René Block

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René Block at his office in the gallery, with the poster *Hommage à Berlin*, 1969 © KP Brehmer / KP Brehmer Nachlass, Berlin

- 1 It is hard to sum up a man's life, and all the more so when this life refuses to be pigeonholed in any professional identity. René Block was trained to be a painter on glass. With his colleagues KP Bremer and Markus Lüperz, he tackled contemporary art by spending time at the Haus Lange in Krefeld. The New Realists' programme presented by Paul Wember left the young man full of doubts. At the age of 22, he settled in Berlin, keen

to help artists, but reckoning that he was insufficiently charismatic to be one himself. The big city was not enjoying the cultural boom of the Rhine region, where the art market was exploding. René Block made the most of this and opened a venue. In the early exhibitions held there, he worked on putting together a hybrid scene which, under the same roof, encompassed the young German go-getters of his generation, the anti-artists of Fluxus, multiple editions, and Happenings. He organized several exhibitions which borrowed the Capitalist Realism label from Konrad Lueg, Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke. In the city which incarnated the tensions of the Cold War, the term was a response not only to Socialist Realism, but also to the invasive nature of American Pop art. The venue was a combative gallery—a *Kampfgalerie*. A sense of political allegory and contact with recent history marked the happenings produced by Allan Kaprow and Wolf Vostell, and group projects such as *Hommage à Lidice* (1967), and *Blockade* (1969).

- 2 The financial worries of the venue's early days were gradually smoothed out, but for all that René Block did not get bogged down. In the early 1970s he started working as a freelance curator championing minor art scenes on the sidelines of the international market. He became involved with the organization of the Berlin art air, counterbalancing the Cologne monster with Zwirner at its helm. In 1974, at the height of the market crisis, and once again going against the grain, René Block created a satellite space in New York. The opening was marked by another gesture stemming from political allegory. In *I like America and America likes me*, after being driven to the gallery in an ambulance, Joseph Beuys locked himself up in a cage for three days with a coyote for company; he left the same way he had arrived, without having set foot on American soil.
- 3 While remaining loyal to his earliest artists, René Block pursued his pioneering role with a soft spot for Eastern European art scenes. He accordingly helped to construct the paradigm of a global art: Sydney (1990), Istanbul (1995), Gwangju (200), and Belgrade (2006) were all biennials which he directed, before ending up contributing to the creation of Manifesta, the European art biennial. The list is long, the feats of arms numerous. René Block is not an art dealer, but he describes himself as a producer. He senses the contradictions issuing from art's relations to capitalism, answering them in the form of an ongoing movement. This latter suggests a kind of resistance. His career symbolizes the journey made through the second half of the 20th century as a European.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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René Block has written and published a lot of books and catalogues, in particular:

New York – Downtown Manhattan : SoHo, Ausstellungen, Theater, Musik, Performance, Video, Film, Berlin: Akademie der Künste und Berliner Festwochen, 1976

Für Augen und Ohren. Von der Spieluhr zum akustischen Environment. Objekte, Installationen, Performances, Berlin : Akademie der Künste, 1980

You can find his complete bibliography in the catalogue *René Block. Ich kenne kein Weekend : Ausstellungsprojekte, Texte und Dokumente seit 1964*, Cologne: Walther König, 2015