

# René Block

## interviewed by Sylvia Ruttimann and Karin Seinsoth

### I. Gallery and Fair / Art and Capital

**Sylvia Ruttimann & Karin Seinsoth:** In 1964, at the age of twenty-two, you founded your own gallery in Berlin and went down in the history of the art world for doing so. What inspired you to take that risk?

**René Block:** Well, to begin with, it wasn't a risk at all but simply a necessity. From the time I was seventeen, when I was a student at the *Werkkunstschule* (school of applied arts) Krefeld, I had the opportunity to experience close up how the museum director Paul Wember realized a unique avant-garde exhibition programme at the *Museum Hans Lange*, and also how he purchased works from those exhibitions for his museum. In Berlin – probably because of the insular situation there – such confrontations and explorations of the immediate artistic present were missing. The exhibitions were conservative and often clung to an academic Expressionist tradition. What they did not do – however much they liked to claim that they did – was pick up the thread of the brief Dadaist period. I felt an urge to pop that bubble, and to do so myself; I needed a platform and that was the gallery. So it wasn't based on commercial considerations at all, but on artistic ones.

**SR&KS:** How did you finance the gallery?

**RB:** With other jobs. Jobs that had nothing to do with art; washing dishes and waiting tables in restaurants, selling honey at weekly markets. And in the end, hasn't the experiences I made with selling honey been quite helpful at the installation of *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz* by Josef Beuys at the documenta 6 in Kassel, 1977?

**SR&KS:** Who did you exhibit; what were your criteria for choosing the artists?

**RS:** I exhibited my generation – the artists were hardly older than me. Gerhard Richter, Konrad

Lueg and KH Hödicke had just left the academy; KP Brehmer and Sigmar Polke were still students, as were Palermo, Knoebel and Ruthenbeck. All of them started in the mid-sixties from point zero, like myself. We started together and we grew up together. Wolf Vostell and, naturally, Joseph Beuys represented the older generation, but hardly anyone was taking notice of their work back then. This made them equal to the artists of the young generation from the point of commerce. Even though artistically they have been more experienced. That was the "German programme". At the same time, I was also interested in the boundary-transcending activities of the international Fluxus movement. Nam June Paik, George Brecht, Arthur Kōpcke, Dick Higgins, Allison Knowles, Emmet Williams, Dieter Roth, Robert Filliou, Tomas Schmit, etc. In the early years, Fluxus, or "Neo-Dada" as some people called it, manifested in the framework programmes accompanying the exhibitions, the so-called soirees, which introduced the individual artists in Berlin. Larger scale festivals only came about later on. The Fluxus artists represented the "international programme".



**SR&KS:** In art there is unfortunately an ever-present dichotomy between art and commerce, which also comes to bear in the work of curating. Lise Nellemann, for example, sees her curatorial projects as social artistic work; she doesn't sell anything and she doesn't earn anything. Art, curating and life are one.

That was also an aspect of the seventies. Was that your attitude towards art back then; was that the reason you exhibited Beuys? Or did you simply want to mark him?

**RS:** In 1964 there was no market for these artists; people only started taking an interest in them about ten years later. That interest was encouraged, however, by the founding of the Cologne Art Fair in 1967. It wasn't until 1969 that I started being able to finance the gallery and my own livelihood through the sale of a few works. More specifically, Beuys participated in the first years with actions like *Der Chef*, *Eurasia*, *Ich versuche dich freizulassen (machen)* or *Ausfeigen*, to name a few. The first and only [Beuys] exhibition in Berlin took place in 1979, when I closed the gallery. On the other hand, in 1969 I succeeded in selling the major work *The Pack*, the VW Bus with the sleds, and the *Sled* edition at Cologne Art Fair. But the money I earned was immediately used to publish the book on Kapitalist Realism and other multiples.

**SR&KS:** In your own words, you gave up the gallery when the "art fair boom took hold". But you were also involved in the founding of the Cologne Art Fair. Is that a contradiction? Did the commercial aspect bother you?

**RS:** In the sense that the Cologne Art Fair initially pursued ideal objectives, it's not a contradiction. The first two or three fairs have been cultural events and not yet commercial events. The fact that it eventually developed into a primarily commercial enterprise that many cities copied could not have been foreseen. By 1979, however, when I closed the gallery, most of the artists I had worked with were established. They no longer needed the platform a small gallery could offer them. The art fair boom got underway just a few years later.

**SR&KS:** How did the city of Berlin respond to the provocative actions, performances, and exhibitions you presented in your gallery in the first few years?

**RS:** An abstraction such as a city does not respond. It's always just individuals, or groups at best. In the case of Gallery Block, there was just a tiny circle of people who were interested in our concept and work. The echo in the media; however was often substantial. But we were just another bunch of crazies they enjoyed making fun of. We rarely got any serious reviews. We didn't turn up in the arts section

as much as we did on the human-interest pages. It amuses me when nowadays people consider this gallery significant.

**SR&KS:** To what extent does the market influence art?

**RS:** That question has never interested me.

## II. Art Promotion



**SR&KS:** You also worked for institutions dedicated to the promotion of art, the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) and the IFA (Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations). What are the criteria for support from such institutions? Were there also conflicts, for instance situations where you thought the institution should do something a certain way but it refused? What effect did the conflicts have on your work?

**RS:** I don't remember any content-related conflicts in the DAAD Berlin artists' programme. Within the framework of my work with the visual artists and composers who had been invited I had every liberty to fulfil the artist's wishes and also my own. That's why I stayed in that position for ten years. At the IFA I took those liberties, and opened up the programme designed for the support of German artists living abroad to foreign artists living in Germany. After three years that led to conflicts with the administration. So I left. To my great joy, my successor is successfully pursuing the same strategy.

**SR&KS:** In Switzerland there have recently been demands that art be integrated more strongly in national marketing efforts. In other words, art is being made an instrument of the state; it's like a reversion to the nineteenth century. But it's the only way to convince people who don't care about art that

art is necessary. How can people be convinced that art is necessary?

**RS:** The sculptor Olaf Metzger recently said that there are people who go to football stadiums and people who go to museums. And there are people who do both. That means that there are people who know that culture and sports are important for a meaningful life, for the shaping of the present, and thus for the future. Those people should be encouraged. Culture is a public service in most of the European countries. It would be a good thing, however, if countries like Switzerland would campaign that.

**SR&KS:** Who should finance art? The state?

**RS:** One of the most important and most superb tasks of the national community should be to make culture possible, to finance cultural institutions – particularly as regards the collection of art, as an enhancement and counterbalance to private collecting interests.

### III. Curating

**SR&KS:** In addition to your activities as a gallery owner, you have also curated rather conventional exhibitions with classically art-historical-sounding titles, for example on the history of the multiple, or on graphic arts techniques. What inspired you to do that? Did you study art history? What was your interest there? Did those activities differ strongly from the activities related to your gallery?

**RS:** There were no art-historical motives. In the seventies there was just something interesting about putting artists like Hamilton, Brehmer, Roth or Warhol – whose silkscreen and offset-printing works were not acknowledged as “artistic graphics” (and incidentally, for the purposes of taxation and customs that still applies today) – about showing precisely those works alongside the classics, Dürer, Rembrandt, Goya, Klinger, or Munch. My concern was actually more with correcting the assessment by the art historians. This exhibition demonstrated the continuous development of printing techniques, from woodcut by hand to mass production. In all times, artists always used the most advanced technologies. A full chapter of the exhibition was devoted to the revolutionary print making concept of the artist KP Brehmer.

**SR&KS:** Do you also work as a free curator like Harald Szeemann? What is your stand on that phenomenon, which was actually his invention?

**RS:** Curating from an independent position is not Szeemann’s invention, but he was the first to give that position a profile. I actually realized a number of my most important exhibitions in the position of a free independent curator: *Für Augen und Ohren* in Berlin in 1980; *Art Allemagne aujourd’hui* in Paris in 1981; or the 4th Istanbul Biennial in 1995. And when I leave the Kunsthalle Fridericianum in 2007, I will arrange the Nordic Pavilion of Finland, Norway and Sweden for the Venice Biennale out of a “free” position. And by the way: as an employee of an institution you can also take liberties and realize projects all over the world. But we’re approaching a situation in which we’re going to have more “free curators” than institutions. Then that freedom will become a problem.

**SR&KS:** How would you describe your relationships to the artists? To what extent is your work collaborative? Do you actively involve the participating artists in your exhibition concepts?

**RS:** For me, exhibitions are only conceivable and only make sense on the basis of very close relationships with the artists. Who am I making the exhibitions for, if not for the artists?

**SR&KS:** The participations of the public was already an important concept in the performance and action art of the sixties, for artists like Beuys, Paik, Vostell – artists you worked with. And the same still applies today (or perhaps applies again today). Has the definition of this principle, this concept, changed in comparison to the sixties? Can it really be a key to a freer understanding of art?

**RS:** The participation of the public should take place in the mind. That was no different with Beuys, Paik and Fluxus, and I think it’s what artists still want today. The fact that the public is occasionally invited to participate directly these days often within the framework of technical, interactive artworks, that the so-called Homo ludens is addressed, is an appealing phenomenon. But often it’s also just a way of diverting attention from a lack of substance in the artistic idea, a lack of what should actually constitute art. So I prefer a conceptual participation, discourse and talks. Artists have a different task than to entertain audiences.

**SR&KS:** How do you involve the public in your projects?

**RS:** I invite the public to think with me.

**SR&KS:** In *Curating in the 21st Century*, Gavin Wade and Teresa Gleadow discuss the term “curator” that has come to play such a key role in the art world. Are you a curator? Or how do you refer to yourself?

**RS:** “Curator” is the designation that has come to prevail for this work; originally, though, it meant something different. I often describe my position as such of a conductor, I could also accept the term “producer”.

**SR&KS:** Do you think it’s possible to learn to be a curator? Or are you of the category who claim that you’re either born a curator or you’re not? What qualities does a curator have to have? What can schools or courses teach?

**RS:** You can’t learn to curate, because you can’t learn inspiration. What you can learn is how to organize projects and communicate them to the public. You can’t learn to be an artist at an academy, either. But if you’re an artist, maybe at an academy you can learn techniques for expressing yourself better.

**SR&KS:** Can you give us an example of an exhibition you thought was especially good and tell us why you thought it was good? What qualities does a good exhibition have to have?

**RS:** The answer to that question would be an entire lecture in its own right. Once I talked about the exhibition that had been the most instructive for me. The reason it was so important was that it failed to live up to what it had explicitly set out to achieve. But that proclaimed aim – it had to do with the dialogue between the northern and southern hemispheres, between the cultural periphery and the cultural centers – was manifested in that context for the first time, and had to be attempted. This subject matter interested me most and therefore it was interesting to analyze why it had failed. In 50 years of practice I found out that I can only learn from shows that failed. To find out why they failed. Good shows can make you happy – but you don’t learn anything from them.

**SR&KS:** Are there certain criteria by which you curate an exhibition? Chronologically, formally, etc.,

or does it depend on the respective exhibition? What exhibitions have you curated, and do they have a common denominator? Do you have a certain curating style?

**RS:** There is experience, and there is the aim. The aim is essentially always the same – to work with the artists who make the themes of the times in which we live visible. Since my first exhibition in the gallery in 1964, the projects have been based on one another; that’s where experience comes in. Every exhibition, regardless of the subject or the location, builds on the previous one. You could call that a curatorial style, but no one has ever thought about it that way.

**SR&KS:** You were interested in the periphery, the margins. And today? Has that changed? What are you interested in?

**RS:** I still find the periphery, the artistic “side-streams”, the margins just as interesting as ever. Mainstream art, art-fair art is boring.

**SR&KS:** You’ve been involved in the art world for more than forty years. How has curating changed within that period? How do you think the function or role of the curator has changed? Do you see differences as compared to when you started out?

**RS:** The field of vision has broadened. We work in a global art arena. Half a century ago the only free art was Western art. The quality of the exhibitions hasn’t changed, just their size. And the role of the artistic director has changed, but not necessarily his skills and qualification. To put it in simple terms: whereas forty years ago the curator saw himself in the service of the artists, today many of the internationally active young “star curators” see the artists as their material. Like collectors, curators should grow with the artists of their generation. They should recede behind the artists, steer things from the background. Too many curators make the mistake of seeing themselves as super-artists, of aspiring towards a career like a star conductor, of thinking and acting solely in terms of career strategies.

**SR&KS:** Today you’re the artistic director of the Kunsthalle Fridericianum, one of the very oldest museums. What does your work consist of? What advantages do you see in working in such an old institution, what disadvantages?

**RS:** Take a look at my development: gallery owner, free curator, institution DAAD, institution ifa, free curator. Then the invitation to direct a large museum like the Fridericianum in Kassel; to give it a new face between the documenta exhibitions, was a great challenge, but one I couldn't resist. The only place artistic postulations are possible is a museum such as this one.

**SR&KS:** Does curatorial practice in museums differ from curatorial practice elsewhere? Who are you responsible to? How can deliberations that arise from curating be reflected in an institution, if at all?

**RS:** Entirely in the Kantian sense. To begin with I'm responsible to my own artistic conscience, my own standards, secondly I am responsible towards the artists and third - but not least I have to have responsibility towards the space, to the local conditions. Then comes the responsibility towards the public that is supposed to partake of the artistic processes. By fulfilling that responsibility, I fulfill my responsibility towards my employers – the city, the state – as long as I stick to the budget. It is simply always the same. Right now I am responsible to the city of Kassel, tomorrow it might be any other place in the world in case of a Biennial, for instance. My stance would be the same if the Fridericianum had been a museum with a collection of its own. Then, however, there would also be a responsibility towards the future by building a collection.

#### IV. Collecting

**SR&KS:** How and when did you start collecting? According to what criteria? What is the main emphasis of your collection? Has your collection changed in the course of time? If so, what is its main focus today? Where is your collection located?

**RS:** By the end of my fifteen-year gallery activities, a number of artworks had accumulated. A basis on which over the course of the years a collection could be formed. Qualitatively and quantitatively, the emphasis was on the works of Beuys, Paik, Kōpcke, Cage, Williams, Vostell, Schmit and other Fluxus artists. Then Polke, Brehmer, Hödicke, Ruthenbeck, Richter, Böhmler, works that had emerged from my joint work with the artists. I merely expanded and continued that principle. All of the works in my collection bear a direct relation to my work with the artists, within the framework of free curatorial work and institutional projects alike.



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Since the Fridericianum is not a museum, i.e. does not acquire works for a collection of its own, I myself have purchased a number of things that document my work there as well, in the *documenta* city. Logically, the emphasis of the past years has been on works by artists from the Balkan region and Turkey. I like to describe it as “Fluxus und die Folgen”. Parts of the collection are on loan to the Neues Museum in Nürnberg. Another part will probably be given to a new Museum for Contemporary Art in Istanbul in a few years. In my home I keep mainly works on paper: conceptual drawings, archive material, documents.

**SR&KS:** What issues are associated with collecting?

**RS:** The proper storage of the works until a suitable place is found for them is sometimes a problem. Fortunately, most artworks are more robust than one might assume.

#### Captions

1 Opening „Neodada, Pop, Decollage, Kapitalistischer Realismus“, 1964 photo: Jürgen Müller-Schneek Archiv René Block

2 Sarkis, *Rice and discussion place*, exhibition view, 4th Istanbul Biennial, Orient/ation, 1995, photo: René Block

3 Joseph Beuys, *Schlitten*, 1969, 50 copies + 5 artists proofs sledge, torch, felt, and fat-sculpture, 90 x 35 x 35 cm photo: Uwe Walter, Berlin Edition Block

**René Block** grew up near Düsseldorf before he discovered Berlin as his field of action in the year 1963. The gallery founded in 1964 became the base for his ‘curatorial building,’ which received a roof with the invention of TANAS (20 08 – 2013). With the exhibition „The Unanswered Question. Iskele 2“ Block considers this building completed.

René Block opened a gallery in Berlin in 1964 at the age of 22, whose first exhibitions and performances were arranged with then also young artists like Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, Wolf Vostell, Joseph Beuys, Nam June Paik and the international Fluxus group a.o. In 1974 he opened an exhibition space in New York with "I like America and America likes Me," by Joseph Beuys. At the same time Blocks started to work as an independent curator, he curated "Downtown Manhattan: SoHo," 1976, and "Für Augen und Ohren", 1980, both for the Berlin Festival as well as "Art Allemagne Aujourd'hui" for the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1981. From 1993 until 1995 he determined the program of the exhibition service at the Institute for Foreign Relations (ifa), which is responsible for the presentation of German art abroad. From 1997 until 2006 René Block was the director of the Kunsthalle Museum Fridericianum in Kassel. In 2008 he founded the artspace TANAS in Berlin, a platform for Turkish art. In Denmark he was cofounder of Kunsthalle 44 Moen and functions as its artistic director. Some other important exhibitions: 1990 "The Readymade Boomerang", 8. Biennial of Sydney 1994 "Iskele", contemporary artists from Istanbul, ifa-galleries in Stuttgart, Berlin, Bonn 1995 "Orient/ation", 4. Istanbul Biennale 1997 "Pro Lidice", Museum of Fine Arts, Prague 2000 "Eurafrica", 3. Gwangju Biennial, Korea "Das Lied von der Erde", Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel First international Biennial Conference, Kassel 2003 "In den Schluchten des Balkan", Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel 2004 "Love it or leave it", 5. Cetinje Biennale, Montenegro (together with Nataša Ilic) 2007 "Welfare – Farewell", Nordic Pavilion (Norway/Sweden/Finland), Venice Biennial 2010 "Starter", inaugural exhibition for ARTER, Istanbul 2013 "Eine kleine MACHTMusik", Museum ESSL, Klosterneuburg/Wien 2013 "Iskele 2 – The unanswered question", TANAS and NBK, Berlin.

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