

Walter Dahn

Let's Get Married, Let's Get Lost

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Sprüth Magers, Berlin

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In the 1980s, Walter Dahn first gained recognition in Cologne as a founding member of the Mülheimer Freiheit, a group of neo-expressionist artists known for their rebellious attitude. A pioneer of the “Bad” Painting movement, he valued raw brushwork and expressive composition over the precision and headiness of Minimalism and Conceptualism. During this period, Dahn’s practice centered on a critical reassessment of painting as a medium. Incorporating references to contemporary music and popular culture, his works evoke a broad array of associations, prompting existential and historical questions that aim at deconstructing the visual ideologies of everyday life. Sprüth Magers is pleased to present *Let's Get Married, Let's Get Lost* on the occasion of Berlin Art Week. Spanning 1982 to 2014, this survey exhibition is the first show of Dahn’s work since his passing.

At just seventeen, Dahn enrolled at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, becoming one of the youngest students to study under Joseph Beuys. Beuys’ insistence that art must work on the social body – that it is a practice of collective transformation rather than aesthetic production – left a deep impression on Dahn. In 1976 he moved to Cologne, where he would live and work for the rest of his life, forging close relationships with Jiří Georg Dokoupil, Rosemarie Trockel, George Condo, Sigmar Polke and Andreas Schulze – artists whose collective energy defined one of the most vital moments in postwar German art.

This inheritance is everywhere in Dahn’s practice. From the outset, he refused to limit himself to painting in the traditional sense, treating photography, drawing, sculpture, and large-scale installation and printmaking as equally legitimate means of artistic enquiry. His works are non-didactic, anti-illusionist and inventive in their use of found and imagined forms, signs and quotations – including historically charged, reductive visual codes drawn from different stereotyping traditions. Dahn deployed such symbols to expose how readily this imagery is used to make the world legible and how hollow such categories are. As he himself put it: “Aber darauf läuft es bei mir immer wieder hinaus: die Dinge auf die Spitze zu treiben, Punkte des Wahnsinns anzupeilen.” (But it always comes back to this for me: pushing things to the extreme, aiming for points of madness.)[1]

In 1984, Dahn decisively broke with painting as such, turning to silkscreen, a medium he saw as a marriage of photography and painting through which he produced small-format works reducing imagery to metaphorical shorthand. *Weltkriegshirsch* (1984/85) is one of the first of these. Themes of violence, oppression and torture appear not as dramatic representation, but as spare, almost clumsy drawings printed onto monochrome grounds – reduced to a reproducible sign.

A parallel disruption runs through his spray-painted works of the early 1980s. Where a painted image carries with it everything viewers have come to expect, Dahn's use of spray paint short-circuits this process. The figures outlined in loose black lines against a hallucinatory ground in *Juice Patrol* © (after a drawing by George Condo) (1983) encapsulate this approach. *Baselitz-Pop* and *Baechler-Blues* (both 1984), from a series of four spray-painted works dedicated to artists and musical genres, bring this into dialogue with artistic lineage. Shaped by time spent in New York and the street art scene of the 1980s, *Baselitz-Pop* invokes Georg Baselitz, whose subversion of pictorial conventions strongly influenced Dahn's generation, extending that legacy into the realm of pop music. Both works were shown in Kasper König's landmark 1984 exhibition *Von hier aus* in Düsseldorf.

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Towards the end of the 1980s, Dahn turned increasingly to photography and silkscreen, drawing from popular culture and mass media as well as his own archive. Among these were images taken during visits to ethnographic museums, where objects from non-Western cultures were displayed in vitrines. In *Untitled (Ex Voto)* (1987), imagery derived from photocopied photographs of Brazilian ex-voto offerings is enlarged, projected onto the wall and recreated by hand. Despite the many layers of mediation, the religious offerings, made by worshippers to show gratitude, return the viewer's gaze with an uncanny sense of presence, cutting through the distance imposed by reproduction and institutional framing alike.

The work from which the exhibition takes its title, *Let's Get Married, Let's Get Lost* (2006), draws on a Nadar illustration from 1859 depicting Painting, personified, offering Photography a place in the Salon des Beaux-Arts: a gesture that reads, from Dahn's vantage, as a historical footnote that borders on the absurd. The term "Bonus Track," visible in the lower right corner, borrows music industry language for the supplementary and unofficial to describe what was once considered a lesser medium. It is a characteristically deadpan reminder that hierarchies of value are always provisional and always available for disruption.

[1] Walter Dahn, interview by Wilfried Dickhoff, Bettina Pauly, and Johannes Stüttgen, *Kunst Heute*, no. 8 (Kiepenhauer & Witsch, 1993), 30.

Walter Dahn (1954–2024) lived and worked in Cologne. Selected solo exhibitions include Haus Mödrath, Kerpen (2024–25), Kestnergesellschaft, Hannover (2019), Kunstmuseum Basel (2017), Sprüth Magers, Berlin (2015), Venus over Manhattan (2013), Kunstverein Sankt Pauli, Hamburg (2007), Kunstverein Krefeld (2005), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1997), Kunsthalle zu Kiel (1994), Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel (1989), Museum Folkwang, Essen, Kaiser Wilhelm Museum, Krefeld, Kunstmuseum Hannover (all 1986) and Rheinisches Landesmuseum Bonn (1985). Selected group exhibitions include Kunsthalle Mannheim (2021), Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, Von der Heydt Museum, Wuppertal (both 2020), Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen (2018), Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Deurle, MUMOK, Vienna (both 2016), Städel Museum, Frankfurt (2015), NCCA, Moscow (2012), HVCCA, New York (2011), Sabanci Museum, Istanbul (2011), Tate Modern (2007), Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel (2006), Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City (2002), Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1996), Biennale of Sydney (1992), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (1989), Museum of Modern Art, New York (1984), documenta 7, Kassel (1982).

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For further information and press inquiries, please contact Silvia Baltschun (sb@spruethmagers.com).