

Günther Förg.

HE HAD BEEN UNABLE to paint for several years after a stroke from which he never fully recovered, but he was still dreaming of a late oeuvre, when on December 5, 2013, his sixty-first birthday, Günther Förg died at his home in Freiburg im Breisgau. In retrospect, the title of an exhibition he presented at Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach, in 1998 can stand as a sort of leitmotif of his art as well as his life: "What's self-evident to others is a problem for us." The phrase is lifted from the Diary of a Journey through the Austrian Alps, a lieder cycle by the Viennese-born composer Ernst Krenek, who later emigrated to the US. As a painter, Förg was among the executors of the idea of the white cube and the shaped canvas, although he always remained faithful to the rectangle. His friend Martin Kippenberger, for whom the problems of Minimal and Conceptual art were yet other opportunities for irony, sometimes called him conservative: Förg delved into these problems and made them personal.

Back when he was a student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich (1973–79), he riled his fellow students by producing a monochrome gray picture every week, an apt reflection of the fact that he lived in a dorm room and had no studio to himself. Later on, he brusquely snubbed his teacher, the painter Karl Fred Dahmen, saying he would no longer paint, playing chess and table tennis instead. After graduating, as the new postmodernist painting took off around him, Förg initially chose a very different path. An admirer as well as a sharp-eyed critic of Gerhard Richter and Blinky Palermo, he created monochrome wall paintings. He also chose an unusual medium for himself: architectural photography. More specifically, he focused on a paradoxical subject—rationalist and Futurist buildings from the Mussolini years. The images he created were painting in an extended sense, produced outside the artist's studio, enlarged and printed by a photo laboratory, framed and glazed by a frame-maker.

Förg had to work on the side as a house painter to pay for such professionalism. And when, after 1984, his lead pictures brought him unimagined success ("I've covered America in lead"), it was important to him to emphasize the economy of his art. He continued to work like a house painter, now in a space at the Basel headquarters of Möbeltrans, an art-logistics specialist, where his pictures could be packed up and shipped directly after he finished them. The structures of his bronze reliefs were similarly created right at the foundry. It was not until the 1990s that he made pictures on canvases, and even then he worked on cotton duck rather than painter's canvas. His grid and window paintings took inspiration from Munch to bring a new dynamic quality to his art, as well as an expressivity he subsequently exorcised in the dot pictures. Some critics and artists maligned his work as haphazard, protesting that he was producing altogether too much, but he knew exactly what he was doing. Call it the Apollonian versus the Dionysian: the discourse of a rational and contemporary perspective on abstract painting, combined with a world of mysterious and enigmatic depth, roiled by memories and the powerful and immediate allure of painting. In his unerring instinct for colors and proportions, he easily eclipsed the painters of his generation.

That's the Günther Förg I mourn. He could be a real asshole. He'd come to openings to pick fights with certain people, calling art "disgusting," women "sluts," and men "faggots." He'd drink too much red wine, upsetting glasses and making a mess, crawling beneath dinner tables or clambering atop them, and later he'd fall asleep in a chair. During the day, however, he was gracious and exceptionally generous; he knew a great deal about painting and its techniques, about architecture and literature. In the 1980s, he got on some people's bad side by allegedly expressing right-wing extremist views. I was with him at a bar in Kassel in 1990 when he stood on a table to sing the "Internationale"—on the eve of German reunification, that was an expression of his deeply rooted personal anarchy. The Günther Förg I mourn has left us a magnificent oeuvre, shrouded in melancholy and driven by an overarching idea that many of us have yet to understand.

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GÜNTHER FÖRG is no longer with us. I first met him in Stuttgart during the preparations for the exhibition "Europa 79," which I helped to organize. He was a young, shy, rather quiet artist, and, after having looked at the exhibition space, he immediately proposed to do a wall painting. After the other curators and I agreed, he quickly and precisely moved toward its completion.

A friendship was born, which led to our unforgettable first trip to New York, where he introduced me to his heroes, above all Barnett Newman.

Günther showed me many new things. He opened my eyes to the architecture of Italian Rationalism. Both of us shared a fascination for Ezra Pound's Cantos. He craved the light and color in Italy. His photographs of Casa Malaparte, which we visited with friends, were inspired by Jean-Luc Godard, whom he admired. And indeed, Munich, where Förg studied, was not far from Lake Como, Rome, or Capri. The gray, dull Germany of the 1970s depressed him. His legendary monochromatic paintings from his years at the academy can also be understood politically.

Günther had a strong impact in my gallery in Cologne. Besides showing his work in numerous major solo exhibitions, he created a permanent wall painting for the staircase and designed catalogues, furniture, as well as the stationery.

Artists such as Albert Oehlen, Martin Kippenberger, Werner Büttner, Georg Herold, and later Jeff Koons, as well as Christopher Wool, became friends with Günther and collected his work.

In his last retrospective, in 2011, at my gallery in Berlin, Günther showed an impressive selection of paintings and large-sized photographs. From this exhibition I remember most of all his very last painting from 2009. He over-painted a colorful dabbed piece, almost exclusively gray on gray, which reminds of his years at the academy. Gray paintings have emerged repeatedly in his work over the years, but this piece is particularly impressive in its calm and dignity. A masterpiece.

Without doubt, Günther Förg's radicalness shook up the very idea of painting. At the age of sixty-one, one of the most generous and talented artists passed away. I am honored to have been allowed to accompany his career from the beginning.

Max Hetzler is an art dealer based in Berlin.