

# SEPTEMBER

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## ON NIKOLAUS UTERMÖHLEN (1958-1996)

### Nikolaus Utermöhlen and “Die Tödliche Doris”

Together with Wolfgang Müller, Nikolaus Utermöhlen founded the group “Die Tödliche Doris” (Deathly Doris) in 1980 while still an art student in Berlin. The group was originally intended to be a music band and remained active in various different formations until it broke up in 1987. Käthe Kruse was part of the group from 1982 on, and in 1984 Tabea Blumenschein joined as well. The conceptually formulated work of the “Tödliche Doris” successively spanned all areas of art ranging from film, literature, photography, performance, and video to painting and sculpture.

During the early eighties, “Die Tödliche Doris” provided important impulses to Berlin’s art and music scene. It coined the phrase “brilliant dilettantes,” a reference to a Merve book of the same title published by Wolfgang Müller in 1982, which additionally served as the name of a festival that also made bands like “Die Einstürzenden Neubauten” and “Malaria” well-known.

Among the earliest artworks made by the “Tödliche Doris” is the conceptual work *Material für die Nachkriegszeit* (Material for the Post-War Era), which was shown in 1981 in Kiel, Düsseldorf, and Wolfsburg. The work consists of hundreds of originally discarded and for the most part torn photo-booth photographs that were pieced back together and reconstructed. An accompanying film of the same name was produced and shown for the first time in 1981 at the Paris Biennale.

The group participated in the exhibition “Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk” (A Tendency Towards the Total Artwork) curated by Harald Szeemann and performed on New Year’s Eve 1983/84 in the Delphi Cinema in Berlin. In mid-1984, under the title *Chöre und Soli* (Choruses and Soli), a green box was released that contained eight miniphone records, a battery-driven player, and an accompanying book. Today, the box is a coveted collectors’ item.

In 1985, the group worked on a series of 44 abstract paintings that operated according to the flip-book principle; these were compiled in a book titled *Die Gesamtheit allen Lebens und alles*

*Darüberhinausgehende* (The Entirety of All Life and Everything that Goes Beyond It), published in 1987. The “Tödliche Doris” also participated in the documenta 8 in Kassel. The Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Musée d’Art Moderne Paris, and countless other museums worldwide invited the group to perform and featured their films.

### **Nikolaus Utermöhlen as Painter**

Following the break-up of “Die Tödliche Doris” in 1987 and until his death in 1996, Nikolaus Utermöhlen pursued the concept of multiple meaning and aesthetic openness as an individual artist. Utermöhlen was radical in his versatility and almost without scruple. Dressed as a painting Bohemian, he created works whose model character recalled the wooden book dummies in furniture stores or films in which paintings do not function as works of art, but as parts of a stage setting. Their garish colors resemble the legendary Edgar Allen Poe films by Roger Corman from the early ‘60s, whose connection to their literary origin were no more than fragmentary.

A large part of Utermöhlen’s works create an impression of painting made on canvas. In reality, except for only a very few exceptions, Utermöhlen never painted on canvas. The basis for his paintings are dampened color photocopies that he applied with a brush to burlap or metal and worked over with clear acrylic binder and pigment. Utermöhlen’s tool was the color copier, which he used to produce “painterly” effects in the copy itself. The ground of Utermöhlen’s images always consisted of reproductions of already reproduced material. He used illustrations from art books, newspapers, and gay magazines as a basis for his work.

He photographed dogs’ toys, plastic balls, and handmade models made from wooden sticks and Styrofoam balls and archived them, gluing them to sheets of paper and storing them in boxes. He found his materials in places like used bookstores, junkshops, kiosks, and toy stores. Utermöhlen’s art is an art of poverty.

He in no way resembled the painter dandy of contemporary art. As a “painter,” he even sewed his own costumes for the roles he played. In his threadbare tuxedo, he resembled Charlie Chaplin or Disney’s animated figure Jiminy Cricket, who accompanied Pinocchio on his path towards becoming human. Utermöhlen’s self-styling finds its analogy in the very reproductions he used in his paintings. Brimming with quotes, they were easy to read through, almost obvious – yet at the same time they

retained an obscurity and secrecy. The aesthetics reflected in Utermöhlen's paintings is not the aesthetics of past epochs, but rather of their reception in mass culture.

Utermöhlen's first "painting" was the hundred-part work *ERREICHEN GLEICHES TOR DURCH DAS ZUERST GEGANGEN WURDE* (Reach Same Door That Was First Gone Through), which is based on a song of the same name by "Die Tödliche Doris." Utermöhlen carried the idea of musical sampling into the fine arts. The work, made in 1989, was presented in the Galerie Zwinger in Berlin; it shows a postcard motif of the baroque choir screen in the Franconian Ebrach Cloister, which Utermöhlen enlarged on the photocopy machine to its "real" dimensions and dissected into one hundred parts. While the overall motif seems almost photorealistic from a certain distance, the individual segments are abstract or at best ornamental. In all of the hundred images, the segments of baroque ornament, enlarged to the point of unrecognizability, are accentuated with matte and glossy acrylic paint in various shades of light and dark color.

In terms of color, Utermöhlen tied his motifs together, but in a formal sense he distorted them, often running them through all kinds of mathematical permutations of color superimposition. His involvement with the color circles of Goethe and the color teachings of Steiner and the doctor and natural philosopher Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801-1887) find their expression in the works *Vor dem Tempel der Ungerechtigkeit* (Before the Temple of Injustice) (1991) and *An Infinite Painting on "A Vision of the Last Judgment" by William Blake* (1992).