

## ***Indians, Toreros and Night Owls— The Neue Wilde in 1980s' Berlin***

Elvira Bach, Luciano Castelli, Rainer Fetting, Helmut Middendorf,  
Salomé & Bernd Zimmer

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40 years after the **Zeitgeist** exhibition of 1982 with its focus on painting, especially "Heftige Malerei" (ferocious painting), held at the Martin-Gropius-Bau—which at the time was located right next to the Berlin Wall and had only just been provisionally renovated—the exhibition at the Galerie Deschler compellingly recalls Berlin's vibrant art scene of the 1980s. **Rainer Fetting**, **Salomé** and **Helmut Middendorf** all participated in the **Zeitgeist** exhibition. In 1977, they had also been among the co-founders of the artists' self-help gallery Galerie am Moritzplatz (which existed until 1981), as was **Bernd Zimmer**, and part of the Berlin "Neue Wilde" group of artists (also known as "Junge Wilde"). With their large-format paintings executed in strong colors and gestural brushstrokes they flaunted an unfettered vitality and punk attitude in their rebellion against the dominant art movements of the time, Conceptual Art and Minimalism, which they perceived as being overly intellectual, dogmatic and restrictive. Swiss artist **Luciano Castelli** was also part of that group, creating joint paintings with Rainer Fetting and Salomé, and together with Salomé founding the eccentric punk band "Geile Tiere" (horny animals) at the Berlin Club Dschungel. Joined by Fetting on the drums, they travelled France on a performance tour in 1982, performing the concert "Opéra Par Hasard" in Bordeaux and Paris, while in 1983 the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Bordeaux mounted an exhibition with joint works by the three artists. The male dominance within the group—also known as the "Moritzboys"—was offset by **Elvira Bach** who was also loosely associated with the Neue Wilde and whose paintings focused on (her own) femininity. 1982 was a seminal year for her, too, given that she had her international breakthrough at the **documenta 7** in Kassel (as did Salomé). For Castelli, that had already been the case ten years earlier at the **documenta 5**, where at age 21 he had been the youngest participant.

The **Zeitgeist** exhibition was preceded by the exhibitions "Heftige Malerei" at the Haus am Waldsee in Berlin in 1980, and "A New Spirit in Painting" at the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 1981 (like the **Zeitgeist** exhibition it was curated by Christos M. Joachimides and Norman Rosenthal et al.). Significantly, the Berlin artists that were part of the Neue Wilde had all moved to Berlin from West Germany (or Switzerland in the case of Castelli), often in order to enroll at the Berlin Hochschule (today Universität) der Künste. Surrounded as it was by the Berlin Wall, West-Berlin, due to its special status in Germany, was paradoxically a symbol of freedom and non-conformity: freedom from the military draft on the one hand, but also freedom in sexual, creative, artistic and financial matters.

Berlin's insular isolation allowed the most diverse subcultures to thrive, such as a wild punk scene. A formative influence on the unrestrained figurative painting style of the Neue Wilde had been Karl Horst Hödicke at the HdK, whose students had included Middendorf and Salomé. Sex was never far away in the pictures and eccentric actions of the artists—the band name "Geile Tiere" (horny animals) was programmatic. Fetting and Salomé were active in the gay movement, but the paintings by Elvira Bach were also expressive of a new (and in this case female) sexual freedom and assertiveness. Trying out different roles was an important part of the revolt against West German bourgeois stuffiness, whether in erotic roleplaying or the assumption of exotic identities that were more often products of the imagination rather than realism, such as the Indian (i.e. native American), the torero, or Castelli's erotic stagings of himself. In Fetting's self-portraits as Van Gogh the role-playing could also take the form of locating the artist in his relation to art history. Bach's night owl is a fitting reference to the thriving nightlife in Berlin, whether in the SO36 club or the Dschungel, or in one of the many illegal bars and clubs in Kreuzberg or Schöneberg. In their spontaneity and energy the exhibited works are a lively testimony to one of the most adventurous decades in the already quite turbulent history of Berlin.