

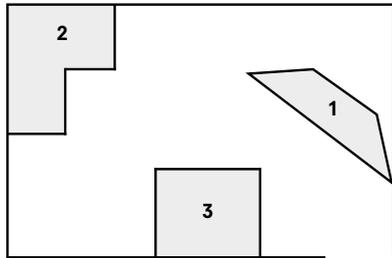
S.M.A.K.

ANNA OPPERMANN

NEVERENDING PARADOX. PHILOSOPHICAL ENSEMBLES OF THE LATE 1980s

11.03...
04.06.2017





1. On the one hand... on the other hand; both... and (M+M), 1988-92

Materials: installation with an oak cupboard, oak table, carpet, various found objects, stinging nettles, cardboard sculptures, drawings, watercolours, black & white and colour photos, prints, printed and handwritten texts, paintings, hand-coloured photos on canvas

Subject / Key Words: an old oak cupboard, table, carpet, parquet, sweeping under the carpet, the romantic and renewing, the classicist and epigonic, the oppressive hard grip, the still undecided, eagle, terror

Reference Plants: stinging nettle, ground elder, oak, tomato

2. Myth and Enlightenment, 1985-92

Materials: various found objects, several models for a stage design, drawings, black & white and colour photos, polaroid photos, graphic prints, printed and handwritten texts, paintings, hand-coloured photos on canvas, plinths

Reference Ensembles: *Digitalis purpurea – purple foxglove (poisonous)*, 1982-93, *Goosegirl with rising main – G.M.M.S.*, 1985

Reference Plants: oleander, lily turf, tulip

The original reason behind and sphere of experience in the ensemble *Myth and Enlightenment* was work done on a set for Georg Büchner's play *Leonce and Lena* (adapted by Claus Peymann, Schauspielhaus Bochum, 1985).

3. Paradoxical Intentions – To lie the Blue down from the Sky, 1988-92

Materials: glass shrine, various found objects, marigolds, splinters of glass and mirror, windows, drawings, black & white and colour photos, polaroid photos, graphic prints, printed and handwritten texts, paintings, watercolours, hand-coloured photos on canvas, plinths

Subject / Key Words: Paradoxical Intentions: "I never lie, I am not a magician, nor can I turn things blue", several theories from German Romanticism (The Blue Flower, Heinrich von Ofterdingen) compared and considered in relation to my ensemble method, "A.O. – portrait – appalling – of Alex O.", a fine housing, reflected, self-alienating reality, veiled reality – important: the chair in the housing-revolving chair, a kaleidoscope

Reference Plants: marigold, *indigofera tinctoria*

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COVER

On the one hand... on the other hand; both... and (M+M), 1988-92

All images courtesy Anna Oppermann Estate and Galerie Barbara Thumm.



Spiegelensemble, around 1969, detail

Anna Oppermann | Neverending Paradox. Philosophical Ensembles of the Late 1980s

by Ute Vorkoeper, curator of this exhibition

"I hate definite formulations that make a claim to being absolute."

- Anna Oppermann

Introduction to her work

It all began with a make-up mirror. During the late 1960s Anna Oppermann created her *ensemble* concept by studying and analysing mirror effects such as reflections, refractions and illusion. For her first ensemble, *Spiegelensemble* (1968-89), she actually used a simple, rectangular make-up mirror to reduplicate, rearrange and extend her private environment and personal circumstances, which she experienced as restrictive and oppressive. Step by step she broke down conventions, role models and besieging facts into countless facets of image and meaning. Finally, she composed the emerging amalgam of contrary views, real found objects, imaginary pieces and signs in complex, as well as agile and mutable, spatial compositions and called them, French: *ensemble*. The high degree of recognisability inherent to Oppermann's ensemble works is due to the fact that they visibly transport their own creation process. Thus, they bring together theoretical and aesthetic aspects of 1960s art, from conceptual art and process-related practices to Arte Povera and performance art.

From the 1960s through to her early death in 1993, she created over 60 ensembles of various sizes, which she described as *principally infinite exercises in perception and cognition*. They permitted any conceivable form of visual, sculptural and written expression. Each one began with a meditation in front of a still life made of plants and found objects, which were usually attributed with a sentence, a quotation or short text. The artist made sketches of these 'initial objects', described them, analysed them, collected associations and arranged her observations to new, expanded still lifes, which she subsequently recorded in photographs and on canvas. By alternating between proximity and distance, examining closely and stepping back, she gradually passed *from the particular to the universal*, as she described it.

In retrospect, this evolution can be traced through the development of Oppermann's complete oeuvre. In the 1970s, she embarked from very personal questions and problems, which affected her everyday life, such as social stereotypes, the notion of privacy, her life as a woman, artist and mother, her relationships with other people. In the 1980s, the focus of her analyses shifted, and her works increasingly revolved around economic, political and philosophical questions in interrelation with art and society. Her experience in the art world finally led her to engage in the debate on so-called postmodernity in the late 1980s. She examined the correspondence between her *ensemble method* and the "deconstructive" ways postmodern philosophers and sociologists attempted to break down modern concepts and universal truth. She also observed similar interests in the ambiguity of action, in paradoxical situations and the contradictions of modernity.

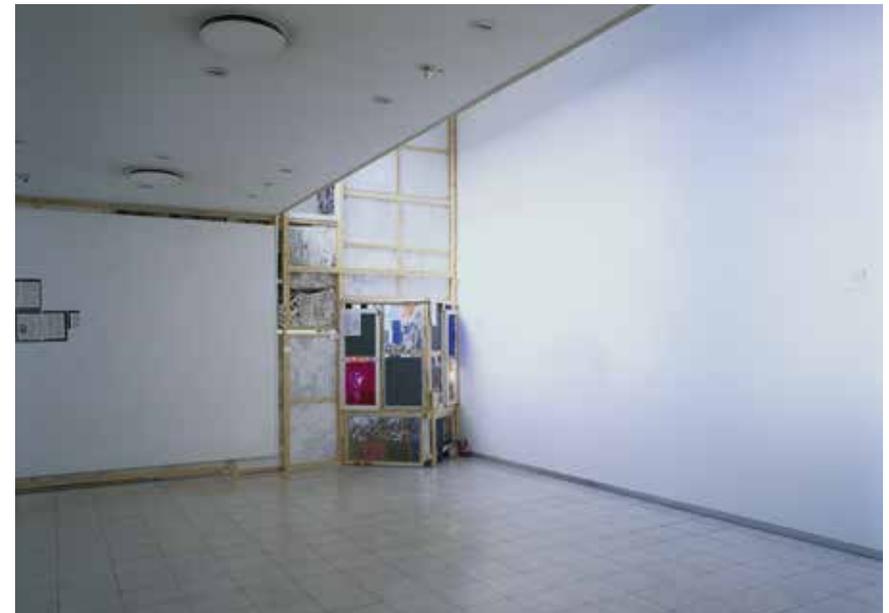
Anna Oppermann herself was early to sense these kinds of contradictions and paradoxes in her own behaviours as well as in the public and private behaviours of others, which she interwove with self-critical reflections in her ensembles. In accordance with her method, her late exploration of postmodern thinking is of course not “general” or philosophical. Instead it probes out the similitude with her method and approaches it critically from unexpected, very personal angles. In the process, she discovered an abundance of unknown paradox and ambivalent aspects, which manifest themselves in this compilation of these three late ensembles at S.M.A.K. for the first time. Anna Oppermann’s work is a striking visual exercise of dealing with complex, contracting realities. In view of the current worldwide attempts to simplify complex correlations in our globalized and conflicting present, her work seems more topical than ever.

Ensembles in the exhibition

Upon entering the space, the first sight to present itself is a raw wooden partition wall, the reverse side of the ensemble *Paradoxical Intentions – To lie the Blue down from the Sky*, which frames a view through the exhibition room. However, before one can set out on that track, **On the one hand... on the other hand; both ... and (M+M)** (1988-92), weightily leans in from the right. A massive, sombre oak wardrobe forms its centre. Along with a peculiar cross-shaped object, which Anna Oppermann discovered at a flea market, and Elias Canetti’s book *Crowds and Power* (German: *Masse und Macht – M+M*), it is one of the objects from which the ensemble was developed. The artist translated the curved forms of the wardrobe into powerful, intermittently grand painterly gestures. The cross serves her as a point of departure for spiry cardboard sculptures, which are arranged on an oak table in front of the wardrobe and surrounded by drawings and paintings. During the working process, on Canetti’s trail, Oppermann discovered the entanglements and interrelations between the masses (the small and multi-part) and power (grand and seemingly potent). She was struck by the impetus and power that lies in the mass of parts as well as the actual impotence the powerful experience in relation to the multitude.

The ensemble **Myth and Enlightenment** (1985–92) appears much lighter, brighter and more colourful. Oppermann developed it from her work on the stage set for Claus Peymann’s production of Georg Büchner’s play *Leonce and Lena*. In this romantic comedy, Leonce rebelliously escapes the existing order, but by a chain of absurd coincidences eventually finds that it has reclaimed him. His irresolvable entanglement and mindless, narcissistic rebellion between *myth and enlightenment* is reflected in the ensemble with great irony. Both notions are allocated their own forms: the *Myth* appears as a malleable jelly baby, *Enlightenment* as a flat, foldable template. An exploration of the stage and theatre production pervades the ensemble. The complex, detailed, multipartite models Anna Oppermann made in the course of her exploration process have been integrated into the ensembles visual inventory. Moreover, the arrangement bears resemblance to a theatre stage in that it is raised from the floor, holding viewers at a distance.

In stark contrast to this, Anna Oppermann simultaneously created a much more accessible space. **Paradoxical Intentions – To lie the Blue down from the Sky** (1988–92) does not hide its reverse side – its backstage – which one encounters when entering and leaving the exhibition room. In distinction to its raw reverse, the front opens the view to a vibrant blue and red kaleidoscopic panorama about aesthetic semblance and the search for truth, about beauty and ugliness, honesty and lie. This ensemble originated from a royal blue glass shrine with red ornamentation, faceted images of which traverse the whole ensemble space. Interspersed glass and mirrored surfaces as well as reflective and coloured fragments enhance the kaleidoscopic visual impact of the work. Fittingly spread across the ensemble are texts about the kaleidoscope and reflections by the French philosopher François Lyotard on poststructuralist, kaleidoscopic thinking techniques. Like poststructuralist thinking, Oppermann’s ensemble breaks the intrinsically irresolvable paradoxes into their beautiful, vital, exhilarating facets, without hiding their inevitable disillusioning, disappointing, threatening and alarming facets.



Paradoxical Intentions – To lie the Blue down from the Sky,
1988-92, reverse side



On the one hand... on the other hand; both... and (M+M), 1988-92

On the one hand... on the other hand; both... and (M+M)

The *start objects* for this ensemble were a massive, dark cupboard, and a curious cross that Anna Oppermann found at a flea market and which can only be seen in a photo. Enlarged and reduced renderings of the curve of the cupboard recur in several paintings, drawings and photos. The cross provided the inspiration for several fanciful cardboard sculptures. The third visually-defining element is the motif of two hands protecting a pregnant belly.

Whereas in the 1970s her main focus was on questions concerning her personal life, as from the 1980s Oppermann turned increasingly to broader societal issues. In this ensemble the two come together. It is not only the found 'start objects' that appeared by chance in the course of her life; once the artist was also spontaneously struck by Elias Canetti's book *Crowds and Power*, German: *Masse und Macht* (M+M).

Following in Canetti's footsteps, during the development of this work Oppermann discovered step by step the similarities, differences and interaction between crowds and power. One of the insights she gained was that power lies in the multitude of the crowd and this makes power dependent on the crowd. *Crowd* can here be seen in the many small parts of which this ensemble consists. *Power* seems to show itself in the imposing cupboard, in broad painterly gestures and in hands as a symbol of strength and power. But in this ensemble, the two are also interwoven.



details



Myth and Enlightenment

What sparked off this ensemble by Anna Oppermann was Georg Büchner's play *Leonce and Lena*, about a prince and princess who try to escape their arranged marriage. They want to fall in love spontaneously and choose their partner for themselves. They both flee, but come across each other during their flight. There is an immediate attraction between them and they soon get married. Are they destined to be together, or was their encounter pure chance?

Just like the love between Leonce and Lena, the initial story for this ensemble fell into Oppermann's lap: Claus Peymann asked her to design a stage set for his adaptation of this play. The construction of the ensemble is thus conceived as a theatre setting. Like a stage set, it is raised up above the floor, only shows itself from the front and keeps you at a distance. Models of the stage set form part of the work.

Theatre is performance. And Oppermann's process-based method is closely related to *performance art*. In her ensembles you see the artist herself performing, as well as many others. What is more, in this work Oppermann examined the theatre itself, the stage, directing and the actors' parts. The main characters – the little green sweet-man who represents *Myth* and the little blue paper man who stands for *Enlightenment* – are literally 'served up'. They are surrounded by paper princes and kings.

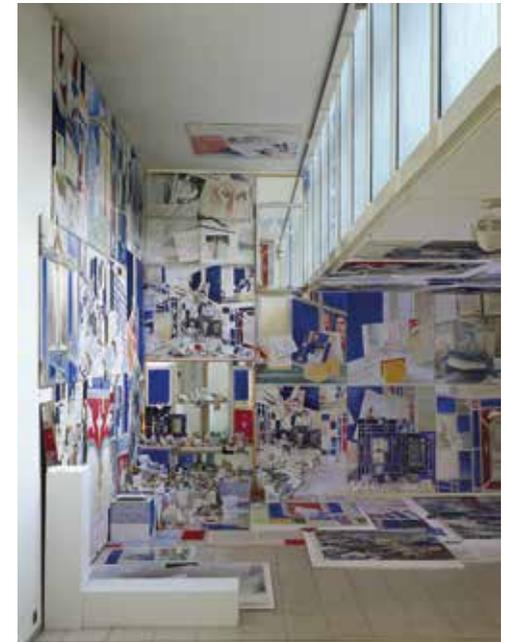
Oppermann is here playing with the relations between large and small. The characters appear in various formats and in several places at the same time. Past and present also became entangled, because this presentation brings together in a single image different moments from the many years of developing this work. So you can see several stages of the process at a single glance. This mingling of space and time is characteristic of each of Oppermann's ensembles.



Myth and Enlightenment, 1985-92, detail



Myth and Enlightenment, 1985-92, presentation in the artist's studio in 1992



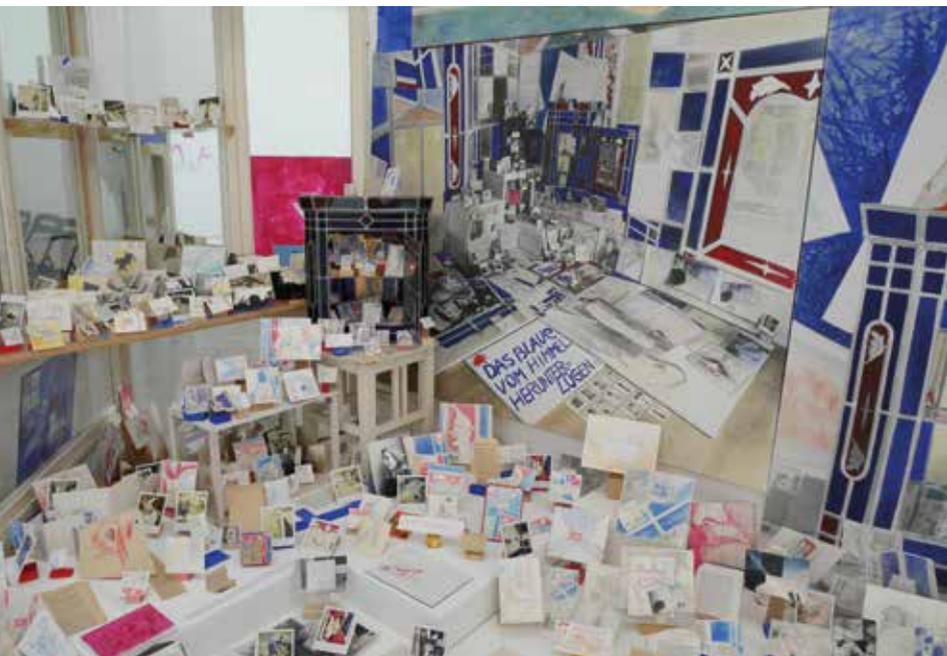
Paradoxical Intentions – To lie the Blue down from the Sky, 1988-92

Paradoxical Intentions – To lie the Blue down from the Sky

For this ensemble, one of the most colourful in her oeuvre, Anna Oppermann started out from a blue and red glass shrine. Fragmented pictures of the shrine are scattered all over the work. This splintered effect reminds us of images that have been split up into various facets by a *kaleidoscope*. The effect is accentuated by glass and mirrored surfaces.

In scraps of text you can read about the kaleidoscope and techniques developed by the French philosopher François Lyotard (1924-98) to divide thinking into facets and to approach subjects from several angles at the same time. The associative method Oppermann used to make her ensembles is related to Lyotard's *kaleidoscopic thinking*.

In this ensemble, Oppermann played with the interweaving of truth and semblance, beauty and ugliness, honesty and lies. In accordance with Lyotard's thinking techniques, she approached these contrasts with an open mind. To give an example, she rejected 'keeping up appearances' while also putting it forward as a captivating game. Oppermann's ensemble pulls apparent contrasts or *paradoxes* apart and in their different facets shows both their positive and negative sides.



Paradoxical Intentions – To lie the Blue down from the Sky, 1988-92, detail

What is an Ensemble?

by Anna Oppermann

By *ensemble*, I mean the documentation of certain exercises in perception and (or) cognition. The composition of an ensemble is the presentation of many attempts in recognising a fragment of reality, assessing it or also – catching the drift of a problem.

The documentation visualises, secures evidence and serves as an aide memoire to psychological processes that take place on various levels of consciousness and within various frames of reference. As such it always serves as a basis of enquiry (recording and raising awareness of deficiencies) with a view to possible corrections and modifications. This requires a relatively open arrangement (...to want to know, how, why I, the others, the circumstances, the conditions are thus – ...to what extent are we (am I) externally driven, unconsciously manipulated, for example in relation to the production of art, how is opinion formed – opinion about art – etc.). Proceeding from a single point, the radius of the circle of interest grows larger and larger (from relatively simple to relatively complicated).

On methode

Starting with a real object (initially something found in nature e. g. a leaf, later people, events, others' remarks etc.) the following stages develop (or are stimulated):

1. *Meditation*
2. *Catharsis*

refers to an ideally spontaneous, to some extent automatic (also subjective) reaction (and abreaction) and association with the object, in order to provoke unconscious i.e. preconscious expressions and, where possible, to record these in form of sketches or notes (video or tape recordings are admissible). This is a phase of *polyphonic expansion*, where everything is permitted – even representations that would be discarded according to conventional evaluation criteria (– depersonalisation – projection – dissociation etc. –). Chaos must be endured. Results from this phase are only made accessible in part in publicly displayed ensembles, since it inevitably brings the most personal deficiencies and irrelevant observations to light.

3. *Reflection* (feedback)

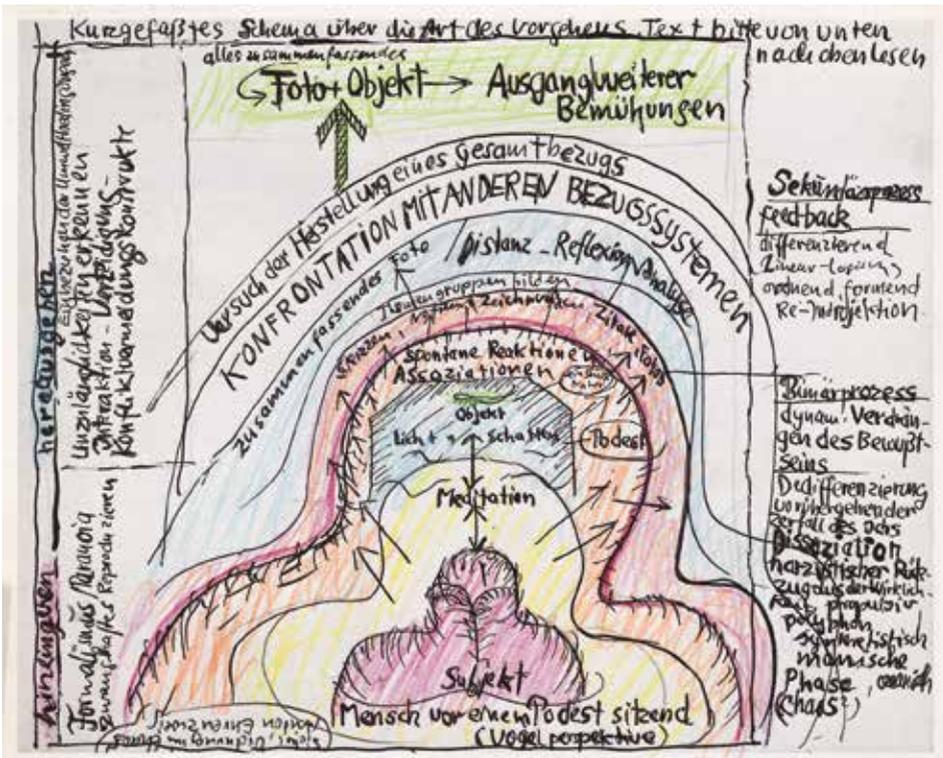
summarising drawings and documenting photographs, to provoke distance – on a verbal level: first individual interpretations and associations in regard to possible causes – motivations – collection of quotes from others.

4. *Analysis* (in the attempt to establish a central connection):

details and preliminary results are compiled in groups, and are put to question and compared with various frames of reference, value systems (interdisciplinary – with texts from the fields of psychology, philosophy, sociology etc.) – Formulation of a theme specific to the ensemble, which indicates the manner in which the problem is to be encircled, and diagrams, which encapsulate the method. On a visual level: accentuation through enlargement (large-format photo canvases, images) and abstraction through summary (diminutions) in documenting photographs, in which details are no longer recognisable i.e. comprehensible to outsiders.

It needs to be emphasised that polyphonic expansion alternates with synopsis. Time plays a significant role, particularly in the necessary achievement of distance; and therefore the process of creation and modification of many ensembles continues for several years (– theoretically never comes to a close). By employing a variety of media – photography – drawing – spatial arrangement – colloquial language – academic language – etc. and due to the juxtaposition of levels of spontaneity, reflection, reality and abstraction, meta levels (– expressions) become probable. In conjunction with the real object, a summarising photograph of an ensemble composition, a so-called reference photograph, becomes the point of departure for further endeavours, in application of the method mentioned above.

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Method Diagram, around 1979

Biography

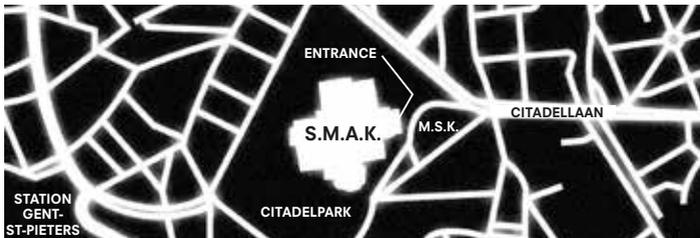
Anna Oppermann was born in Eutin, Germany, in 1940. She lived and worked in Hamburg since studying there at the University of Fine Arts (HFBK). She died in Celle, her secondary residence, in 1993. Between 1982 and 1990 she taught art at Bergische Universität, GHS Wuppertal, and from 1990 until her early death she was professor of fine arts at Universität der Künste (UdK), Berlin.

Her participation at documenta 6 (1977) made Anna Oppermann's ensembles known to an international audience. Invitations to the Venice Biennale (1980), Biennale of Sydney (1984) and documenta 8 (1987) followed. Large works were shown after her death at the São Paulo Biennale (2012). Her works regularly feature in national und international group exhibitions, recent examples include *Monday Begins on Saturday*, 1st Bergen Assembly, Norway (2013), *Playtime*, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich (2014), *The Unfaithful Replica*, Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo (CA2M), Madrid (2016), *Incorporated!*, Ateliers de Rennes – Biennale d'Art Contemporain, Rennes, France (2016) and *The Everywhere Studio*, Institute of Contemporary Art Miami, USA (2017, upcoming).

Retrospectives of her work took place at Hamburger Kunstverein and Bonner Kunstverein (1984) as well as posthumous exhibitions at Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart and Generali Foundation, Vienna (2007). In addition to this, numerous international art institutions and galleries have hosted solo exhibitions.



Anna Oppermann



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This exhibition is curated by Ute Vorkoeper and organised in collaboration with the Anna Oppermann Estate and Galerie Barbara Thumm.



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