

**When attitude becomes form:
Daniel Birnbaum
on Harald Szeemann**

***WHEN ATTITUDES BECOME FORM:
WORKS, CONCEPTS, PROCESSES,
SITUATIONS, INFORMATION.***

HARALD SZEEMANN, who died in February at the age of seventy-one, was the most influential curator of his generation--and, arguably, the most influential of all time, since he practically defined the curator's role as we understand it today. For decades, he worked out of a studio he called "The Factory" in the small Swiss village of Tegna, conceiving exhibitions that were international in scope and consistently dodging the categories of traditional museum practice, often daring to place historical and contemporary artworks beside anthropological artifacts, sacred objects, technical devices, and occult instruments. Szeemann sought, he said, to create shows that were "poems in space." And in the wake of his move away from quasi-scientific museological attempts to classify and order cultural material, the figure of the curator would no longer be seen as a blend of bureaucrat and cultural impresario. Instead, he emerged as a kind of artist himself, or as some would say--with no small degree of skepticism toward Szeemann's genuine belief that art exhibitions were spiritual undertakings with the power to conjure alternative ways of organizing society--a meta-artist, utopian thinker, or even shaman.

Szeemann himself preferred the down-to-earth *Ausstellungsmacher* (exhibition maker) as his job title. But this modest term hardly conveys a real sense of his curatorial endeavors, whose "controlled chaos" (Szeemann's phrase) might productively be traced back to his brief career in theater during the 1950s, which included a renowned transvestite act and an homage to Dadaist Hugo Ball before ending with his egomaniacal one-man production of *Urfaust* in 1956 (yes, Szeemann played all the roles himself). "It gives you the same rhythm as in theater, only you don't have to be on stage constantly," he said in these pages regarding his decision in 1957 to enter the art world and direct exhibitions. Four years later, at the age of twenty-eight, he became director of the *Kunsthalle Bern*. It was a rather provincial institution at the time, but the bare-bones venue--precisely because it lacked any permanent collection--dictated that Szeemann take up a kind of improvisational, laboratory approach and working style that he would maintain throughout his life. At an unbelievable pace--an exhibition opened every month--Szeemann introduced a baffled local audience to the newest generation of American and European artists, many of whom received their earliest opportunities from the young director. Christo and Jeanne-Claude's first major project, for example, was wrapping the *kunsthalle* in 1968; and the venue also offered Andy Warhol one of his first shows in a European institution.

But the landmark event of Szeemann's tenure in Bern was also his grand finale: "Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form," the first major survey of Conceptual art to take place in Europe.

The tumultuous 1969 show, subtitled "Works, concepts, processes, situations, information," marked an important methodological shift for exhibition practice, in that artists were more or less free to contribute any work that they felt would be relevant. Since the artists, in Szeemann's words, "took over the institution," they also did their best to redefine the physical conditions for the show: Lawrence Weiner removed three square feet of wall space; Michael Heizer demolished the sidewalk with a metal ball; Richard Serra contributed one of his "Splash Pieces" involving molten lead. Richard Long, on the other hand, left the institutional framework behind and went on a three-day hike in the Swiss mountains. As the title suggested, this was not an exhibition of artworks but of "attitudes," the implication being that the artists themselves, as creative subjects and eccentric personalities, were as much on display as the often ephemeral works resulting from their activities. In fact, in the introduction to the show's catalogue, Szeemann mentions that some of the Conceptual and Earth artists who appear in the catalogue had no works in the show. Today this kind of approach is accepted practice in many international exhibitions (for better and, some would say, for worse): First the artist is invited, then comes the question of what the work will be. But in 1969 this method was entirely novel. (Though one should also note that Szeemann was not entirely alone: For example, New York artist and curator Seth Siegelaub was exploring similar ideas contemporaneously, notably creating a show in which artists could make their pieces "anywhere in the world.")

The new model had no less an impact on the public role of the curator, who was now not only an accomplice but also a key protagonist--the enterprising figure responsible for the exhibition's very staging as an event. Unfortunately, the public reaction to "When Attitudes Become Form" was overwhelmingly negative ("When Platitudes Become Form," "Sabotage in the Art Temple," "Is Art Finally Dead?" "Stupidity ..." are just a few headlines found in local newspapers at the time), and scandals accompanied the opening (Daniel Buren, who hadn't actually been invited to participate in the show, was arrested for executing a poster project illegally in the streets). In addition, Szeemann, who had already come under heavy fire from the kunsthalle's board for not showing enough Swiss artists, was assailed again for the number of foreign artists he featured. Under such increasing pressures, Szeemann decided to resign, but only to become something that had never previously existed, assuming a role that would affect the most fundamental operations of the art-world community for decades to come: the independent curator.

By choosing not to direct an institution, Szeemann forged a new mode of working, eschewing traditional museum tasks such as collecting, restoring, or keeping board members and trustees content in order to engage a wider cultural context. To this end, he created the *Agentur für Geistige Gastarbeit* (Agency for Spiritual Guest Work, "guest worker" being the term for immigrant laborers in Switzerland and therefore an obvious job at Bern), a one-person business with a team of devoted collaborators taking care of exhibition architecture, transportation, insurance problems, bookkeeping, and all other practical matters. Szeemann's agency had no objective other than communicating his vision of a radically different zone of energy, passion, and intensity. Every show he did from the early '70s until the very end was defined as "spiritual guest work," made in the service of "a possible visualization of a museum of obsessions." The only museum Szeemann was truly interested in, he said, was the one in his own head: an imaginary, otherworldly entity, a kind of utopian sphere that actual exhibitions could only hint at. It was, he insisted, a museum of obsessions: "Where no obsessions are to be discerned, I have no reason to linger."

During the following three decades, he made his mark on most large-scale undertakings in the art world. In 1980 he created "Aperto," a section of the Venice Biennale devoted to young artists, and two decades later, in 1999 and 2001, he returned to the festival as director of the entire international section, which he expanded to the massive size it is today. But it is important to acknowledge that while Szeemann's becoming independent signaled the beginnings of an art-world infrastructure familiar to us now, events leading up to the presentation of "When Attitudes Become Form" had already marked a crossroads of sorts for the financing of art institutions. In retrospect, all the dilemmas of corporate sponsorship and branding in contemporary art today are fully articulated in

this show. Remarkably, according to Szeemann, the exhibition came about only because "people from Philip Morris and the PR firm Ruder Finn came to Bern and asked me if I would like to do a show of my own. They offered me money and total freedom." Indeed, the exhibition's catalogue seems uncanny in its prescience: "As businessmen in tune with our times, we at Philip Morris are committed to support the experimental," writes John A. Murphy, the company's European president, asserting that his company experimented with "new methods and materials" in a way fully comparable to the Conceptual artists in the exhibition. (And yet, showing the other side of this corporate-funding equation, it was a while before the company supported the arts in Europe again, perhaps needing time to recover from all the negative press surrounding the event.) Significantly, as an independent curator Szeemann was innovative throughout his life when it came to financing his ventures, always exploring approaches from outside the art world: "The exhibition 'The bachelor machines' is in its financing an alternative undertaking whose model might have been film production," reads the telling first sentence of the catalogue for that 1975 show.

"The Bachelor Machines" was among Szeemann's most original projects, based on what he described as "a belief in eternal energy flow as a way to avoid death, as an erotics of life." Terrifying yet fascinating apparatuses have been conceived by, among others, Franz Kafka, Marcel Duchamp, Raymond Roussel, and Alfred Jarry, and in their "splendid ambiguity," he wrote in the show's catalogue, these machines stand for "the omnipotence of eroticism and its negation, for death and immortality, for torture and Disneyland, for fall and resurrection." That exhibition, along with such others as "Monte Verita," named for an early-twentieth-century utopian commune of artists and intellectuals (1978), or "Gesamtkunstwerk" (1983), named after the Wagnerian vision, allowed the curator's own passions and obsessions to fully materialize, and through them, Szeemann's unique signature became most legible. These shows perhaps best fit Szeemann's presentation of himself as a lonesome cowboy--"old school," he said to me in an interview for Artforum in 2001--who preferred doing everything solo instead of surrounding himself with a team of advisors.

A notable exception was his 1972 Documenta 5, generally seen as the most pioneering of the Kassel extravaganzas--emulating the "controlled chaos" of his Bern days, Szeemann famously refashioned the show from a "100 Day Museum" to a "100 Day Event"--and likely the first example of a large-scale exhibition with separate sections organized by different curators and devoted to individual themes, including realism, propaganda, art by the mentally disturbed, and science fiction.

The most controversial category was also the one that most clearly belonged to Szeemann. Originally labeled "Mysticism and Shamanism" in an apparent nod to Joseph Beuys, who was at Documenta in a makeshift office answering questions about art, Szeemann ultimately settled on the title "Individual Mythologies," a phrase he coined with respect to French sculptor and alchemist Etienne Martin's hermetic cosmos--which seemed to him to be built upon an intricate yet impenetrable system of signs, a kind of myth unknowable to anyone but the artist himself. So, Szeemann seemed to ask, how can a deeply "egocentric" universe ever be communicated in a language shared by many? When criticized for having produced a confusing oxymoron rather than a helpful artistic category, Szeemann referenced Viennese actionists, Vito Acconci, Christian Boltanski, Mario Merz, and Paul Thek, insisting that, in the end, all truly interesting artists are the originators of individual mythologies. Yet in Szeemann's view there were also fascinating creators of individual mythologies outside of the art world. One of the most unusual shows he ever staged happened soon after Documenta 5 and took place in his modest apartment in Zurich: "Grandfather-a pioneer like us" (1974). Described as "a torture chamber in the service of beauty," it presented the personal belongings--first and foremost the hairdressing equipment--of Szeemann's beloved grandpa, a Hungarian-born hairdresser and adventurer who died in 1971 at the age of ninety-eight. In Szeemann's opinion this show remained one of his more important achievements: an arresting and unique glimpse of the evasive, heavenly museum of obsessions.

All creators of individual mythologies must be mad, Szeemann seemed to suggest--yet throughout his life he liked to quote the Italian publisher Mazzotta's slogan that "now is the time to find the lunatics." For his part, Szeemann was a prophetic activist in search of visionaries. There are people

who have an inexplicable ability to detect subterranean currents of water or (especially in the Alpine countries) crystals and veins of precious ore, and Szeemann was like that--a kind of dowser of artistic energy. He knew he had this gift, and although he was not a significant theoretical writer, he often wrote with great energy and detail about his quest-in diaries, preparatory notes, open letters, and beautifully impulsive catalogue essays and articles. One of the latter, titled "Inszenieren ist Lieben" (To Stage Is to Love; 1991), has become a canonical document for contemporary curating, spelling out a program of setting energies free and emphasizing nonverbal levels of significance inherent in the works on display. Of course, even in ordinary conversation he could articulate his project succinctly: "In putting together an exhibition," Szeemann once said, "I took both connoisseurship and the dissemination of pure information into account and transformed both. That's the foundation of my work."

Daniel Birnbaum is a contributing editor of Artforum.

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