



The artist as magician: Markus Raetz rewards fascinated gazes with 'aha' experiences

His delicate, poetic sculptures never cease to amaze. The first major retrospective in Bern since his death is dedicated to the artist of minimal gestures with maximum visual effect.

Philip Meier

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Everything is changing. Nothing is what it seems at first glance. As soon as we have grasped an image as such, it turns into its opposite. Markus Raetz repeatedly deceived his viewers. His art pieces sometimes seem like sleight of hand. This magician of the ambiguous cast a spell on his audience by not only continually astonishing them, but also richly rewarding their fascinated viewing with aha experiences.

The Bern artist, who died in 2020, was a magician of movement. His art is particularly evident when you move yourself. A woman and a man, bent in a highly complex manner from delicate wire, mutate into man and woman: If you walk around them, they change their gender, as if Raetz wanted to make a posthumous comment with a wink on the bizarre dance of our days around gender identity. But there is also a sculpture of a pipe that, when viewed from a different angle, suddenly dissolves into smoke. Small structures made of letters, so-called word sculptures, simply reverse their meaning as you walk past - Oui-Non, Yes-No.

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The artist called such objects anamorphoses. Including this bent wire that creates the profile of a sitting rabbit. But behind it in the mirror shows a man with a hat. Raetz knew how to charge a simple wire with multiple meanings. But with him there is never just one or the other, but always also the in-between. For the Bernese, it was not about a specific image or a clear image, about what was depicted, but about how we ourselves see the pictorial world, make it accessible to ourselves and interpret it. Raetz was interested in phenomena of perception. With this conceptual approach to art, he fit in with his time, and also fit perfectly into Harald Szeemann's legendary exhibition "When Attitudes Become Form" at the Kunsthalle Bern in 1969.

A classic from Raetz's collection of fine, playful and poetic works can now be seen in the Kunstmuseum Bern: his famous original form of Eve. Three twigs, which he had perhaps casually picked up on a walk along the side of the road, are placed on a base, with the small twig in the shape of an upsilon in the middle -and we see a female abdomen. This is simple and at the same time treacherous: how much our vision is conditioned and predetermined by archetypal forms.

Art as imagination

Markus Raetz was never interested in showmanship. The spectacular was far from his mind. He was a quiet artist, one for whom simple materials such as some wire, some sheet metal, fine twigs, the occasional round mirror, but also stones and wood were enough. Finds and fragments: things like that inspired him. Nevertheless, his "Eva" has become an icon of contemporary Swiss art. A lot of it was a coincidence: "Sometimes things like this happen because you're bored. Then you just think of something so that your head and your hands have something to do," the artist once said.

How often the trained primary teacher was bored remains to be seen. In any case, Raetz has further developed his "Eva" into a highly complex installation with a mirror, a glass pane and a few lines and dots on the wall. You stand in front of it with a question mark, looking for the right position and can no longer imagine how the image was created, which you can suddenly see reflected on a blue disc: Eva again, now as a torso. But where is this picture? In our heads? In the room? No matter. What matters is this: Raetz illustrates here, so to speak - and quite humorously - the idea of the eternal feminine, which constantly evades the desireful gaze.

How playful his work is becomes clear to you with every object exhibited in the Kunstmuseum Bern. Raetz also likes to be a bit mischievous with art history. So there is a picture with a mountain on it. But if you look closely, all you see is a succinct picture frame like the one you find in every Brockenhaus. Behind the glass pane, the string that holds the empty frame to a nail in the wall is stretched into a triangle. And then our brain turns it into a mountain picture.

Some may even see the famous Niesen near Lake Thun, as the Swiss national painter Ferdinand Hodler painted it again and again - so often that it has, so to speak, engraved itself in the collective image memory. Raetz retrieves such stored images with his optical move and at the same time shows us how simple what we consider to be a work of art is: nothing more than a frame on a nail - plus imagination.

Raetz, the artist of the minimal gesture with the maximum visual effect: This is now also shown by his rotating sheets of metal on the museum ceiling, kinetic sculptures that, depending on the position and incidence of light, take the form of three-dimensional cuboids, only to immediately disappear again into a narrow line. Raetz continually pushes this game of moving form further, as if to reveal to the art viewer that art is nothing without the participating imagination.

Twisted heads

Hundreds of profiles of human faces sway and dangle gently in the gentle draft of the air conditioning: Raetz had once thrown them onto sheets of paper in a single night in Amsterdam in a drawing frenzy - like a Chinese calligrapher. Later implemented as three-dimensional mobiles made of wire, they form a panopticon of all conceivable physiognomies: if we look long enough, we can see all our friends and enemies in them. Markus Raetz has explored a wide variety of media, including painting, photography - and even cartoons. Above all, he was a draftsman through and through. He worked tirelessly on the most diverse effects of lines; his graphic work is immense. But his wire objects are essentially drawings in space. His sketchbooks, in turn, are the thinking space in which he put his ideas on paper and created an enormous treasure trove of drawings from which he repeatedly drew for his works.

We turn our heads in front of many of these works in search of meaning and, when rotating around Raetz's art puzzles, we sometimes run the risk of drowning in a loss of meaning. Until our heads turn upside down, like in the bronze work that demonstrates exactly that: a man's head, whose profile becomes more diffuse with every step around the object, until we recognize it again, now suddenly upside down: the head has turned upside down.

Markus Raetz himself often had his head in the clouds. He found inspiration up there. Because there in the sky - the children already know this - the clouds transform into all imaginable shapes and figures. Clouds are metamorphosis in its purest form. And probably the best teacher of an artist like Markus Raetz. The artist himself was no longer able to realize his last project from 2020 - a "cloud" made up of many hanging and constantly re-forming wire figures. It is now floating in the Berne Art Museum in the first major retrospective since his death.

"Markus Raetz - oui non, si no, yes no", Kunstmuseum Bern, until February 25, 2024.