

## **From the Living Room into the Museum: a review**

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**Essay from the exhibition catalogue «Rectangle and Square». Rupf Collection II**

Hermann and Margrit Rupf realised early on that a collection such as theirs ought to be opened to the public and made over to a suitable institution. Hermann Rupf (1880–1962) laid the foundation of his collection in 1907/08 with his first acquisitions of work by Derain, Friesz, Picasso and Braque. At the turn of the century, Rupf had made the acquaintance of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, who later became an art dealer in Paris. From the beginning, they shared an interest in contemporary art. As the owner of a haberdashery shop in Bern, Rupf travelled regularly to Paris to buy stock. He met Kahnweiler in his gallery and accompanied him on visits to artists' studios. By 1915, he already owned a classic collection of almost thirty Cubist paintings by Picasso, Braque, Gris and Léger. Rupf also became involved with the art scene in his hometown, and routinely supported artists both financially and morally. He was also friendly with Paul Klee who had personal connections with Bern: birthdays and Christmases were occasions that the artist remembered with works dedicated to Margrit and Hermann Rupf. Thanks to their membership of the Klee Society, at times there were more than 140 of Klee's works in their Collection between 1946 and 1952. It is not surprising then that in the early 1950s, the Rupfs' collection of some 190 of Klee's works was far larger than what was eventually transferred to the Foundation in 1954, or rather on the death of its founders. There are now just seventeen works by Paul Klee still in the Rupf Collection. One of the crucial factors for this drastic reduction in its holdings was the view of the Museum's then director, Professor Max Huggler. With the Paul-Klee Foundation based at Bern's Kunstmuseum, Huggler believed they already possessed enough examples of Klee's work. Even before Hermann Rupf set up his Foundation, he parted company with some of his Klees, modifying his collection by making gifts of some and selling others.

As early as the mid-1930s, Hermann and Margrit Rupf were actively seeking a future home for their collection. Hermann Rupf held his first talks with representatives of Biel, an industrial town with which he had business links. The conditions under which his gift were to be accepted were discussed over a number of years, but the talks failed: there was too much scepticism about a collection of contemporary art, and the town found it difficult to come up with suitable premises. Almost twenty years later, in 1954, Hermann Rupf was finally able to establish the Hermann and Margrit Rupf Foundation based at the Kunstmuseum in Bern. The board of trustees was founded with Hermann Rupf as its president; its members were his wife Margrit Rupf-Wirz, Professor Max Huggler, the director of Bern's Kunstmuseum, Dr. Emilio Albisetti, assistant director of Spar- und Leihkasse Bern, and Margrit Rupf's brother, the Biel businessman Alwin Wirz. In 1961, another two trustees joined the board that has retained seven members to this day.

The founding assets included forty-one paintings, fourteen sculptures, twenty-three drawings, and 149 loose prints as well as thirty-two books of prints. All of them passed to the Kunstmuseum Bern upon the deaths of the founders, who at the same time left the remainder of their fortune to the Foundation, thus ensuring that purchases would continue to be made in the future.

### **The early years of the Rupf Foundation**

The purpose of the Foundation is set out in its deed of foundation of 16 December 1954:

'The purpose of the Foundation is to conserve, complement and expand the art collection as gifted by the aforementioned donors.' The collection was catalogued in 1956 and first shown at Bern's Kunstmuseum. Hermann Rupf was actively involved in the Foundation's early years and he gave thought as to which works might be sold. Margrit Rupf died in 1961; her husband died a year later. From then on it fell to the board of trustees to purchase works. The first entries relating to new acquisitions soon began to appear in the inventory: in 1963 Henri Laurens's *Comptoir et pipe* (1918) was bought to add to an already respectable collection of his sculptures and works on paper. A relief by Hans Arp was purchased in 1964; more prints by Henri Laurens were added in 1965. Until then, the trustees had acquired only work by artists who were already represented in the Collection. For the first time that same year, under the management of the Museum's director Hugo Wagner, the suggestion to buy Lyonel Feininger's *Architecture with Stars* (1927) became the subject of controversial discussion. With works by Klee and Kandinsky already in the Foundation's collection, and given the undertaking of the Kunstmuseum Bern to make a financial

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contribution, a new name was added to the existing list of artists in the form of a small painting by Feininger.

During the early years of the Foundation, works of art that Hermann Rupf had not transferred to its holdings, and whose destiny was uncertain, also gave rise to discussions. Some works were thus donated to Bern's Kunstmuseum; others – such as African masks – were sold; still others were later incorporated into the Foundation's holdings, such as Eugène de Kermadec's *Nu devant une table* (1933) and Anton Raederscheidt's portrait of Hermann Rupf (1947).

### **The Foundation's Policy during the 1970s**

More than ten years after the deaths of the donors, the question of the future acquisitions policy was first raised and thoroughly discussed by the trustees in 1973. According to the deed of foundation, Rupf imposed no conditions on his heirs: 'At the decision of the board of trustees, other works of art may at any time be purchased using the endowment fund so as to enlarge the collection.' The board agreed on the need for a uniform concept for the purchase of groups of works by individual artists, analogous to the Rupf Collection. The following year the board confirmed its intention not only to augment existing groups of work, but also to add new names to the Foundation's holdings. The Rupf Collection should not be regarded as something self-contained; instead it should be developed further in consultation with Bern's Kunstmuseum. In 1974 the board of trustees explicitly stated its interest in acquiring work by Alfred Jensen, Meret Oppenheim, Dieter Roth and Franz Eggenschwiler. A short time later, the Foundation recorded the purchase of three works by Meret Oppenheim. An opportunity arose that same year to buy Kandinsky's gouache *Street in Tunis* (1904) using unforeseen funds from an insurance claim. With the purchase of a large painting by Alfred Jensen, *Rectangle and Square* (1968), and Ad Reinhardt's *Painting (Diptych)* (1957) in 1975, the Foundation again broke new ground. In 1976, there followed prints by Josef Albers as well as a painting by Fernand Léger, *Fragment Mécanique* (1943/44) that was bought with compensation received for damage to a work that had been on loan. Other names that had not previously been represented in the collection were Alexander Calder and René Magritte, but they were not pursued.

In 1976, once again the Foundation had to post a substantial loss after the theft of two Klee watercolours from the Kunstmuseum. These were the two prints from 1915 *with dem braunen* from the collection of the Kunstmuseum and *Der Niesen* from the Rupf Collection. The works surfaced again only twenty-five years later, and – undamaged – were finally transferred to the Foundation's holdings in 2005.

### **Object Art and Links with Bern**

Debate about the acquisitions policy was renewed in 1977, the impetus being a statement made by the then conservator at the Paul-Klee Foundation, Jürgen Glaesemer: '[...] besides specific purchases of classic works by artists from the first half of the twentieth century, contemporary art might also be collected in keeping with the thinking of Mr and Mrs Rupf. As the Rupf Collection was also strongly focused on a number of priorities in contemporary art, it seems possible that the collection of contemporary art might be enlarged in similarly concentrated fashion.'

Glaesemer attempted to formulate an acquisitions policy that distinguished itself from others, and that at the same time did not lose sight of the Foundation's financial means. His suggestion was to start a representative collection of small-scale objects with a focus on Swiss art:

Eggenschwiler, Thomkins, Roth, Raetz. Classic examples of work by artists like Cornell or Man Ray could have extended such a group. At the same time, Glaesemer referred to prints; until then neither the Kunstmuseum nor the Rupf Foundation had made them a priority. Glaesemer's suggestions bore fruit: extensive bodies of graphic art by Franz Eggenschwiler, Rolf Iseli, Bernhard Luginbühl, Meret Oppenheim and Markus Raetz were acquired in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In doing so, the Foundation prioritized works on paper by artists who had close links with Bern. At the same time these acquisitions enhanced the existing holdings of the Kunstmuseum Bern. As a result of donations from Toni Gerber's collection in 1983 and 1993, and in parallel with the purchases made by the Rupf Foundation, well over two hundred works on paper by Markus Raetz and as many again by Franz Eggenschwiler found their way into the Kunstmuseum. In the case of Meret Oppenheim, too, the Foundation's acquisitions were

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augmented in 1986 by the accession to the Kunstmuseum of the artist's estate. The result is that the Kunstmuseum Bern is now probably home to the most significant body of Oppenheim's work. With the exception of one object by Franz Eggenschwiler, the development of a collection of object art, such as had been suggested by Glaesemer, was not pursued. Instead the Foundation focused mainly on acquiring prints, which was possibly an expression of its caution in handling the finances at its disposal, although it had been possible to increase them during the 1970s from 75'000 Swiss Francs (1973) to 120'000 Swiss Francs (1981) by making best use of the Foundation's property. Shortly after Hans Christoph von Tavel joined the board of trustees as the director of the Museum, he criticized the fact that almost only Swiss art was being collected – in 1978 Samuel Buri, in 1979 Peter Stein and Oscar Wiggli, in 1980 Theo Gerber and Otto Tschumi, among others, and in 1981 Claude Sandoz: 'It seems to me that the basic idea that Hermann and Margrit Rupf had as collectors has been lost because of the narrow focus on Swiss, and particularly Bern artists.'

Von Tavel suggested that collecting should again become international in scope, that prints should still be collected, and that every two to three years, the trustees should contemplate the purchase of a major work of art.

### **The 1980s: Painting**

The acquisitions made in the 1980s and 1990s reflect a new openness in purchasing policy. Certainly the work of the middle generation of Swiss artists continued to be collected, and included pieces by Roland Werro (purchased 1981, 1994), Richard Paul Lohse (purchased 1983), Hansjörg Glattfelder (purchased 1984), Jean Pfaff (purchased 1985, 1991), Olivier Mosset (purchased 1989), Marcel Wyss (purchased 1990), Peter Stämpfli (purchased 1991), Pierre Haubensak (purchased 1992), Franz Fedier (purchased 1993), Gianfredo Camesi (purchased 1994) and Robert Müller (purchased 1996). With works by Lohse, Glattfelder and Pfaff, notable exponents of concrete colour-field painting are represented in the Foundation's holdings; Franz Fedier is an important exponent of Art Informel, in contrast to which Olivier Mosset's *Pharmacy* (1988) represents a radically different approach. Nevertheless a few international names were added to the list of artists: with the accession to the Museum of a significant body of work from the collection of Toni Gerber in 1983 and 1986, the Rupf Foundation was able to acquire a large group of works by James Lee Byars. Acquired from a private collection in 1987, a special item in the Foundation's holdings comes from Joseph Beuys' *Honigpumpe* complex of works (1977).

### **Traces of Exhibitions**

Thanks to a generous and anonymous bequest in the early 1990s, the existing collection of work by Hans Arp was enhanced with valuable sculptures. A major exhibition of the work of Canadian artist Royden Rabinowitch at the Kunstmuseum Bern in 1994 gave rise to the purchase of a representative collection of his sculptures and drawings. The bodies of work by Josef and Anni Albers also date from a major exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Bern in 1998/99. With Donald Judd, Joseph Kosuth, Brice Marden, Ad Reinhardt and James Turrell, on the one hand, and Piero Manzoni, Enrico Castellani, Lucio Fontana and Christian Megert on the other, the board of trustees succeeded during the 1990s in gathering a collection of the work of artists associated with Minimal Art and the ZERO Group respectively. In the context of the original Rupf Collection, this proved to be an interesting evolution. The traditions of Constructivist and Conceptual art have certainly been a priority in more recent collecting: a major show of the work of Ilya Kabakov at the Kunstmuseum Bern in 2001, for instance, led to the acquisition of the Russian conceptual artist's installation titled *The Children's Hospital*.

### **Changed Conditions**

Shortly after the turn of the millennium, the board of trustees again debated the Foundation's policy on collecting as well as its relationship with the Kunstmuseum Bern. Is the Rupf Foundation guided by the collecting activities of the Kunstmuseum Bern or does it act independently? How does it want to be seen in relation to the other foundations based at the Kunstmuseum Bern and other comparable institutions? Debate about acquisitions policy continues to this day, and that is a good thing. Nevertheless, collecting itself remains a big challenge. The prices paid for art have also changed greatly in recent years. With the funds available to it, the Foundation can now no

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longer consider buying modern classics. Given the variety of the collection today – with the work of over ninety male and female artists – it is all the more important to develop priorities rather than forever to keep on creating new ones.

To continue its dedicated acquisitions policy, the Rupf Foundation adopted appropriate guidelines in 2007 that set out how:

- it would expand existing bodies of work in the collection assembled by Hermann and Margrit Rupf.

- it would expand the bodies of work that were largely collected by the Foundation (after 1954).

- it would acquire contemporary work by young artists whose work tied in conceptually with the main priorities of the existing collection.

Of course, that does not mean an end to the debate surrounding the acquisitions policy – which never should come to an end. It is important time and again to take a critical view of the collection, to re-examine established procedures from time to time, and to make any necessary corrections. The Foundation must engage with recent, contemporary art without becoming fashionable, and at the same time it must not lose sight of the base established by the Rupfs.

Recently it has been possible to do justice to all three of the priorities defined for the collection in 2007: one work by Henri Laurens and one by André Derain were bought in 2009, thus enlarging the holdings started by the Rupfs. The purchase of a neon work by Joseph Kosuth meant the accession of a second piece by the minimalist, or rather conceptual artist. His three-part work one and three mirrors was acquired in 1989. Finally, with bodies of work by Vaclav Pozarek and Florian Slotawa, two new artists belonging to different generations have entered the collection.

Albeit in very different ways, both have adopted a method of working that is indebted to Constructivism and takes its bearings from minimal and conceptual art. In the light of policies established at the time of Cubism, this represents an interesting development. In the end, both are concerned with space, architecture and issues of sculpture.

### **In Conversation with the Collection**

Slotawa's piece of work titled *Berner Sockel* (2010) is his response to the existing collection.

Using items of furniture taken from the former home of the Rupfs, he has constructed plinth-like bases: Margrit Rupf's old dressing table is now part of the support for her 1922 terracotta bust by Max Fueter; a trolley now forms part of the base supporting Hans Arp's *Blatt-Torso* (1963). From an unusual perspective and under new conditions, the artist's direct exploration allows the viewer to experience and simultaneously re-examine the collection that now has over 1'100 serial numbers.

With the Norwegian artist Knut Henrik Henriksen's sculpture titled *a story about the sun and the moon and the chipboard removed to reveal the pearls of water*, the Rupf Foundation has again entered unknown territory. Specifically for the show at the Kunstmuseum Bern, Henriksen designed this site-specific work. The artist has focused his attention on the exhibition floor's corner windows that have been filled in and covered up for some time. This was done a few years ago in connection with a display that expressly did without natural light. Like the windows and the condensation that formed on them, the reasons for the building work were soon forgotten.

Henriksen takes up the idea, removes the (originally temporary) partition walls and confronts us with them – albeit in modified form. He denies us an unobstructed view of outside –

*Sonnenfinsternis* (Solar Eclipse) is the title the Norwegian has given his piece, whose dimensions and materiality are exactly tailored to this location in the Museum. The segments extend to ceiling height; the material he has used is what he found in situ. The panels are sawn up and erected anew. With his sculpture, the artist reacts not only to the conditions within the exhibition space, but with his sculptural intervention he accentuates the two corners. This is suddenly about natural light again, about seeing and no longer suspecting what lies beyond the exhibition space.

Henriksen seduces us with shapes and lines; one is tempted to unite the positive and negative shapes and spaces. What is interesting is the play of the overlapping positive and negative segments from which the human eye instantly tries to create an imaginary circle. Henriksen's sculpture plays here with shapes and lines that in reality have their source solely in our imagination.

*a story about the sun and the moon and the chipboard removed to reveal the pearls of water* not only highlights this room's special situation, but shown in the context of the Rupf Collection it also acquires an additional level of meaning. As the moon does with sunlight, this

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sculpture reflects numerous individual pieces and bodies of work in the Foundation's holdings that likewise are indebted to the constructivist and concrete tradition.

It is part of the artistic concept that the piece will have no inventory number and that its site-specific nature means it cannot become part of the collection. Care has already been taken to ensure that Henriksen's work will not be forgotten altogether, but will still leave some trace in the history of the collection.