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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Thomas Micchelli. "One Paints, the Other Doesn't." *Hyperallergic* (blog). September 22, 2012.



Installation view, "Eugen Schönebeck: Paintings and Drawings: 1957–1966," including, from left, "Mayakovsky" (1966) and two untitled drawings from 1963 (all images courtesy David Nolan Gallery, New York)

In 1961, two scrappy young artists decided to stage their first show together. One of them was Georg Baselitz, who would later become a mainstay of Neo-Expressionism's German flank; the other was Eugen Schönebeck, who would stop painting by the time he was thirty.

The show was held in a condemned building in Berlin, and in keeping with the well-established *enfant terrible* tradition, the two artists produced a manifesto — the enviably titled *First Pandemonium (Manifesto)* — as a 52 x 39-inch lithograph.



Georg Baselitz and Eugen Schönebeck, above: "First Pandemonium (Manifesto)" (1961), offset lithography, 52 x 39 3/8 inches; below: "Second Pandemonium (Manifesto)" (1962), offset lithography, 35 1/4 x 50 inches

From a translation provided by the David Nolan Gallery, where the manifesto is part of a superb exhibition of Schönebeck's work, it's immediately evident that the writing is your standard apocalyptic fare, especially Baselitz's section ("spots of shadow, drops of wax, parades of epileptics, orchestrations of the flatulent, warty, mushy, and jellyfish beings, bodily members, braided erectile tissue, moldy dough").

The hyperbolic tone of the artists' screed is not unexpected, written as it was in a destroyed and divided city sixteen years after the fall of Hitler. But even in its condemnation of "the amiable" who proceed "by art-historical accretion" and its rejection of "those who can't wrap art up in a smell" (Baselitz again), the differences between the two artists are already apparent.

While Schönebeck shares Baselitz's disdain for the status quo and taste for fatal syntactical collisions ("Painting was — is a formic raster putrid subjective general. Tendentious."), in general he takes a more reserved and philosophical tone, one that sees a glimmer of light limning the black horizon:

[...] the gift of unlimited exuberance can make possible the leap out of the routine track of the well-known and, with the instantaneousness of light, point the way unerringly to the true meaning of freedom. / Flowers in the undergrowth / The creatorium

Which makes it all the more ironic that Baselitz, who became famous twenty years later for exhibiting his splashily expressionistic figurative paintings upside-down, would continue along a career path to international stardom while Schönebeck would cease to make art after 1966.

The duo produced a second *Pandemonium Manifesto* the following year. It is even longer than the first, and more fevered; Baselitz's part (which ends with the pithy "All writing is crap") is less readable than the first effort, while Schönebeck's (which ends similarly but enigmatically, "Words are prick piglets") is far more coherent.

Titled “Fragments for a Pandemonium,” Schönebeck’s text exhorts the reader to “Pandemonize!” while heaping scorn on the artist’s peers, carrying forward the flatulence motif introduced by Baselitz in *Pandemonium I*:

My colleagues are introverted and extroverted Rubensians. I have to counter my colleagues with wealth; I have to do the imaginative. My colleagues consist of natural flatulence. They love the wild and they love it unconsciously — the way flayers have to gnaw their victims with their lips until they rub off.



Eugen Schönebeck, “Mayakovsky” (1966), graphite on paper, 38 1/4 x 28 3/4 inches

Such youthful, self-consciously flamboyant pronouncements would be ultimately tangential if not for the gnarly graphic invention coursing through the two lithographs. Hung one above the other in the dead center of the gallery’s longest wall, their head-banging, high-contrast image-and-text mash-ups, even without benefit of a translation, immediately grab you by the eyelids.

All but one of the works in the show were made between 1957 and 1963. The exception is a 1966 portrait of the doomed Soviet poet and playwright Vladimir Mayakovsky, who shot himself in 1930 at the age of 36. Granite-hard and forbidding, the graphite-on-paper head, which measures 38 ¼ x 28 ¾ inches, is among the last of Schönebeck’s works.

These final pieces were overtly political if not propagandistic, in which the artist (as described in the gallery press release):

[...] not only scrutinized the character and behavior of revolutionaries such as Lenin, Trotsky, and Mao, but also the aesthetic strategies of such Mexican mural painters as David Alfaro Siqueiros. These likenesses and the few large-scale drawings that followed attest to

Schönebeck's struggle to find a middle way between art made for the capitalist market and work harnessed to political ends.

The struggle to reconcile these competing interests eventually became Schönebeck's undoing as an artist:

Disinclined to turn his back on either of these aesthetic traditions and unwilling to compromise the moralistic edge of his art, Schönebeck decided in 1967 to stop painting and withdrew from the art world.

In Schönebeck's decision we may hear echoes of Marcel Duchamp's abandonment of art in favor of playing chess (though he spent years secretly working on the fetishistic installation, "Étant donnés," now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art). But an unwillingness "to compromise the moralistic edge of his art" is hardly in the Duchamp mold. It is a decision with which Schönebeck, who lives in Berlin and has continued to show the work he made during his brief career, is apparently at peace.

The drawings and paintings at Nolan are ample evidence of why Schönebeck's work persists. The drawings are especially trenchant, many of which are executed in tusche, the greasy ink used in lithography, from which the artist wrings an exquisitely realized tonal range of warm grays and blacks.



Eugen Schönebeck, "Landschaft (Landscape)" (1959), tusche on paper, 8 1/4 x 11 5/8 inches

His works from the 1950s vary wildly, from a swirling abstraction to a landscape rendered in matchstick-like brushstrokes to what appears to be a page of automatic writing. Tangles of lines fill two drawings from 1960 and '61 in what could be combinations of abstraction, landscape and automatism, or they could be in utero depictions of the beastly humanoids that were soon to spring into his work. In the scheme of the exhibition, which is arranged more or less chronologically, Schönebeck's monsters appear immediately to the left of the *Pandemonium* lithos, as if unleashed by the manifesto's channeling of artist's id.



Eugen Schönebeck, "Sonnenbad (Sunbath)" (1963), tusche on paper, 11 11/16 x 8 1/4 inches

These chunks of bone, meat and hair look exhumed from Otto Dix's grave. The earthbound repulsiveness of their misbegotten forms is as stark and startling as the otherworldly beauty of the lines and washes that conjured them.

Mostly the size of a sheet of typing paper, the drawings are mini-marvels of the graphic genius of German modernism. And given Germany's hallowed tradition of the graphic arts, as well as Schönebeck's self-evident originality in this arena, it is puzzling that he didn't follow the example of Dix, George Grosz, John Heartfield and Max Beckmann and turn to multiples, books and magazines as an outlet.

It would seem to be the logical path for a radical left-winger to take, rather than give up altogether once his ideals failed to mesh with the market's demand for unique, high-end objects. Perhaps he saw all of art-making as part of the same stew. And perhaps that is something we can identify with in our post-Zuccotti, post-Sotheby's moment.

Or maybe, from the evidence of the manifestos and the infernally intense work on display, he simply flamed out early and refused to carry on by repeating himself for the sake of cash and career. A decision like that can be viewed as artistic suicide or spiritual salvation, but either way it is pure speculation. Still, one look at these drawings will tell you that Schönebeck was playing for keeps.

Eugen Schönebeck Paintings and Drawings: 1957–1966 continues at the David Nolan Gallery (527 West 29th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through November 3.