

Theo Altenberg

by Andrew Spyrou

Since the early 1970s and the days of his membership of some of Germany’s best-recognized artistic communes, Theo Altenberg has worked with a great variety of artistic media, from film and text to electronic music. Most recently he has produced the vibrant oil paintings shown here. Nevertheless, he rejects definition as a ‘multidisciplinary’ artist.

Communal Living: For as long as I can remember I have been attracted by adventurous and unknown situations, and artists like Otto Muehl and Günter Brus encouraged me in this direction. For many years I was a member of artistic communes, including the somewhat notorious Friedrichshof Commune (1973–90). The structure of such communities made possible the exploration of one’s deepest feelings, providing for a profound emotional ‘education’ that has influenced my whole artistic practice.

Words & Music: During several years of working on ‘public’ projects, such as Joseph Beuys’s 7000 Oaks between 1980 and 1983, and founding the Atelier del Sur artist-in-residence project in El Cabrito/La Gomera in 1986, the commune had gradually turned into a ‘hierarchical communist regime’. I found myself in deep psychic crisis. The idea of a ‘new creative society’, which I had held up as an absolute utopia, had imploded into a nightmare. The isolation I felt during this period, around 1987, led me to attempt to understand the position of art within human consciousness. Focusing on the arrangement of word structures allowed me to realign my world, almost as if the words I was using – such as A N G S T (fear), LIE BE (love), HA SS (hate), and SUPER SA MEN (supersperm) – were aware of their own solitude. They served as personal traumatic poetry and became the desperate echo of ‘the collective orgasms of a failed vision and the loss of identity’. I found it necessary to tear words apart in this way, twisting them in a way that revealed previously hidden

multilingual meanings: WEISHEIT (wisdom) became WE IS HE IT or WE I SHE IT, for example. The viewer could thereby take part in a conscious decipherment of both the work and the linguistic world that they found themselves located in, emotionally connecting to elements of life that are usually taken for granted.

I was fortunate enough to attend the Werk-kunstschule Krefeld art school, which encouraged a multifaceted education and promoted an interdisciplinary practice. It pre-empted the era of the multidisciplinarian, a term I feel is no longer relevant; it is common sense to work across different media and acknowledging this by way of terminology merely restricts and confines in other respects.

My linguistic focus between 1987 and 1995 subsequently led me in another direction, that of the production of electronic music. The dancing that inevitably accompanied the music had its roots in the commune’s dance performances of 1975–78 and my own obsession with soul music from Stax and Motown which supplied me with a groove. Music continues to feature strongly in my artistic practice, in particular in my work with Burnt Friedman. My paintings have featured on several of his album covers, a product of our artistic dialogue. So although my work might appear to take distinct aesthetic paths, in fact these paths all link to the superhighway of the subconscious.

Painting & Liquid Space: I came to painting very late, in about 1988. At art school my ideas were engaged with photography and filmmaking, and in the commune period I hap-

pened to become a performer, singer, video artist and language researcher. I was always fascinated by oil paint as a material but the presence of brilliant artists like Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter discouraged me from exploring it at first. The early works of Günter Brus, Otto Muehl and Hermann Nitsch struck me in a different way, and in particular in the way that they reinterpreted painting as action, allowing the material to express itself through dialogue, utilizing bodily energy as an essential ingredient in the medium. In general my paintings are about liquidity.

Gustav Metzger’s 1966 *Liquid Crystal Environment*, which I saw reinstalled in 2002 at Zürich’s Migros Museum, subsequently had a profound influence on my current practice. In painting it has always been part of my intention to use colour as a kind of ‘liquid space’, and I feel Metzger’s work encapsulated this feeling perfectly.

Art as Life and Life as Art: The 1960s and ’70s saw musical and artistic revolutions. My influences are wide and varied but certainly included Andy Warhol, Joseph Beuys, Paul Thek, Land Art and the manifestos of Viennese Actionism. 1972’s Documenta 5 in Kassel, Germany, curated by Harald Szeemann, significantly expanded my appreciation for art within life and life becoming art. Many of the installations there felt like ‘birth experiences’, and this was the real inspiration for me to want to live as part of an artistic collective. But fusing one’s ‘art’ and one’s life too closely can lead to potentially disastrous consequences. It is dangerous to organize all aspects of life/creation in one collective structure. The complexity of our ever-changing lives is hard to handle and a balance is not always struck. Everybody has a responsibility to pay attention, to respect intimacy and to demand recognition for their actions.

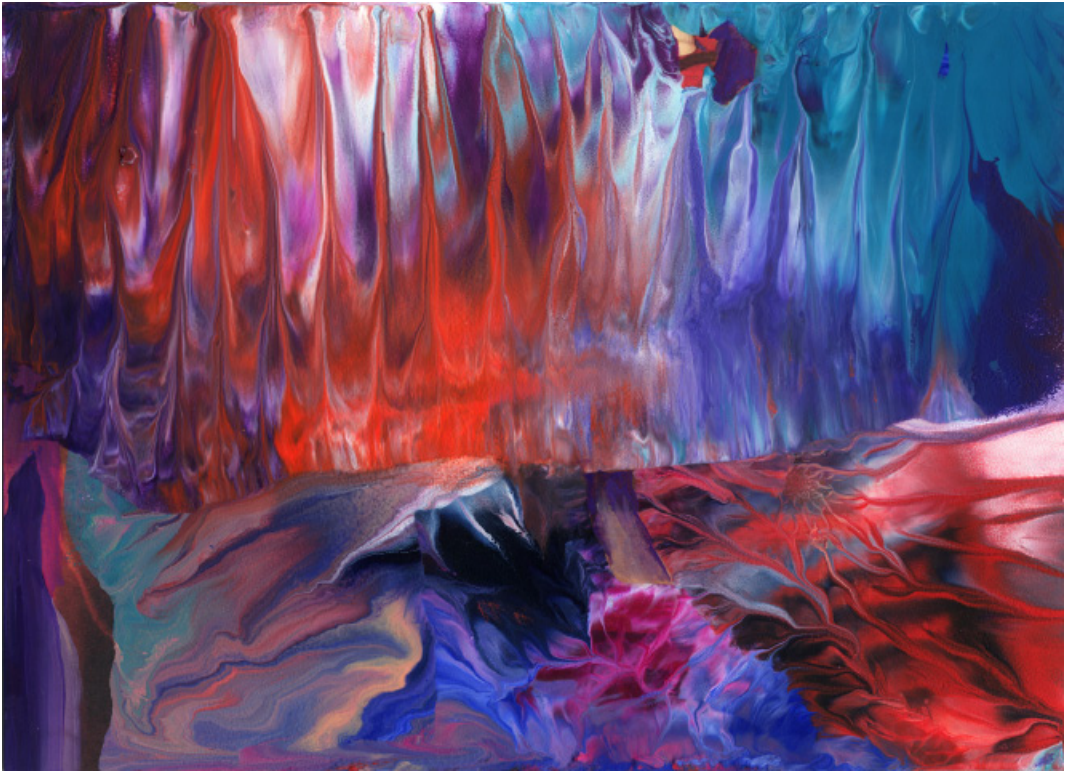


O.T. (Untitled), 2012, oil on cardboard, 35 x 24 cm

O.T. (Untitled), 2012, oil on cardboard, 20 x 14 cm



O.T. (Untitled), 2012, oil on cardboard, 41 x 29 cm



O.T. (Untitled), 2012, oil on cardboard, 27 x 20 cm