

Out of Düsseldorf  
Lynda Morris

The triangle in Northern Europe between Köln/Düsseldorf, Amsterdam and Ghent Brussels was the site of most of the galleries and museums that pioneered the first shows of US minimal and conceptual artists in Europe between 1967 and the late '70s. The work was led by Konrad Fischer from October 1967, with Kasper König in New York, Heiner Friedrich in München, Anny De Decker and Bernd Lohaus at Wide White Space Antwerp. Paul Maenz based in New York organized an important early exhibition in Frankfurt May 1967. The triangle in Northern Europe had seen some of the worst battles at the end of World War Two. Konrad was six years old in 1945. In the *Studio International* interview in 1971<sup>1</sup>, he reminded his clients, particularly museum curators in the triangle, that Germany still had a problem. He said his job was:

*To get artists over here, and to bring them into contact with those who live here. When I was an artist everything was so far away; Warhol, Lichtenstein and all those were great unattainable men. But when you know them, you can have a beer with them and get rid of your inferiority complex. I insist that the artist has to be here when I show his work...Palermo and Richter, for example, two of the German artists, who have exhibited with me, have now been to New York, and they felt at home there because they had already met artists like Andre and LeWitt over here...It's not the artists who are chauvanists, but the institutions.*

I first met Konrad in August 1969 during the installation of "When Attitudes Become Form" (WABF) at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London (ICA). I began working at the ICA in July 1969 and I went on to set up their first bookshop. The London showing of WABF was organised by Charles Harrison but he was busy as Assistant Editor of *Studio International* and teaching at St Martins with Antony Caro. Harald Szeemann who had originated the exhibition in Berne March/April 1969 arrived at the ICA only in time to make his speech at the private view. Konrad, meanwhile was there every day working out of the ground floor Gallery Office with the artists and technicians. I also worked in that office and I took several international phone calls for him. I also remember watching across the foyer during the opening, his first meeting with Gilbert & George, with metallic paint on their hands and faces.

"WABF" was a great success at all three venues. Jean-Christophe Ammann, the Swiss curator who worked with Szeemann on the catalogue, wrote accurately in *Art International* that "WABF" was "a perfect summery of the spade work achieved by the progressive European Galleries." Although the exhibition was Szeemann's, it would not have been possible without Konrad's work in 1967-68. Szeemann was photographed at the opening of "Prospect 68". Soon after he wrote to Konrad asking for artists' addresses and phone numbers in New York.

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<sup>1</sup> *Studio International* Vol 181 February 1971 pp 68-71, interviewed by Georg Jappe

In February 1969, Szeemann wrote to Konrad checking prices on work shown in "WABF". Konrad replied (February 24, 1969): *Sandbach DM 2,800, Andre DM 10,000, Ryman DM 3,600*. For Szeeman to sell pieces directly from the exhibition, would give the museum an extra source of income from the commission.

Szeeman informed Konrad (April 8, 1969): *Sandbach sold to Dr Franz Meyer Kunst Muzeum Basel DM 2,240. Also considering Ryman*. Konrad replied simply to Szeeman (April 14, 1969): *Thanks for arranging the Sandbach sale and Ryman possibility*.

Konrad's surviving early correspondence gives an insight into the work he was doing in 1967-68 to connect US, and UK artists, to his carefully constructed European network. Carl Andre's first exhibition with Konrad had the evocative title, *5 x 20 Altstadt Rectangle (Düsseldorf, 1967)* but the correspondence between Konrad and Andre has not been found. The first invitation card 1967 gives the title "Ontologische Plastik" and acknowledges the work was made by Technische Ausführung Stahlbau Hanfland, Düsseldorf.

Sales were the concern of artists as well as Dealers and Curators. Sol LeWitt first wrote to Konrad 10.11.1967: *"Dear Sir, Both Paul Maenz and Kasper König have contacted me with the offer of a show in your gallery. Carl Andre has also spoken very highly of you and your gallery....The cost of manufacture would have to be borne by the gallery. Also the transportation costs and a place to stay in Düsseldorf....would the work be available for shows elsewhere in Europe...Also I would like to know who would own the work when completed. And what is the percentage that the gallery would get on the sales and the percentage I would get. If the work is shown in other galleries in Europe, what percentage would the Galerie Fischer get, and what percentage the other gallery"*.

Konrad replied to LeWitt 22.11.1967: *"I am glad to hear from you that you are ready to come to Düsseldorf in December. I will surely find out a place, you can do your work or where it could be done... all cost, concerning the manufacture and the material, your coming and, of course, your staying in Germany will be taken by the gallery...You asked me who will own the pieces, when they are completed.... The Percentage: 50% for the artist, 50% for the gallery, when the show is taken to another place, I think there should be 20% for my gallery, 30% for the other gallery and 50% for you."*

Much of Konrad's work was with other dealers. LeWitt showed with Bischofberger and Friedrich in early 1968. Other correspondence shows the Bischofberger exhibition had been pre-arranged with Dwan in New York. There is a note from Anny de Decker, Wide White Space Antwerp to Konrad 12.12.1967: *"Thank you for the Andre exhibition."* Carl Andre first showed with her 3-25.5.1968, in an exhibition titled *Clastic*, it include two 100 square pieces and six four unit squares. Konrad wrote to LeWitt 15.1.1968: *Yesterday Alfred Schmela came and he bought 3 of your pieces...only he don't want to give the pieces to Heiner (Friedrich) for the show... you earned nearly 10,000DM(\$2,500)...."* 29.1.1968 Konrad to Friedrich: asking for payment of one-half of the work

produced for exhibition *Sol LeWitt Five Cubes* and one third of the air ticket. Konrad has shown with Schmela as an artist, and Schmela had tried to encourage Konrad to develop for him a Schmela Gallery for younger artists.

Around the time of Prospect 68, LeWitt continued to actively negotiate. He wrote to Konrad (May 22, 1968) *If the Dwan Gallery has my work there – you do not get anything if they sell a piece – and neither do I. The only way I can make money is if I sell through you and get 50% (45% + 5% for Dwan Gallery).*” Four months earlier LeWitt had written to Konrad: *“The reasons for making the prices (higher) are: 1) to make more money; 2) So that American collectors will not go to Europe – bypassing the Dwan Gallery here; 3) Once a collector has a piece he will not want another and there are only a limited no. of collectors; 4) It is better to sell less work now because next year it will be easier to sell work in Europe because I will have more publicity. Maybe you should wait to sell things until summer when the Hague show and Documenta (if I will be in it) will provide more publicity to sell for higher prices.”*

Shortly after, Konrad received a letter from John Weber at Dwan Gallery, following up on LeWitt’s note: *“Sol was worried over one point [...] the phenomena of other German art dealers purchasing his work for resale at a higher price. The price of Sol’s pieces was very low for American standards. They were set at a low price so that they could get out into public collections. It would perhaps be best if you confined your sales to museums and private individuals rather than dealers.”*

In his 1971 *Studio International* interview Konrad remarks: *“More than 50% of what I sell goes to other galleries.”* The Federal structure of West Germany meant that most state museums tended to buy through dealers in their own region. The same held true for other countries. Over time, dealers in both Europe and the US sought to work with Konrad as an intermediary.

Writing to Konrad in May 1969 regarding Robert Ryman, Marilyn Fischbach (whose New York gallery also represented Ronald Bladen and Eva Hesse) proposed, *“What would you think of the following: You could be the central European gallery connection... and you could distribute the work in Europe, and most of the European arrangements could be made directly with you... The commission could be 25% to you, which leaves little to us, actually only 15%... It is essential that Bob (Ryman) exhibits in Germany, France and Italy as much as possible.”*

Konrad had trained originally as a painter, working with Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke. I once asked him if he regretted giving up being an artist, and he replied: *“Now don’t make trouble Lynda.”* He continued to dress casually like an artist. He liked ordinary bars, pubs and cafes. He always stayed in basic hotels

and booked cheap flights. He was austere with himself but generous with the people whose work he supported and he was always ready to pick up the bill on a night out. Carl Andre wrote to Konrad (February 13, 1968): *“Everything sounds great – Copenhagen, Antwerp, Düsseldorf, Hague... I have been invited to Documenta 4 in Kassel. Is this good? Do you mind taking care of all my business in Europe?... You will be very welcome in New York. Many fine artists wish to show you their work. I have told them you are a fine fellow, an artist, not a stuffy dealer....”*

Konrad made his first visit to New York April 1968, to research galleries and artists for Prospect 68, but also to develop the programme in his own gallery. He asked advice from his artists. LeWitt, was loyal to the Siegelau artists, Douglas Huebler, Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, and Robert Barry. He advised Konrad against working with Bruce Nauman, writing (April 27, 1968): *“Personally I do not think it is sensible to send Nauman from Los Angeles. I do not think he is as good as Kasper (König) does... send some NYC artists who are better and would cost less money...”*

But Konrad was very keen to work with Nauman. He wrote to Nauman (May 25, 1968): *“Dear Sir,... I think we had a good connection via my friend Kasper (König)... I would be very glad and proud if you would come to Düsseldorf... I want to send you a 21 days ticket California-Düsseldorf-California... I think that is a good time to come, for then you can go with me to the Documenta opening (26–27). (I have booked a place in a hotel for you.)...It would be very nice, if you take some videos with you to Germany, so that I can sell some pieces of yours. Excuse me, I am not only thinking in selling, but I think it is good if you earn some money here, and me too, for the ticket is very expensive for me. I hope you understand...”*

Konrad’s own work, as the artist Konrad Leug, aspired to something akin to Nauman’s early sensibility. But things between them weren’t always easy. Nauman also made important business sense. The influential European collector Giuseppe Panza bought Nauman’s work through Konrad, but Nauman was concerned about his New York dealer. He wrote to Konrad (October 6, 1968): *“I don’t know how things will work out because although everything is fine with Nick (Wilder), Leo (Castelli) would rather deal with Zwirner in Germany and perhaps only some special arrangement with you. I think it is something I will not have much control over...”* And the problems continued, Nauman later wrote to Konrad (April 1, 1970): *“Here are instructions for the piece which I described to you. If it is possible, I think you should go ahead and have the piece made and have the show without my presence, for I want to stay home and work....”* It was very important for Konrad’s mission that an artist be present when their work is shown. Nevertheless, Konrad went ahead with Nauman’s exhibition *Diagonal Sound Wall*

(*Acoustic Wall*) 1969–1970. Although Nauman was absent, Konrad was still able to sell it to Panza.

Klaus Honnef curator of the Kunstverein Munster overcame Szeeman's objections to a dealer curating a part of *Documenta 5* 30.6-8.10.1972. He worked with Konrad as co-curator of the *Idee/Licht* section. It was the section that made the reputation of *Documenta 5*.

*Footnote*

*Konrad Fischer's selected correspondence with artists, dealers and museum curators between 1967 and 1977 was published by Lynda Morris's late Phd student, Sophie Richard in Unconcealed: The International Network of Conceptual Artists 1967–77 (Riding House/Norwich University College of Arts, Herbert Foundation 2009). This small selection, concentrates on the contacts between dealers, US American artists, and museum curators between 1967 to 1971 in Europe.*