

[ArtSeen Next Section »](#) [Next Article >](#)

Letter from BERLIN: MANFRED KUTTNER A - Z

by David Rhodes

GALERIE JOHANN KÖNIG, BERLIN
OCTOBER 30 – DECEMBER 18, 2010

Galerie Johann König is a short walk from Potsdamer Strasse, a new neighborhood for the Berlin gallery scene now long decentred from the original art district of Berlin Mitte. What once formed a haven of cheap, available space after the fall of the Wall in 1989 has now become a chic and increasingly expensive neighborhood for the incoming wealthy of former West Germany. It is the urban poor and those of modest means who are bearing the brunt of these changes, as people are forced out of their homes to accommodate newcomers able to pay the increased rents. The galleries simply relocate, prompting more nostalgia for the early days of post-reunification Berlin.

On entering the gallery and passing the reception area, there are two interconnected rooms, one illuminated only by a solitary film projector showing Manfred Kuttner's 1963 film *A - Z*; the other contains a long, narrow vitrine for the scripted sequencing of images, titled "Filmstudie," that make up the formal structure of *A - Z*.

The film, which was shot by Kuttner (1937 – 2007) and others, including Gerhard Richter, who appears in the film along with his painting "Nase" ("Nose," 1963), consists of rapidly edited images of the journey from Kuttner's apartment to his studio in the Art Academy of Düsseldorf. Pictured are groups of people, shop windows, and street signs, interspersed with female portraits in the form of pin-ups and divas from the 1960s and images of the then-current Pope, John XXIII. The letters A and Z, which appear at the beginning and at the end of the film respectively, are in fact brief shots of paintings by Kuttner himself.

Alternating between these and other short motion sequences are still images that are sometimes over- and sometimes underexposed, and which are subsequently hand-colored red, yellow, or green. The fast, flickering, disjunctive nature of the film serves to emphasize the continuous, but not consistent, quality of lived urban experience and its associated visual overload. The jagged flow of categories churned up by these images mirrors the function of memory and other contingent processes of thinking.

Kuttner's paintings had been initially described as "kinetic" by critics in Germany because of his insouciant use of optical color effects. If one were to imagine them in the negative, employing

only black and white, the collapse of foreground and background into a rough pattern of signs would connect Kuttner unexpectedly, I think, with the paintings of Christopher Wool, another artist who uses the urban environment as a source. Wool has even used the occasional blink of florescent color in his paintings, and, of course, letters and words. And both artists can be said to recall the musical structures of Cecil Taylor and Sun Ra, in their clustered and scattered forms.

Kuttner made his paintings almost entirely with the then-recently patented Plaka fluorescent color. He sought to break down the picture plane into a series of repetitive and geometric patterns that often appear laconic and improvised. In his work, precision and straight lines were not the name of the game at all; his interest was in new color contrasts and structure, though always with a kind of unlikely rightness and balance, the deceptively simple kind that is also to be found in the formal compositions of Blinky Palermo. When Kuttner uses pattern, he undermines its symmetry with direct paint handling that accepts and utilizes accident and mistakes. One subject of the paintings was painting itself. Through painting itself there was a desire for new possibilities, things not yet seen or at least seen differently. This attitude toward a medium's material possibilities is consistent in both A – Z and the paintings.

Kuttner's family had moved to West Germany in 1959 and eventually settled in Düsseldorf, where Kuttner enrolled at the Art Academy in 1960. By 1962, at the suggestion of Konrad Lueg, Kuttner along with his new friend Gerhard Richter (who was still Gerd Richter back in those days, professionally as well as privately) moved to the class of K. O. Götz.

Götz's class also included Sigma Polke and Franz Erhard Walther. In fact, Gerhard Richter's first professional exhibition was with Kuttner at the Jung Kunst gallery in Fulda, though Kuttner's geometric Zero Group-inspired abstraction contrasted with Richter's Art Informel painting style (Richter later burned these paintings). Even their titling was at odds, with Richter's romantic "Exzess" ("Excess") opposed to Kuttner's abstract "oo.btz," for example.

Manfred Lueg (who, using his mother's name, became well known later as the gallerist Conrad Fischer), Gerhard Richter, Manfred Kuttner, and Sigmar Polke exhibited together only once, in some modest rooms at Kaiser Strasse 31a, Düsseldorf, in May 1963, as a result of Lueg's encouragement of an "impromptu community," as Richter called it, amongst colleagues who were otherwise in direct competition with each other. Lueg was from Düsseldorf and was well-connected; the others had moved there from East Germany. Kuttner decided to end his career as an artist in the mid-1960s, last showing in the large group exhibition called *Neo-Dada, Pop, Décollage, Kapitalistischer Realismus* at Galerie René Block in Berlin.