Screen Negatives
KP BREHMER

BY ELISA R. LINN AND LENNART WOLFF

KP BREHMER, *o.T.,* 1965, laminated cliché print on cardboard, 50.2×62.9cm. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.

"The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in a democratic society…We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested."[1] – **EDWARD BERNAYS**

"If artists want to take part in work that relates to society, they must assess the suitability of their tools and materials."[2] – **KP BREHMER**

The multifarious practice of artist KP Brehmer, who was once described as a "media worker,"[3] spans from the 1960s to the late '90s and can be described as revolving around a daring question: how can art be made "useful to society"? In post-war Germany's consumer landscape, where images furnished the prevailing order—to sell desire, dreams, ideology, and products—Brehmer sought to make his art a training and testing program[4] that could produce, in a Brechtian sense, "visual agitation" (*Sichtagitation*).[5] By appropriating, collaging, and subverting late capitalism's visualization techniques and ubiquitous information systems, from adverts to maps, diagrams, and political and propaganda imagery, the artist practiced what could be considered "anti-public relations." As a negative to the operations of manipulation and persuasion pioneered by Edward Bernays, the father of propaganda, Brehmer's use of distancing and alienation was a means of "sharpening" the viewer's senses. This meant seeing through the ideological constructs, fabricated narratives, and biases woven into official and trivial representations—the particles of consumer societies' omnipresent smog of technical images. Early on, Brehmer dissected the operational mechanisms of these reproducible and manipulatable images and the roles they play, not only in steering the political process, but in fundamentally shaping the perception of reality under capitalism. Complicating any distinction between image as representation and the seemingly neutral graphics of statistics and data visualization, Brehmer alluded to what Vilém Flusser saw as a dialectics of re-presentation: the ultimate danger of humans

KP BREHMER, *Über die Bilder – Bilder Ansehen [About the Images – Viewing Images]*, 1979, Emulsion paint on canvas, 3 parts, each 120.02×149.86cm. At "Welt im Kopf [World in Mind]" 2023, Maxwell Graham Gallery, New York. Courtesy KP Brehmer Sammlung und Nachlass and Maxwell Graham Gallery, New York.
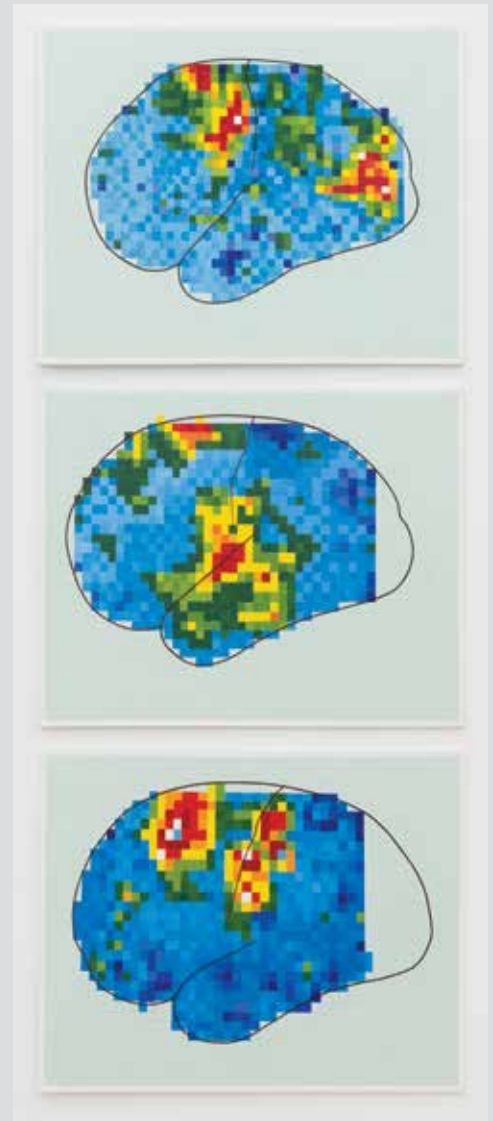
becoming functions of the images they create.[6] For Brehmer, art had to be analyzed vis-à-vis the broader process of mediatization that post-war Western society increasingly came to adopt. And having trained as a reproduction technician, he frequently switched mediums and techniques, employing various media—painting, installation, video, sound art, and participative actions—as engagements with the "trivial" medium of print that remained of central importance.[7]

While studying printmaking and graphic art at the Academy in Düsseldorf in the early 1960s, a group of artists around Brehmer, including Sigmar Polke, Konrad Lueg, Gerhard Richter, and Wolf Vostell, shared an interest in art's relation to consumer culture's strategies and its products of libidinal engineering. Their initiative, Capitalist Realism, was short-lived, and Brehmer, who had begun using "KP," the initials of his two first names—a provocative nod to the then-banned West German Communist party—returned to the Cold War's prime cultural battleground: a divided Berlin. At the time, Walter Benjamin's ideas about art in the age of mechanical reproduction received renewed and widespread attention and were echoed in calls for art to enter into an "alliance with the production apparatuses."[8] "Throw your pallets on the dung heap.

Let your products rotate in printing presses," Brehmer humorously responded as he began experimenting with different printing techniques, materials, and distribution channels. Here, Brehmer's way of working could be described as relating to the term technician, not only because of his background and training as a reproduction technician, but in Gilbert Simondon's sense of the figure of the technician; one that, as paraphrased by Tiziana Terranova, uses a deep understanding of machines to envision alternative ways of "being, working, and producing value with them."[9]

By the 1960s, Brehmer's attempt to create a mass market for authentically reproducible, and hence highly affordable, cliché prints faltered. As a result, strategies of subverting the mechanism of value assignment and bourgeois conceptions of subjectivity and authorship informed his subsequent series. For Brehmer, this was a refusal of "creation" in favor of appropriation and quotation.[10] Having to return to what he jokingly described as the "play with the art collectors," from 1967 onwards Brehmer produced what would become one of his most important series. It was here that he appropriated and manipulated motives from postage stamps from both sides of the Iron Curtain: carriers of official state representations and politics

of identity and collective memory alike. These works interweaved semiotic concerns with the relations between collectibles, the distribution and consumption of images, and the process of commodification as a transfer between the trivial and the elevated. Using a strategy described as "ideological kleptomania,"[11] for instance, overlaying, fusing, and juxtaposing Soviet propaganda and United States postmarks—like in *Give Art* (1968)—was meant to provoke and alienate. With the postage stamp series, Brehmer tested what would become a reoccurring structure in his works: multiple coded images, ones that require the viewer to consider not only motif and style of rendering, but also color, (printing) technique, choice of support material, and edition.

From the early 1970s his works included appropriated and reproduced maps, statistics, and diagrams; his Berlin gallerist, and later curator, René Block, with whom Brehmer shared a lifelong friendship, arranged contacts with newspapers and magazines for him to receive "screen negatives" (*Rasternegative*).[12] Corresponding to Brehmer's view that the best way to address societal issues is to present their presentation, the artist enlarged and printed, drew, or painted the reports, diagrams, maps he received on paper,

From top to bottom:
KP BREHMER (from left to right) *Schuldentgiltung der öffentl. Hand [Repayment of public-sector debt]*, 1970, watercolour and pencil on graph paper, 59.4 ×40.6 cm; *Einnahmen und Ausgaben der Stadt New York 1975 [Revenues and Expenditures of the City of New York 1975]*, 1976, watercolor and pencil on graph paper, 59.37 × 41.91 cm; *Offene Stellen und Arbeitslose [Job Vacancies and Unemployed]*, 1976, watercolor and pencil on graph paper, 41.91×59.69 cm; *Weltbevölkerung I [World Population I]*, undated, emulsion paint, pencil on graph paper, 41.9×59.7 cm. René Block Gallery, New York, 1976. Courtesy KP Brehmer Sammlung und Nachlass and Maxwell Graham Gallery, New York.

Collection of **KP BREHMER** source materials. Courtesy KP Brehmer Sammlung und Nachlass.

cardboard, PVC, or canvas. For instance, works such as *Development of Political Parties 1868–1972 (USA)* (1977)—a seemingly abstract painting based on historic election results—recently on view at Brehmer's first US retrospective at Petzel and Maxwell Graham Gallery, exist in different versions and are often rendered with varying levels of precision, detail, and notation. Here, the term "negatives" can be used to trace a recurring motive and strategy in Brehmer's work. That is, the way tension is mobilized between the "complete" or authoritative appearance and any omissions, built-in inaccuracies, inclusions and redactions of legends, descriptive texts, and the traces of manual artistic labor in Brehmer's reproductions, such as *Sichtweiten in verschiedenen Höhen über der Po-Ebene (am 12.10.1978)* (1979), a painting based on a study of air pollution in northern Italy's industrial region. The works themselves are not just end results or static representations, but constantly perform and visualize the process of abstraction—one of subtraction towards information—on which their genesis is contingent. In that sense, these works are not only diagrammatic—in terms of motifs that reference infographics—but as German theorist Doreen Mende argues, they can be understood as part of a practice that itself is "diagrammatic": one that constructs artworks from several vectors and layers of inscription that open up a discursive space, not only characterized by an ordering of information but intentionally littered with voids in which the political subject can unfold.[13] Here, his works point towards what German economist Alfred Sohn-Rethel, building on Karl Marx, described as "real abstractions." In other words, the epistemic logic of "exact sciences" is itself a product of a commodity-based economy. Hence seemingly abstract categories, such as quality, quantity, movement, and so forth, are not products of thought, but instead stem from the real action of exchange.

Brehmer began to work increasingly with statistics and diagrams at a time when the emergent information economy was increasingly molding society. As with his subsequent series, Brehmer would commonly react to, reflect, and interweave the artistic developments around him—in the rise of figurative painting in the 1980s, the socio-political developments of nascent neoliberalism, and emergent image-making technologies such as thermal imaging. For example, *Über die Bilder - Bilder Ansehen [About the Images – Viewing Images]* (1979)—thermal images of brain activity while encountering images—renders in paint what Brehmer's acquaintance Harun Farocki called an operational image, as opposed to one with

an aesthetic purpose that serves only a trivial function. In this work, a stark contrast is being created by Brehmer between painterly marks and the appropriated source image that is not just representation or metaphor. Rather, it functions as a "machine,"[14] based on the code of mathematical thinking, made to enable new modes of seeing for human and machine vision.

Today, many of Brehmer's works appear to anticipate what the German artist and writer Hito Steyerl has described as "statistical renderings": images generated by machine-learning networks that appropriate and imitate every artistic rendering style ever made and shatter the last remains of the true claim of an image's indexicality. Similar to Brehmers diagrammatic works, the process of abstraction and alienation is complicated when data no longer comes in the graphic forms of diagrams and graphs but is instead visualized in the very form of the "thing from which it is supposed to abstract." But against the "open" iconic constructs—littered with gaps and voids—that Brehmer produces, these contemporary technical images are impenetrably smooth screens that obfuscate reckoning with the mechanisms of their generation. Created by neural networks that, as Steyerl claims, mimic market logic in the process of selection and generation, they appear to be the logical next step in the development of medialization that Brehmer has traced throughout his career. With neural network-generated images, reality itself is now "permanently at auction." As these unfold, an unlimited potential for deception and manipulation appears, begging the question: can Brehmer's sharpening of the sense still be of "use" today? What Brehmer's diagrammatic practice continues to visualize is that data and information is not just "a physical domain or a social construction, the content of a communication act or an immaterial entity set to take over the real,"[15] as Terranova claims, but part of the dominant power's reorientation that can be countered with "visual agitation."

KP Brehmer (1938–1997) was widely exhibited in his lifetime—at documenta 5 and 6, Kunstmuseum Bonn, Whitechapel Gallery London, and the 55th Venice Biennale, among others. From 1971 until his passing, he taught at HFBK University of Fine Arts in Hamburg. During the 1980s, he was a guest professor at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou and taught a number of renowned artists, including Shan Fan and Zhang Peili.

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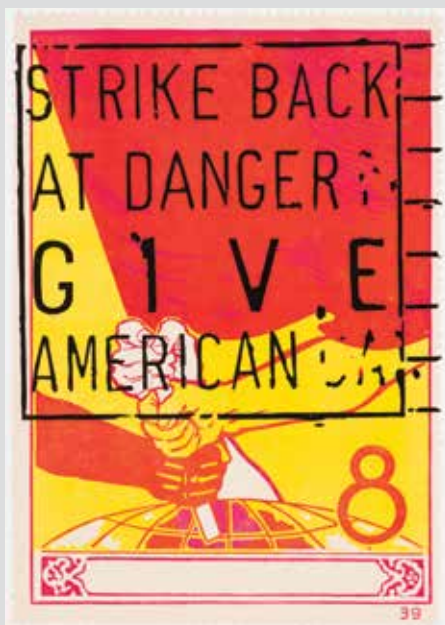
1   Edward L. Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: Horace Livewright, 1928), 9.

2   KP Brehmer, contribution to *Kunstforum International*, vol. 12 ('Kritik der Concept Art'), 1975, 151.

3   Jochen Becker, "KP Brehmer. Alle Künstler lügen. Museum Fridericianum Kassel, 4.10. – 29.11.1998", *Kunstforum International*, vol. 144 ('Dialog und Infiltration'), 1999, https://www.kunstforum.de/artikel/kp-brehmer/.

4   Doreen Mende, "Aus einer diagrammatischen Praxis: KP Brehmer," *In NO PROOF OF EVIDENCE. Kritische Aneignungen grafischer Visualisierungsstrategien in der Kunst. Dokumentation zum Symposium in der Berlinischen Galerie am 07.06.2013* (Berlin: Berlinische Galerie, Landesmuseum, 2013), 25.

5   Werner Rohde, "Interview mit *KP Brehmer,"* *In KP Brehmer: Produktion 1962—1971* (Hamburg: Kunstverein Hamburg, 1971), np.

6   Bram Ieven, "How to Orientate Oneself in the World: A General Outline of Flusser's Theory of Media*"*, *Image and Narrative, Online Magazine of the Visual Narrative*, Issue 6. Medium Theory (February 2003), https://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/mediumtheory/bramieven.htm.

7   KP Brehmer, *Real Capital-Production*, ed. Doreen Mende (London: Raven Row and Cologne: Koenig Books, 2017), 13.

8   Hubertus Butin, "Werft Eure Paletten auf den Misthaufen – KP Brehmers frühe Druckgrafik im Kontext ihrer Zeit," In *Alle Künstler Lügen. Katalog anlässlich der Ausstellung KP Brehmer. Alle Künstler lügen, 1998*, ed. René Block (Kassel: Museum Fridericianum, 1998), 10–24.

9   Alessandra Mularoni, "After the Internet: An Interview with Tiziana Terranova — PPPR," PPPR, September 15, 2022, https://projectpppr.org/platforms/after-the-internet-an-interview-with-tiziana-terranova.

10   Rohde, "Interview mit KP Brehmer," np.

11   KP Brehmer, *Kunstforum International*, vol 12 ('Kritik der Concept Art'), 1975, 151.

12   KP Brehmer, *Real Capital-Production*, 9.

13   Doreen Mende, "Aus einer diagrammatischen Praxis: KP Brehmer," In NO PROOF OF EVIDENCE. Kritische Aneignungen grafischer Visualisierungsstrategien in der Kunst. Dokumentation zum Symposium in der Berlinischen Galerie am 07.06.2013 (Berlin: Berlinische Galerie, Landesmuseum, 2013), 24.

14   Reinhold Martin, *The Organizational Complex: Architecture, Media, and Corporate Space* (MIT Press, 2005), 54.

15   McKenzie Wark, "CRIT: Critical and Radical Information Theory - Public Seminar," Public Seminar, April 21, 2021.

From top to bottom:
KP BREHMER, *Give Art*, 1968, Cliché print on paper, 50 × 35 cm. Courtesy KP Brehmer Sammlung und Nachlass and Galerie Volker Diehl.

KP BREHMER, *Development of Political Parties 1868 – 1972 (USA), 1977*, acrylic on canvas, 120 × 210 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.