

**THE  
NECES  
SITY  
OF  
A  
HAND  
STAND**

**SILVIA STEIGER**

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## INTRODUCTION

Shortly after my appointment at the Belvédère Museum the exhibition “Colours of Friesland” was shown at the Fries Museum in Leeuwarden. For me, this exhibition and the accompanying book reciting post-war modern art in Friesland, came at exactly the right moment. These presented me with basic knowledge about the developments within the Frisian visual arts on a silver platter. Not long after this, I met the curator of the exhibition and author of the book, Huub Mous. During our conversations he brought me up to date on several of the artists about which he had written in his book – artists who, until then, had not been discerned by the Belvédère Museum. Upon further research into their backgrounds and works, I became particularly impressed by Paul Panhuysen and Silvia Steiger. Both came from afar – Panhuysen was born in Limburg in the south of the Netherlands, Steiger in Austria and grew up in Germany – and both contributed to shaking up the art scene in Friesland considerably before continuing their artistic careers elsewhere. Panhuysen received the 2012 Gerrit Benner Prize and as part of the occasion was honoured with an exhibition in the Fries Museum. I decided that Silvia Steiger should get her own exhibition at the Belvédère Museum. A number of considerations led to this. The profile of the museum is determined by the work of Frisian artists and its allies, who mainly have been or are devoted to drawing and painting. Steiger’s art, however is characterised by a wide diversity of manifestations. The method is not a given but is instead through exploration and research conformed to the idea she has at front of mind. This great agility she has mastered as an artist and the varied oeuvre this has yielded, momentarily blows an entirely different breeze throughout the galleries.

This, I hope, will result that we again look with fresh eyes at our own values. Another reason to bestow attention to the work of Steiger is the fact that it shows a substantial, though almost forgotten, aspect of the history of Frisian modern art. Together with her partner of many years, Fritz Rahmann, she introduced Friesland to the possibilities of conceptual art. Many of the works she executed or realised during her Frisian years, have not lost anything in urgency and for this reason deserve renewed attention. Together with more recent work they reflect in the exhibition **THE NECESSITY OF A HANDSTAND** a continuously renewing artistry and at the same time generating a

consistent body of work. This work stands out because of its pleasant commitment to put things in perspective, it dares to show its own vulnerability and allows us to intensely view and feel.

The exhibition and this special cassette could only be realised thanks to the enthusiastic efforts of many. I take pride in thanking Huub Mous who introduced me to a remarkable artist, and was willing to write a comprehensive introduction about and for Silvia Steiger, Ilse de Haan who helped Silvia as well as Belvédère Museum during the long preparations and Gert Jan Slagter, who thought of a form of publication that directly fits in with the character of Silvia's work. In particular, and on behalf of the Belvédère Museum, I would like to thank Silvia Steiger for the manner in which she has summarised her current work as well as that of prior years into one total installation.

Finally, also on behalf of Silvia Steiger, I would like to thank the institutions that have made this publication possible, the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds/Tijl Fonds, the Harten Fonds en the Juckema Siderius Fonds.

*Han Steenbruggen*  
*Director-curator Museum Belvédère*



*"Today I managed to take this snapshot. The cherries are finished again and I should be buying new ones. A week has passed since my last message and I have fed at least 3 pounds of cherries to the robber. Apparently our grocer provisions excellent quality. During a short break from supply, the trees' own cherries have been harvested by the blackbird as well. I am a little annoyed about that. Still, it remains amusing and the tree looks silly with only pegs and no cherries (like a christmas tree without baubles ...). I wonder if I should continue until cherries are no longer sold? I am unsure ..."*

I received this email on June 26th 2014 from Silvia Steiger. The above photo was attached. A bird greedily devours a cherry that, indeed, had been attached to the tree by means of a peg. I subsequently replied she should continue with supply, and not stop, as long as cherries are for sale. Five days later I was able to witness the scene with my own eyes. Cherries were still neatly attached with pegs and hanging off the tree in the tiny rooftop garden at the back of her Atelier in the Marnixstraat in Amsterdam. There were even two birds now, busily eating their meal of cherries. For a brief moment I felt part of an artwork.

But what distinguished it to be an artwork? Or, better put, was it an artwork at all, or just something that other people might do as well from time to time? Like feeding the ducks in the park, or throwing stale bread crusts from the bridge so that hungry seagulls can fly away with them. The boundary between art and ordinary life is never clearly demarcated in the art of Silvia Steiger. Let's say it was indeed an artwork, what then was it that defined it as an artwork? Was it the pegs with which the cherries had been so ingeniously attached to the tree? Or was it just the idea, or perhaps the happening itself? Was it the email with photo that I received? Perhaps I was not the only recipient and other people found the same message in their inbox as well. Or, did the artwork only come to be at the very moment of

me actually viewing it, in “real time” on Tuesday afternoon 1st July, at 14:03, looking south out of a window in the Marnixstraat in Amsterdam overlooking the Nassaukade? Is this artwork purely a happening of the outside world, or does it in fact only come into existence at the very moment I observe it and thoughts and associations flutter on and off in my head, just like the birds flying to and fro.

Date, time, place, the happening, the coincidence, the interaction between the inner and outer space, these are themes that often recur in the work of Silvia Steiger. They are the structural elements of a happening. However, once you start to analyse the happening and dissect all its interrelated parts, you are left with hardly anything at all. Language and analysis do not do her work any justice. Things are what they are and happen as they happen. Be that what it may, this becomes a little bit of a problem when you want to write an elucidating text about her work. How does one put a framework around this seemingly indefinable art in order for it to be placed more clearly?

Those who try to get an overview of Silvia Steiger’s work will be met by a great array of diversity. Is there a common unifying thread to be discovered within this colourful collection without invalidating the indescribable? Her work is made up of drawings, paintings, objects, photographic works, installations and site specific materials. All of this work practically begs for it not to be interpreted. To be set free from any form of analysis that would chop the artwork to pieces and as such would miss the essence of the work. Rather, this essence has more to do with vulnerability and a direct experience via the senses.

So, no interpretations then. This also happened to be the adage forming the basis of a new type of art that came to be in the sixties, the art of endless accounts and documentations of that what was actually happening. Ten days after my last visit to the atelier in the Marnixstraat, the Japanese artist On Kawara died on 10<sup>th</sup> July 2014. He was called “the giant of conceptual art”. As I was reading his obituary I immediately had to think of Silvia Steiger. Ever since 4<sup>th</sup> January 1966, On Kawara had created a daily “date-artwork”, the “today series” or “date-paintings” as they are commonly called. He painted a canvass each and every day with, the only thing on it, the date of that specific day. Often times Silvia Steiger has also subjected herself to quite similar painstaking tasks: to register and observe, completely mindfull, the most ordinary things, seemingly without any purpose, but with an iron discipline as if life depended on it.

What is it then, this wondrous fascination with everyday occurrences, this deep interest in things that come to pass? It has an almost mystical quality, like a mantra being repeated during a never ending meditation. All of life’s grand thoughts and ideas are thus condensed into the tiniest parts with the only common denominator being, that all things change perpetually. Things that take place, are being watched, registered, recorded and documented. That is all. That which occurs in the outer world is imported to the inner world, though importantly it is allowed to keep its own integrity. Everything already exists and will always remain, yet

nothing stays the same. The only constant in this stream of change is coincidence. The scene of the bird eating a cherry attached to a tree with a peg, brought a famous haiku to mind of the Japanese poet Matsuo Basjō (1644-1694):

*Looking carefully  
a shepherds purse is blooming  
under the fence*

Basjō gives account of what he sees, without analysing or interpreting his own observations. Let alone connecting his own feelings or metaphysical thoughts to the narrative. The poet endeavours to be an empty mirror. Nonetheless something seems to be transpiring from the few simple words that record his observation. In his book “Empire of the Sign” the philosopher Roland Barthes has tried to articulate what essentially ensues in a haiku. In “the West” he states, the mirror is mainly viewed in a narcissist manner, one solely thinks of it as reflecting one’s own image. In “the East” however, it appears that the mirror is empty and is the very symbol of the emptiness of symbols. Such a mirror cannot hold anything whilst at the same time not repelling anything either. It only captures other mirrors and this never-ending reflection is precisely that emptiness. So a haiku is a reflection without any grip. It reminds us of that which never happened. We recognise in the haiku a repetition without cause, an event without reason, a summary of a thing as a happening, an event without substance. A haiku is a memory minus person, “a word of which the mooring lines have been cast off”. And so Barthes arrives at the astonishing conclusion that the total of all haikus is more than the sum of its parts. “The collective body of all haikus is a network of jewels in which each jewel reflects all others and so on, to infinity, without there ever being a centre to grasp, a primary core of irradiation.”<sup>1</sup>

Zen and I Tjing became important for Silvia Steiger about 40 years ago when she realised that her work had mostly been a probing search. What had been missing was a crystallisation point. Suddenly it all fell into place. The moment of revelation happened whilst visiting the Documenta in Kassel in 1972, at which she saw the work of an artist whose name has escaped her. The artwork consisted of merely a few diary entries interspersed with a number of drawings jointly displayed in a glass case. Her imagination was not triggered by the everyday reality, but rather by the recorded summary of something that really does not seem to matter. In the years that followed, it would not be the natural changes as such playing the starring role in her work, but rather the notes, the recordings, the inner traces left behind. Not the original of reality as such, but rather the inner impact of it. It was as if the inner inside and the outer outside had suddenly joined forces.

Zen and coincidence became fashionable with a post-war generation that wanted to make amends with an abject past and an unliveable present. That is to say, the moral bankruptcy of the Second World War and the false utopias that the initial post-war period had put into place. This fascination with the coincidental surfaced emphatically in the arts during the first

decennium after the war. John Cage, a student of the western Zen master Alan Watts, made coincidence the central theme in his compositions and happenings. The American beatniks of the fifties also had a great admiration for Zen Buddhism.

In his book “the Making of a Counterculture” the American philosopher Thomas Roszak states that this fascination with coincidence can be seen as the intellectual confusion of a new generation who want to start with a clean slate. In particular, it was the logical fundamental contradiction of Zen that would serve as confirmation of a strong felt need for freedom by still unformed adolescents. Especially for those experiencing a justified unease dealing with the technological demands of the post-war years of rebuilding, which saw impudent capitalism unashamedly walk hand in hand with stifling conformism. And so Roszak comes to the following bold assertion “There could very well exist a subtle, restrained connection between the discovery of Zen by a couple of young American writers in San Francisco in the early fifties and the posters which appeared on the walls of the besieged Sorbonne in May 1968 with the motto “it is forbidden to forbid.”<sup>2</sup> This time span of one and a half decade is exactly the years in which Silvia Steiger develops from child to artist. Not in America, but in post-war Germany, literally on top of the ruins left by the war.

### **Childhood in Germany**

I recall a photo from the catalogue of *The Family of Man*, the famous photography exhibition that could be seen all around Europe in the fifties. A boy of about eight or nine years old with a schoolbag on his back descends a flight of steps through the remains of a ruined city. The year is 1949, the city turns out to be Pforzheim, but the photo paints the iconic picture that stands for just about any large German city shortly after the war. Cologne also looked like this during this period, the city where Silvia Steiger grew up as a child. Photographs of post-war Cologne show enormous devastation. Only the Cathedral stands and even the Hohenzollern-bridge is seen having miserably collapsed into the Rhine. This scene of devastation and reconstruction must have had its influence on her earliest memories.

Silvia Steiger’s father served as a soldier under the Nazi regime and worked as surveyor on the construction of the Autobahn in occupied Austria. Her mother followed him to Linz where Silvia Steiger was born on 26 March 1940. During the first years her mother moved them around from here to there, from occupied Alsace to Rhineland. Finally, in 1945, Cologne became the place where she would spend her school years. It was an oppressive time during which one mostly looked onward and not backwards. These were the years of the incipient *Wirtschaftswunder* as well as the arrival of the cold war with its iron curtain and atomic threat. Furthermore, it was the time of great impotence, the time of denial and repression of recent war past. It was the collective feeling described in 1967 by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich as “the inability to mourn”. It was the quiet before the storm, the big emptiness that would precede the cultural revolution of the sixties.

Childhood memories do not play a major part in the oeuvre of Silvia Steiger, however every now and then they do come to the fore. Like, for example, with a mirrored baby photo from 2007 entitled THANK YOU MISTER RORSCHACH, where in the middle of the doubled baby-silhouette a reflection of a sort of smirking clown's face appears. The innocent portrayal of earliest childhood encounters its grotesque shadow as a seemingly dreamlike vision that suddenly appears. It uses an assembly technology also used in 19th century "picture puzzles" where romantically set scenes could, for instance, reveal a skull as its counterpart.

In DER MANTEL, a work from 2014, her autobiography has the upper hand. It consists of a big red and blue cloak that hangs, during one of my visits to her atelier, like a scarecrow in the middle of the room. The inside shows reddish tinted photographs, memories of a long life. We see her mother, her father, people she has loved, or loves. The blue outside of the coat shows little mirrors, as if the photos on the inside are the back of a mirror image. The inner inside and the outer outside reflect each other in time and space.

### **Art Academy in Düsseldorf**

Silvia Steiger wanted to become an artist during a period when it wasn't as common for women as it is now, most especially not in the milieu she had grown up in. Her mother insisted she should first complete a textile design training course in Krefeld. This turned out to be the footstep into the art academy of Düsseldorf where she spent her time from 1958 until 1964 and completed her Masters. The academy in Düsseldorf would in the sixties become known as the hatchery of German Avant-Garde and one of the home bases of the Fluxus movement. However this atmosphere of rejuvenation and experimentation was not very noticeable yet during the late fifties. The education was sound and based in classical footing. Later, Silvia Steiger stated "It was an ivory tower training and I was taught nothing about the harsh reality of being an artist." One learned how to paint and use watercolours. Gerhard Richter was her classmate for a short while. Sigmar Pole had his atelier elsewhere in town and from 1968 Konrad Fischer ran his famous gallery, where Soll LeWitt and Bruce Nauman both had their first solo exhibition in Europe. But that wasn't until later. Silvia Steiger didn't cross paths with Bueys during that time. She did, however, meet Fritz Rahmann there, a fellow student and four years her senior. An intimate loving relationship developed which lasted until 1975 after which their friendship continued until his death in 2006. Rahmann came from a baker's family where a different, more harmonic, atmosphere was present, at least compared to Silvia Steiger's home. They were on the same wavelength, also from an artistic perspective. The creative and critical interaction between them was intense. Fritz was the theoretician who read Kant and Heidegger and could lose himself in towering rationales and far reaching abstractions. Silvia Steiger on the other hand was more of an intuitive soul with an eye for detail and minor events.

Some of her earliest works created whilst still at the academy, are paintings that had garbage as subject matter. Later on she experimented with painting cream cakes, chandeliers or

magnified images of poetry pictures. The iconography shows some kinship with the early American pop art of Robert Rauschenberg and Jim Dine. They were painted freehand and became more and more realistic, almost like photorealism. The paraphernalia of the bourgeoisie was put into picture in a humourless and businesslike manner. This critical attitude in these paintings towards consumerism contrasted with the ironic glorification of American pop art, which shamelessly showcased the trophies of consumerism. This earlier work of Silvia Steiger mostly seems to express a certain sense of uneasiness. This keynote remains and will continue to form the basis of work created in the following years.

### **“Narrenfreiheit” in Friesland**

The young artists' couple wanted to leave Germany, where the atmosphere was stifling them. In 1964 they moved to Friesland (in the north of the Netherlands), having discovered it a few years earlier during a sailing holiday. Via Harlingen and Bolsward they ended up in Hichtum, a village with approximately eighty inhabitants then. Many houses in the countryside stood empty at that time. Declared uninhabitable, but a haven for artists nonetheless. Steiger and Rahmann came to Hichtum in the same year that famous Dutch writer Gerard Reve landed in Greonterp, a little further on the other side of Bolsward. Graphic artist Frans Lodewijk Pannekoek lived not far away in neighbouring Pingjum. It was the awe inspiring space and silence that fascinated them all. They were looking for a new beginning that seemed to be up for grabs like a “tabula rasa” originating from the innocence of the empty Frisian landscape. However this became also the place where, far away from the Germany of her youth, Silvia Steiger saw the television series “The Occupation” by Dutch historian Lou de Jong. For the first time, she became aware of the horrors of the Holocaust and how her parents had kept quiet about it.

Life in Friesland had something exotic in their eyes. A climate of tolerance reigned and they imagined themselves to be far away from the wealth of information that was specific to living in the city. City air sets you free, but in the seventies it was the fresh Frisian country air that gave these artists their freedom. “Freedom of Fools” Silvia Steiger called it. “Beware of crossing rabbits”, was written on a sign outside the house in Hichtum. Lush marijuana plants grew in the garden here, without anyone taking offense. After all, they looked just like tomato plants. In her book COUNTRY LIFE (2012) Silvia Steiger reflects on her experiences with animals during those days in Friesland. The stories are sometimes funny, sometimes cruel, about eating and being eaten.

In retrospect, it is remarkable that, so soon after her time at the art academy, Silvia Steiger became part of mainstream international avant-garde, and that in distant Friesland. Although one should note that, notwithstanding rapid developments, in those days, not just the art world but the entire cultural scene was a lot more transparent. Everybody knew who the important writers, filmmakers and composers were. Museum directors still had a reputation as visionaries, as being able to predict the future of art. In the late sixties, Rahmann and

Steiger were well informed about what was going on elsewhere. Both created their links in Friesland and became friends with fellow artists as well as such diverse people like journalist Laurens ten Cate and Fr. Marinus Achterberg from the Monastery of Witmarsum.

There is a nice picture by Paul Janssen showing the couple in their living room in Hichtum. It was taken to go with an interview for the *Leeuwarder Courant*. Fritz Rahmann sits at the piano entrenched in sheet music and Silvia Steiger sits in the foreground with a young tomcat named "Rotmensch". On the wall hangs a poster depicting the exhibition of M.C. Escher at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague. In the *Leeuwarder Courant* of 6 October 1969, the interior is described in detail. "The room paved in green tiles, is so large that the piano appears to be small." Yet the house proved not large enough. For this reason Silvia rents a former labourer's house, where she carries out her work. Living together with Fritz is good, working together not so good.

On the surface, it looked like things were going well, but reality was different. The couple was forced into making textile designs, arduously peddling them to manufacturers in the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria and Germany. This situation only improved when in 1972 Rahmann was admitted to the Visual Artists Regulation (BKR), that provided artists with an income by guaranteeing the regular purchase of their work by the local authorities. This had taken a lot of strife because he was a foreign artist. A few years later Silvia Steiger also encountered major problems when she appealed to the BKR. In both cases, solidarity actions were undertaken by Frisian artists. Both Rahmann as Steiger were active within the trade union of artists and also involved in the creation of the BKF (the Professional Association of Visual Artists in Friesland). The first issue of the *BKF Courant*, released in August 1972, was designed by Silvia Steiger. The magazine was encased in plastic and filled with Frisian hay. It was even for sale at the International News Centre Atheneum in Amsterdam.

The first joint exhibitions of Rahmann and Steiger were well received in the Frisian newspapers, although they sometimes struggled to interpret the work within the right context. Consequently she continued to be haunted by the label 'pop art', even though much of her work had no semblance to it. Following an exhibition at Galerie van Hulsen in Leeuwarden, Eduard Kools wrote in 1969: "The pop art of Silvia Steiger has something poetic. The things made by her seem to be everything but contrived. They convey a feeling of openness and first and foremost appear to be a personal expression." She says of her art: "I'm just trying to clarify my thoughts. To accomplish this, I choose the most obvious materials. I don't care whether it is, or isn't, traditional."

In addition to a number of drawings mainly assemblages were shown at this exhibition. Chairs combined with all kinds of objects and materials. Kools recognized: "the atmosphere of childhood memory mixed with a nostalgia for that blissful time without major problems" in this work. *STORY FOR A CHILD* is a reminder of things that one is not allowed to touch as a child. In this case it consisted of a white statue of a dog that stood unattainable on

her grandmother's sideboard. Also, an anxiety from earliest childhood was shaped into four rubber boots painted in the form of a swastika on a round board. Anything but pop art one would say? Kools saw it differently. "It's pop art with meaning," he concluded.<sup>3</sup>

## Fear and Shelter

The theme of "fear" is for the first time explicitly reflected in BAG FOR FEAR. A large object created in 1971 consisting of an iron rack with a bag of army green cloth attached to it and within which the viewer can place his or her fears. A scent of the Cold War seems to persist in the duffel bags used to make this "fear defence" -object. The fabric comes from a thrift store at the military airport in Leeuwarden. During that time a Starfighter crashed every three months in Europe. This work seems to reflect a kinship to Joseph Beuys. He also often sought ritual protection, for example by being fitted a suit of felt, or donning himself in felt carpeting or, to lock himself up in the empty space of a gallery in New York for five days, together with a coyote.

Fear and the seeking of protection and shelter would reoccur in subsequent years in Silvia Steiger's work. In Amsterdam during 1992, at "Art & Behavior", an artists' initiative by Thom Puckey, she built, from loose sections of the parquetry floor, a shelter for a toy animal that Puckey's son had accidentally left behind. In that same year she also created the installation PACK OF HOUNDS in which a plaster dog, painted in fluorescent colours, was placed between two mirrors. Every minute and a half the scene is brightly lit, so the dog appears in all directions to have multiplied into a terrifying pack. It brings to mind the sublime image of a nightmare that suddenly breaks into consciousness. Beneath the smooth surface of everyday reality an ongoing battle is obviously fought between demons of the subconscious.

Apart from this, the nostalgic search for a guardian angel keeps making an appearance as well. In 1993 the installation AFTER THE BATTLE was created, consisting of two parts. In the first work two casts of her own hands, spasmodically clinging onto the feathers of wings, lie on a small leaden platter.

The second work consists of a seven by seven meters wide hanging cloth of tulle that spreads across the floor. Down feathers lie atop, scattered amongst many little red pebbles like coagulated blood drops on an angelic robe. In an elucidation she wrote: "Do I leave behind the reality of objects in favour of a personal imagined reality? I have to visualize my fears."<sup>4</sup>

This underlying threat combined with a longing for shelter runs like a golden thread throughout her entire oeuvre. Time and again an impalpable feeling is called to the surface, whereby the seal of dead silence is broken by a heavenly promise.

## Being attentively present

After her debut exhibition at Galerie van Hulsen in March 1969, Silvia Steiger had another exhibition in 1972 in Museum 't Coopmanshûs Franeker, managed by Thom Mercuur at that time, the later founder of Museum Belvedere in Oranjewoud, Friesland. Again, she appears fascinated by “ordinary objects like cuckoo clocks and chandeliers with electric candles, things that one may find in mail-order catalogues”. Sikke Doele wrote in the *Leeuwarder Courant*, “*She also paints slippers and a toy pussycat that – vicious detail – has a tiny swastika dangling from its collar.*” We note the emergence of systematic observation of everyday objects, which will continue to fascinate her in years to come. Cups and saucers are depicted in many different ways, painted in water-colors, drawn on paper or on a tablecloth, or cut out of foam rubber. “I’m going to make a portrait of a thing,” she said in an interview at that time.<sup>5</sup>

In the summer of 1974 the exhibition “OBSERVATION OF AN OBJECT – egg” followed in the Fries Museum in Leeuwarden. The work was shown atop a series of tables that were set up in the same hall which reportedly also housed a putative Rembrandt. In the five months prior, Silvia Steiger had made a drawing of the same object every day, firstly a rosebranch and then an egg. While working she discovered that observation is subjective. More specifically, the fact that depending on your state of mind, observation changes over time.

This presentation was part of a group exhibition, but Silvia Steiger’s contribution widely received the most acclaim. It would be her breakthrough. Not long afterwards she was invited to exhibit at the gallery “Corps de Garde” in Groningen and at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague.

“In Friesland I could become myself,” she said in an interview in 2012 in answer to the question on whether she had done well to stay in Friesland for such a long time. When in the mid-seventies the relationship came to an end, Fritz Rahmann left for Berlin, where he founded Büro Berlin, made career for himself and in 1987 was invited to participate in the Documenta in Kassel. Their ways parted.

The intense observation and recording of a commonplace object every day for 5 years, led to an extensive series of drawings in which the sequential and conceptual crossed paths. This approach also had an impact on the consciousness out of which arose the creative impulse for Silvia Steiger. It seemed she went looking for an experience that can be stealthily provoked if you are not on your guard intellectually. Towards a mode of consciousness that floats on paradoxically involved indifference, which forms part of being attentively “with the things” that unemphatically surround you in the Here and Now. In other words, she started to look at things in the same thoughtful way Matsuo Basjō had observed the flowering of the modest shepherd’s purse.

## Turbulent times, loss of form

The period of the late sixties and early seventies was a hectic time with great social unrest, demonstrations and student revolts. But at the same time it was the heyday of the hippie ideals that were aimed at expansion of consciousness and free love. Times, they were changing, as Bob Dylan had already predicted. Napalm bombs were thrown in Vietnam and the Beatles sang "All you need is love" worldwide on live TV. On June 2, 1967, during a visit by the Shah of Persia to West Berlin, the secret police shot the student Benno Ohnesorg in the back of his head. Shortly thereafter student leader Rudi Dutschke was shot in the street by an anti-communist. Both shocking events gave rise to the emergence of the left-wing Baader-Meinhof Group in West Germany.

During this time the socially critical element also became more evident in the work of Silvia Steiger. Her political views shifted to the left without, however, radicalising. Together with Fritz Rahmann and other like minded people she took part in a happening during a Biafra demonstration in Leeuwarden in 1970. Emaciated little "Biafrans" made from Styrofoam were run over by cars.

In October 1972 Silvia Steiger exhibited together with Fritz Rahmann and Geert Fastenhou in the Prinsentuin Arts Centre in Leeuwarden. Silvia Steiger showed six similar kitchen chairs that each had undergone a different transformation. Imprisoned in a pile of plaster, or fenced in by chicken wire, chopped to pieces, or bearing the words "Ich bin ein Schwein", with a garland of flowers around it, or wrapped in packing paper. On a banister hung two flannel sheets with the words respectively "Yes" and "No" and on the invitation card Steiger licks her soup plate empty. They appeared to be provocations, similar to the action she had previously performed on the festival of the Communist Party of the Netherlands in Amsterdam. In the performance PAINTING THE DUTCH FLAG RED one flag was painted red every hour for a total of 10 hours. Naturally, painting the red, white and blue striped flag was in vain, as only the white of the flag really became red. However, this from the outset doomed performance was accepted without comment by the public and organisation.

The time of great change also affected the Arts. Interesting exhibits from this period included "Op losse schroeven" curated by Wim Beeren in 1969 at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, and "When Attitudes Become Form" presented by Harald Szeemann in that same year in the Kunsthalle Bern. Both exhibitions would be a benchmark for the rapid changes that were happening in the art world. The formerly clearly defined mainstream of the avant-garde separated into a broad delta of new streams and trends. Such as minimalistic art, conceptual art, land art, performances and body art. Three years later, in 1972, Harald Szeemann would be curator of Documenta 5 in Kassel, which in retrospect was a Fleet Review of all these new movements. It was "the best Documenta ever held", Dutch arthistorian Carel Blotkamp ruled three decades later in a review of that time.<sup>6</sup>

In her book *Six Years: "The dematerialisation of the art object from 1966 to 1972"* American artcritic Lucy Lippard summarises this hectic period. Looking back from the beginning of the seventies, she shows a development essentially coming to the surface at the end of the fifties and, evolving ever more clearly during the course of the sixties. This trend was focused on the conceptual, whereby the emphasis increasingly shifted to the mental creative process, separated from visual presentation that was increasingly omitted. It was the quality of the idea, and not the visual aesthetics of art as an object, that mattered. Daily life – including the social systems connected to it – was also appropriated by artists.

All these trends outlined by Lippard were in fact a response to the excessive focus on the art object being an external shape. Lippard sees this increasing anti-formalism as a process of dematerialisation as well as disintegration of the art object. More and more art was becoming a process that only transpired in the mind itself. Even though that purely mental event also enjoyed to be materialised as an object or recording, as such eventually becoming part of the official art circuit again. Specifically during this period art divided itself in an amorphous collection of video, performance, photography, texts and actions. Throughout these years this development appeared to take place, one-by-one, in the work of Silvia Steiger.

### **A new inwardness**

During the eighties and nineties her work would be recognised by the Dutch museum circuit. She correspondingly exhibited at art fairs, in leading galleries as well as artists' initiatives, but the international breakthrough failed to arrive. It is remarkable that in the seventies her work was not recognised in the context of a development that took place not only in the Netherlands but also manifested itself internationally. In the exhibition "Personal worlds", which was compiled in 1978 by art historians Antje von Graevenitz, Franck Gribling and Gijs van Tuyl, her work was not included. The exhibition showed work by artists such as Bas Jan Ader, Ben d'Armagnac, Ger van Elk, Pieter Laurens Mol and Sigurdur Gudmundsson. In retrospect, it was exactly this type of artist forming the context in which the work of Silvia Steiger belonged. They objectified the personal experiences by observing the outside world in an extremely attentive way hence capturing the "outside" as an inner possession. It is exactly this interaction between the outside and the inside – between the objective and subjective – which also comes to the fore in the work of Silvia Steiger.

In her introduction for the catalogue *Personal Worlds*, Antje von Graevenitz refers to the words of Paul Klee that have also inspired Silvia Steiger: "*Art is not a reproduction of what is visible, rather it makes visible.*" Von Graevenitz recognised in the work of artists the tendency to show ordinary everyday life things in situations where these act as "metaphors" – "that is, they are the means to display something in a poetic manner". Von Graevenitz writes: "Often the work, through these added lyrical connotations, acquires a mystical dimension; the visible representations imply more than they display". Thus vistas become "visions" and

vice versa. There appeared to be a new kind of inwardness – “Die neue Innerlichkeit”. The work produced from this viewpoint was based mostly on emotions or a “sculptural” sense.<sup>7</sup> Von Graevenitz refers to the title of one of Peter Handke’s poetic texts from 1969: *Die Innenwelt der Aussenwelt der Innenwelt* (“The inner world of the outer world of the inner world”). This anthology of Handke consists of a concatenation of all kinds of texts, often found ready-made, such as the line-up of a football team or a pop-chart from Japan. But he also took wondrous dialogues, excerpts from plays and texts that resemble actual poetry, but that are not really genuine. Handke was obviously searching for a new demarcation between the subjective and the objective. In twentieth-century philosophy it is often pointed out that the subjective and the objective can not be seen in isolation of each other. Peter Handke drew from it the ultimate consequence. Language was a secret alliance between a transmitter and that which the language was referring to. In between the words and the things. But what transpired within this demarcation? What exactly happened in between the words and the things?

If you put that question of Peter Handke in connection with the work that Silvia Steiger produced after the mid-seventies something of a pattern becomes evident amongst the huge assortment one perceives as a first impression. Unity in diversity. Those words are typical not only for her work, but also for the process of disintegration that took place in the art scene during the seventies, the period in which the concept of her work crystallised.

A fine example of the art of that time was her participation in an intensive collaborative project for the exhibition of “The Franeker Group BFKNS” in March 1976 in ‘t Coopmanshûs Franeker.

The collaboration took a whopping nine months. Other participants were Benno Reichart, Fritz Rahmann, Karl Krüll and Nils Kristiansen. All five artists had studied in Düsseldorf. Silvia Steiger showed BLUE TREE. The junction for this project for her was a wind bent tree in the empty landscape outside of the dike at her new residence Makkum. That tree modelled the “inner tree of imagination” that she would realise in the museum during her working week. It was a constant shift between the reality of the tree on the embankment and the manufacturing of the image amid the work of the other participants.

During the same period the group also conducted telepathic experiments. At an agreed time, each in their own place, the artists focused their minds on one of them acting as the “transmitter” for the session. He/she would, completely focussed, draw and the team members would then draw what they “received”. The resulting drawings would then be compared after a number of sessions and examined for similarities. The project aroused the interest of the Parapsychology Institute of the University of Utrecht. Due to the inability of the scientists to clearly define the signs, no academic sequel was undertaken, to follow their visual investigation. Later, Silvia Steiger and Karl Krüll created around 80 telepathic works in four years entitled “Analogy”. More than half of these works can be found in the Museum of Modern Art in Herne, Germany.

During the collaboration of the group BKFNS the Chinese oracle book “I Ching” was consulted by all for advice. The group had found something through the I Ching that sustained the constant flow of changing moods and events that defined their lives and work. To this day the book became the foremost consultant for life and work of Silvia Steiger. In his introduction to the Dutch translation of the I Ching in 1971 Herman Cohen wrote: “The I Ching gives us change, shows us, in fact, that there is nothing but change and thus leads us to a peace within change.”<sup>8</sup> and a little further: “the I Ching might just as well be called the book of changes as it may be called the book of complete peace or emptiness.”<sup>9</sup> The obvious intent appears to be to discover the eternal through the never-ending flow of events.

There is something that continues and lasts, even though everything is moving. The I Ching teaches: those who are not open to the necessary peace that lies within the flow of changes, will not be able to perceive the significance of the change itself. This realisation of peace amidst the endless stream of changes was also reflected in the balance that Silvia Steiger appeared to have found in her personal life from the mid seventies. “We were quirky and focused and paid attention to coincidences and dreams,” she later wrote in one of her notes.

In her book “Country Life, about my animals in Friesland” a few sentences witness a new attitude: “Emancipation has me in its grip. First there is the driver’s license, then the dog. For now, I want to live without a partner. I found a new home in Makkum. For a petty amount I can rent a small house next to the workshop of the pottery factory Tichelaar.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Discovery of the trail**

“We had a vision of a new art. An art that would overcome hierarchies, a collective art without author” Silvia Steiger wrote later in a letter about that intensive collaboration during the period 1975-76 with “The Franeker Group BFKNS”. This utopian dream of art without author was characteristic of a development in the arts that took place during the seventies. During that time American art critic Rosalind Krauss developed a way to analyse contemporary artwork based on semiotics, with her attention mainly focused on photography. Silvia Steiger also starts to include photography as a medium during that period. Throughout a project week in Leeuwarden in October 1978, she discovered some items, left by previous occupants, in an abandoned building on the Turfmarkt. After incisive inspection she documented these exposed objects photographically, such as a laundry rack in the hallway and scraps of paper on the floor.

The photographs she took were then placed next to each item. Sometimes its condition would change during exhibition opening hours due to spectators touching things. As such the condition itself became co-author of the work. The object of observation and not the “ego” determined from now on the outcome, as if Silvia Steiger had discovered a new space between the subject and the object. A new game that was stripped of all emotion, moods or aesthetic coding of the symbol. One could call this “the index game”. Semiotically the index

stands for the symbol that maintains a direct causal link with what it is actually referring to. Within the index the symbol points towards to a particular cause or effect of the symbol. Examples include smoke, fingerprints or footprints in the snow. As such a photograph is, in essence, also an index. The photograph creates a different time window in our consciousness because a photograph presents to us a slice of reality which, in fact, already belongs to the past.

It is remarkable that during the seventies many artists started to use photography in their work, not only to document and capture their projects, ideas, interventions and performances, but also as an 'indexical medium' by which an event in the here and now was literally caught in its track. The American artist Gordon Matta-Clark restricted his artistic work to sawing away pieces of flooring in empty buildings and then capturing these interventions in photos. Silvia Steiger also made use of such a methodology. Parts of a floor covering could be removed or sometimes a floor would be cleaned, as was the case with an installation in De Fabriek in Eindhoven in 1984. She divided the middle of this factory floor into 13 lanes and then scrubbed these lanes until they were sparkling clean. This procedure in the outer world did not leave the inner self of the artist unscathed. She later explained that, whilst conducting this project, she wrote an imaginary letter to her sick father. In doing so the whole process also received a ritual meaning.

Where did this interest for the empty symbol, the index, the work without the author come from? In an article from 1977 *Notes on the index* Rosalind Krauss suggested that during the seventies many artists came to perceive pictorial art as insincere and increasingly as incredible. Had they in the sixties still believed that the boundaries between art and everyday life could be lifted; this latter ideal of the avant-garde would during the course of the seventies considered to be a tragic illusion. For the first time this brought bankruptcy into view, not only of the avant-garde, but also of modernism as such. Only the photographic image could still be true, because through it reality is presented one-on-one without the medium encoding the symbol into art and thus rendering it incredible.

A vague in-between space seems to have been created. Something imperceptible caught between authenticity and its shadow. From this rebound, the art seemed to nestle right in the remaining gap between the artist as subject and the objective representation of reality. Art literally was colliding into this gap and thus penetrating a new semiotic field. This would be territory of the index, the track, the print, the shadow, in short that which remains after the presence has been present. It was a discovery through which the photographic image was suddenly given a new dimension. Something like a twilight zone originated between instantaneous space and the trace of a present-time that is past. The ideal of appropriating time in a work of art in the here and now was hence forward impregnated with the melancholy of memory.

Track and imprint had already surfaced in the work of Silvia Steiger in the early seventies. One of the finest works she produced in Friesland, was purchased by the Province of Friesland in 1971, but unfortunately has since been lost. It was the PORTRAIT OF JANTJE MULDER. An old armchair containing the residual imprint of a woman in plaster. Beside it was a tape recorder on which her life story could be heard. "Jantje Mulder was an old woman in Hichtum" she later said in an interview. "The interior of her house seemed to not have changed in a hundred years. And her stories were wonderful. I put a piece of plastic on her chair so her clothes could stay clean, and then she had to sit down in the wet plaster".<sup>11</sup> The imprint of the body in the chair was a fossil of time, just as the tape recording. Appreciating things for what they are. Reality, time, the essence of things, all this was summarised in this key work in her oeuvre.

In the early eighties Silvia Steiger came to live via Akersloot in Castricum with her new partner Ruud van Ginkel. Just before her departure from Friesland in 1979 she exhibited again in 't Coopmanshûs with the project GRASS OR OBSERVATION OF A PLACE IN THE GARDEN. The floor of the museum hall was, on that occasion, littered with notes and watercolor registrations on paper of "events" that had taken place every day in the same spot in her garden between September 13, 1977 and June 24, 1978. The critic of the Leeuwarder Courant noticed that one theme, namely love, continually returned, through symbols such as heart shapes. "The registrations appear to alternate between an expression of emotion concerning the place and the place as a symbol of one's own emotions."<sup>12</sup> Something surfaced which in the years to come would become more important in her work.

### **The outer and the inner**

In registering the encountered reality the emotion of the moment became more and more predominant. This could be a feeling of tenderness, wonder or love, but also the experience of the impermanence of all life, not just of humans but also of animals and plants. As such the personal and the narrative gradually came into view through all kinds of art: installations, multiples, books and objects.

The heart as a symbol would return repeatedly, for example, through the red boxing gloves shaped like two hearts in LIEBELIEBE, 1992. This work has a strong emotional charge, love and hate, aggression and irony meet each other in a surprising manner like in the weaponry of a divorce battle. In 2013 and 2014, these amorous gloves would again be used for two performances during the exhibition "Shameless" in Breda and Eindhoven.

The different scenic surroundings of Castricum challenged Silvia Steiger to new explorations. This is how the series of daily walks through the dunes transpired, SIGNS FOUND IN A LANDSCAPE. Thirty-five walks through the dunes of Castricum were fixed in photos onto large rolls of photo paper. And in 1983 by invitation of Wies Smals of gallery "The Apple" it was exhibited within the Zuiderkerk of Amsterdam. By means of the rolled out bands of paper on the floor, their direction determined with help of a compass to be the same as in the

dunes, the spectator was offered the option to trace the discovery tour through a left behind track. Streams of light fell onto the floor through the windows of the church crossing the entire scene. In this way the intense registration of the landscape united itself with the contemplative atmosphere of the church interior into a mysterious whole.

The principle of the imprint and the play of the track that she had discovered in the seventies, would over the years be determining for progression within the work of Silvia Steiger. It represented the peace within the change. This “trail” can always be recognised within the means of her work, be it through a ‘sign’, like the feather of a bird, a rabbit bone, the leaf of a tree – or as a shadow of reality captured on a white sheet of paper.

Her interest in optical phenomena is consistent with this. Having separated from her second partner and moving to Amsterdam in 1991, she fills a glass fishbowl that a previous occupant had left in her studio with water. She fantasises that the bowl contains all her tears as she explains in a later comment: “I long for a new vision for my future life.” One can see the view through the bowl, but on its head. She then photographs this reverse image – every hour – for a whole 24 hours. She concludes the series with a staged handstand of an acrobat from across the street. In an elucidation, she writes: THE NEED FOR A HANDSTAND was born. I am recovering.”.

The optics seem to have been applied here for a self-cleansing ritual. The emotions of the inner world blend themselves here with the optical laws of light. Again and again Silvia Steiger creates in her work an interaction between the outside and the inside, like the light that falls into a sphere and the consciousness of the outside world perceived through the eye. This reversal of the image in the fishbowl is an optical principle that occurs in both the camera obscura as well as within the human eye. The eye cannot think, but the mind can see. Thus, the figure of the sphere becomes a metaphor for the inner self.

Jagged lines run through the diverse landscape comprising the work of Silvia Steiger. Is this the inner landscape, or is it what we can see from the outside? It seems like ever and again a process of osmosis transpires in her work so that the boundaries between inner and outer literally fade. This phenomenon already existed when she participated in the telepathic experiments in the mid-seventies. It was a time when, like her, many were looking for the miraculous and one read books by Suzuki and Ouspensky. But in order to experience wonderment the miraculous is in fact not necessary. The miraculous can be hiding in the closest thing because nothing is what it seems. Similarly, the reading of a book is always more than just optically sensing the printed words on paper. What happens between the eye and the patterns? What does this say about the relationship between consciousness and reality? Even in the present day no one knows what really happens in our brain whilst we experience our reality as reality. In short, another type of topology is needed in which the inner and the outer can flow into each other.

German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk explores in his book “Spheres” these kind of hybrid psychological spaces, that are present within normal reality but are not subject to normal spatial restrictions. He applies insights from Taoism in order to pinpoint the indefinable of these dual spaces. The familiar borders between inner and outer are seemingly lifted during transformation processes unknown to the West. The center is everywhere and nowhere at the same time, such as Zhuang Zi once dreamed he was a butterfly, after which he no longer knew whether he was Zhuang Zi who dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly who dreamt he was Zhuang Zi.

The relevance of the Taoist thoughts of Sloterdijk when applied to the work of Silvia Steiger, might be recognised in her search for shelter, which is reflected in the seemingly detached registrations of the work. It is the primeval orb of paradise that she repeatedly seems to search for within the traces that light has left behind in the dark room, within the curved lens of the camera. So also in the dozens of glass stones shaped like water droplets and displayed on a dark green velvet cloth in the installation NOTHING EVER LOST of 1992. The round shape appeared the year before in the multiple THE WALL PAPER AFFAIR where she placed marbles like solidified tears in front of Man Ray’s photograph of a tearful eye. During the same time Silvia Steiger creates an installation whereby underneath a kind of incubator numerous glass balls reflect the mirror image of a naked female body. The projection repeats itself ad infinitum.

### **Bookworks and alternative circuits**

The painting as a medium did not disappear after the sixties but eventually emerged rejuvenated. Consequently during the eighties the artist’s book flourished to attention again. With the rise of the artist’s book in the sixties a subversive stance against the established order was often undisguisedly expressed. This undertone was not present in the eighties. The private and personal appeared to be given ample space within the artist’s book and multiples. No longer was the aim to push the boundaries of the book as a medium, but rather it was meant to be an intimate and unemphatic manner of expression, the book as a private domain, with all attention to the subtle and tangible qualities that a book holds within.

This trend is also recognisable in the books that Silvia Steiger made during the eighties. The propensity towards the experiment had been replaced in favour of a more intimate and spiritual relationship with the medium book as such. For Silvia Steiger the book seemed to take on a type of healing function through a process of spiritual transmission. In a statement she said: “Of course I hope that turning the leaves in such a special booklet can be therapeutic.”

The Zeitgeist changed during the eighties but the work of Silvia Steiger remained topical and effortlessly connected to a new generation with different ideas and ideals. The wave of subversive tendencies, which had emerged during the sixties, suddenly ebbed away from society. The last subcultures were gradually being replaced by the unbearable lightness of

being of the late eighties. This decade that had begun so turbulently, after the grim coronation of a new Dutch queen, slowly turned into a time of ideological calm, the years of yuppies in the West and glasnost in the East. In short, onwards to a time without alternative.

In the eighties, Silvia Steiger found her work to be increasingly appreciated, not only within museum circles. She received invitations from prestigious institutions such as gallery Corps de Garde in Groningen or The Appel Foundation in Amsterdam. But also the emerging circuit of artists' initiatives that was increasingly gaining prestige because of the defeasance of the BKR, initiatives like Art & Behavior and Makkom Foundation in Amsterdam or The Factory in Eindhoven and Büro Berlin in Berlin asked her to carry out projects. The location-based method of working of Silvia Steiger lent itself quite well to these new spaces in abandoned factories or squats.

### **The rediscovery of Fluxus**

The work of Silvia Steiger found a new context throughout the nineties. The Fluxus movement was rediscovered by a new generation. Art once again became volatile and formless. Fleeting actions, such as organising happenings or cycling through the city and labelling these as art, became norm. For a short moment it seemed that one was working on disintegrating the arts, but the opposite was the case. All of these artists' actions were actually documented in photographs, film or video and reviewed in art magazines.

For Silvia Steiger this new development contained little novelty. Again her work connected wonderfully well with the intentions of a new generation that had fallen under the spell of the recent past. Indeed, within her work, the legacy of the sixties and seventies was over and again furnished with a new poetic charge. The art world changed by the rise of commercialism, but the art itself seemed to rediscover the radicalism of the sixties. In an article entitled "The Art of forgetting, the lost idealism of the sixties" Michael Gibbs wrote in 1992:

*"The conditions are not yet right for a renewal of the arts, or a resurrection of idealism. Although we may still impatiently desire change, the crisis is yet to come. In the meantime, let's forget the sixties, the seventies and eighties. And, if necessary let's forget the art itself, at least until such time as its radical edge has been found again."*<sup>13</sup>

These words not only testified to a desire for a new beginning, but also implied to want the revival of something. Something that had actually been preserved in the work of Silvia Steiger. She remained true to the ideals of the sixties throughout all these decades without ever losing sight of the track. Those ideals were reflected, among other things, in her preference for the production of books or multiples; smaller works of art that could be produced in series and through their low price were accessible to more people. The need in the nineties, to venture outside the established circuit in search for new distribution channels was partly caused

by the decline of government involvement in the arts, which made grants and scholarships scarce. From 1993 Silvia Steiger began not only with the production of multiples, but also took a hand in its distribution. As such and starting in 1993 she, together with artist friends, organised three exhibitions of multiples in her own studio. "VIRTUAL IMAGES FOR REAL MONEY" was the ironic title of that project. The idea was such a hit that an invitation for the "Art Multiple" in Dusseldorf followed.

And so in 1993 she returned to the place where she had spent her student years, the city which three decades before had been one of the breeding grounds of the international Fluxus movement. In 1992, a commemoration event was organised in Wiesbaden in honor of Fluxus, which had been founded in 1962 in this city. The atmosphere of Fluxus slowly returned to the nineties, even though Fluxus had never really left. As one of the first front men Georg Brecht once compared this movement to a wheel of fortune that remains spinning throughout the arts, without anyone knowing where and when it will come down: 'Round and round it goes, and where it stops nobody knows.'

After Dusseldorf, repeated presentations at the KunstRAI in Amsterdam and Multiple Fair in Frankfurt followed. With her event STEIGER 8 MULTIPLES Silvia Steiger was very well in touch with the times. She returned to a track that, in fact, she had never left. A kind of cooperative company emerged together with nine other artists whereby each artist retained the scope for organising their own production line. TRANSPORT BOX PROJECT STEIGER 8 they called the project, where the multiples were displayed in wooden boxes of identical size.

### **Comfort and Healing**

In the series of multiples that had emerged since the nineties ideas were progressed, leading to poetic objects and assemblages. Precisely through this small scale of multiples Silvia Steiger appeared to possess a special talent for creating wonderment. To achieve this, she utilised a process reminiscent of the surrealist principle of bringing together disparate objects and materials. The fur-lined teacup of Meret Oppenheim from 1936 seems to have stood model for the surprising poetic finds Silvia Steiger elaborated upon in her multiples. Not infrequently, this produced an iconic image in which the poetry of the object seems to have an almost comforting impact. Highlights in this progress were the aforementioned WALL PAPER AFFAIR (1991) and ONE PAIR OF SHOES (1993). These identical objects found their way to many different owners, thus essentially creating a social link without anyone being aware of it. They were "healing objects" which found their way to a myriad of new owners and as such weaved together a featherlight network like a new type of social sculpture.

But the therapeutic element also surfaced in other objects. For this Silvia Steiger had the blossom therapy of the English physicist and alternative physician Edward Bach (1886-1936) in mind. He discovered that aromas of blossoms can be beneficial in curing diseases. He

would show his patients images of flowers, from which they could take their pick. He then mixed together a medicine from this chosen flower by diluting tiny extracts in water. Similarly Silvia Steiger always intuitively chose a particular flower species as the subject for her work. By focusing entirely on a plant, it was – sometimes literally – brought to the inside. Such a method of association with an object from the outside world had a long history in her work. Back in the seventies, she already explained in an interview that it was her aspiration to become spiritually completely one with what she observed.

She recognises her observations back in dreams:

*“It looks like the pine cone is a wing, the wing of an angel, perhaps. I put a bowl of grease next to it so that the angel can polish its wing. Dream of a snake with scales, brown yellow coloured (I'm afraid of snakes). The snake turns into a droll little creature, a cross between a cat and a rabbit with a long tail. The animal is tame, I can stroke it. Someone asks me how I feel. I hear myself say, scaly.”<sup>14</sup>*

The desire to heal through art is an intention that underlies much of Silvia Steiger's work. It surfaced previously in her early work “Bag for Anxiety” from 1971. The boundary between self-healing, such as dealing with grief and trauma, and providing comfort and solace to others, is fluid. Sometimes an autobiographical element prevailed, like in “I Need You-I Need You” from 1991. It consists of two ‘canine objects’ that materialised at the end of a complicated love affair in Crete. The objects are filled with the complete faxed-letter exchange from which fragments of text are sometimes decipherable. The consolation for the observer lies perhaps therein that they are allowed to be a voyeur.

The symbol of the dog – often based on her own dog Oskar – grew to be a comforting archetype in the nineties. It was portrayed in multiples made from all kinds of materials like a holy animal possessing the timeless connotations of faith and immortality. The multiple: The Golden Oskar from 1999 was bought by the Rabobank and the Dutch Central Bank. This image was created during a time when money still grew on trees and was for the taking. In retrospect, this Golden Dog seems to convey a veiled ironic commentary not only on the famed Hollywood award, but also on the “the golden calf” pertaining the unbridled culture of greed of late capitalism.

## **Flower Power**

The healing effect is sometimes explicitly reflected in her work, especially through the flower theme that recurs again and again. Besides animals, the flower has a special significance for Silvia Steiger that is intertwined with Zen aspects. The attentive manner of observation which had been necessary for the series of drawings which emerged during the seventies, was internalised a decade later. The flower motif was literally spiritualised and as such gained a different meaning. This was explicitly acknowledged in her book entitled ABOUT INCLUDING

LOVE from 1989, which was purchased by the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Silvia Steiger was substantively inspired by the white lily as a Mary icon. Along with drawings of white lilies and blue moon shapes she also included gold colored pages. The reader can repeatedly create new images by turning and exchanging the loose-leaf pages within the book.

Colour increasingly takes the upper hand in the flower drawings created on Crete later on. From 1999 to 2006 Silvia Steiger stayed twice a year for three months on Crete, where she rented a private studio. In doing so she managed to escape the art scene of Amsterdam, which she was ever more experiencing as being oppressive. After Friesland in the sixties, Crete became the new refuge. The Mediterranean landscape with its unique colourful flora invited new explorations which were then shaped into large colourful works on paper or linen. The exuberant colours speak a different tone, as if a rebirth had taken place. The flower in its enchanted form was studied and, after translation into an ornament, again presented to the world. Just like Buddha, who conducted his 'flower sermon' merely by displaying a flower to the passers-by without ever saying one word.

It is not Silvia Steiger's intention to create a realistic image; for this reason she speaks of "ornaments". The concept for the majority of the Crete series is to create 'healing environments'. Apart from the 'flower portraits', throughout the years other series surface of fruits or stones from the pebbled beach. Each time the theme would be interspersed with monochrome coloured shapes in order to emphasise the ornamental character. The studio just above the beach allowed for the ever-changing sea-view to be painted quite traditionally on canvas for 39 days. The famous labyrinth sign from the Minoan period – probably intended as a pattern for ritual dances – concludes the series as an "earth sign".

The shadow theme underwent a new transformation in Crete. Silvia Steiger became intrigued by the shadows of plants. She collected large numbers of these "shadow symbols" by photographing them in front of a white background. These photos were then photocopied onto transparent tracing paper. Subsequently she added the putative 'aura' of the plant symbol drawn in chalk colours.

Colour, shadow, sign and tracks are the formal elements used by Silvia Steiger to construct her poetic universe on Crete utilising all she came across in her immediate vicinity. The optical effect of light continues to fascinate her. The work with shadows led to the commissioned work NO CLOUDS PLEASE in a private garden where – when the sun shines – one can behold the shadow images of the surrounding trees moving like slow motion film footage over a white marble slab.

### **The body as a relic**

Throughout the years, several works were created as a means of processing or ending a period of sadness or gloom, the breakup of a relationship or dealing with illness or other physical discomfort. In 1997, a neglected complaint that caused a facial paralysis triggered a series of self-portraits. Thus the making of art was continually applied for beauty and

solace. This manifested itself in countless imprints of her own body in wax. Also a variety of other materials such as textile or candy were used. With casts of chocolate or marzipan the audience could physically participate in the work. Out of this attention to the body objects and installations come into being that are sometimes reminiscent of medieval relics. Although through it thoughts of intimacy and transience also become apparent.

This interest in one's own body was not only a result of a growing awareness of mortality, but also befitting of a period during which the body was given plenty of attention in the arts. Body art experienced a revival in the nineties. Terms like "neurotic realism" and "victim art" arrived in the art world. According to the American art theorist Hal Foster during the nineties a general trend came about seeking to redefine the experience, both historically and individually, in terms of trauma. There would be an overall flattening of image and symbol and psychological depth would disappear. Referring to theories of Jacques Lacan, Foster speaks of a 'missed encounter with reality'. Something appeared to be wrong with the experience of reality itself. These times would be characterised by a dormant, schizoid feeling that reared its head again and again: *'Pure effect, no effect. It hurts, I can't feel anything.'*<sup>15</sup> And those who do not feel are doomed to repeat the feeling of loss. As such the body was explored by artists in a variety of ways, often with the intent to be provocative or create shock.

Remarkably, this tendency does not emerge in the way Silvia Steiger uses her own body in her work. She says "My aim is to visualise the inner processes". Her body is respectfully utilised for healing and reconciliation, but also sometimes displayed ironically in limp versions made of textiles. Feelings are being activated and not held at bay through shock tactics. In fact, through these works the process of full attentive observation of the object is brought to the inside, in that the observer and the observed object interconnect with each other. Thus, in a semiotic sense, a shift between the sign and the significance takes place again. The index returns, but now in the form of one's own body leaving behind footprints and tracks.

For example, in *THE 29 FEET OF THE AUTHOR* her own feet were reproduced in 29 casts. The cruel cut off above the ankle softened with tulle pieces of cloth. Over the years this installation has been shown many times over and again, thus through the ever changing context new layers of significance were continually added to it. Her private abdomen was reproduced on a thin fabric as if it were a feminist version of the Shroud of Turin. Sometimes the work was reminiscent of a post-mortem with bodyparts displayed like debris on cutting tables. Other times it made one think of the magical, fetishistic practices of miraculous healings like in the pilgrimage town of Fatima. Where wax casts of body parts – a chest, a shoulder, a hand or a foot – were thrown as candle offerings into the fire by devotees representing a symbolic substitute of their own sick body.

It does not come to that with the casts of body parts that Silvia Steiger exhibits or offers as multiples. Still a comparison with the relic seems to be in order: the objects embody almost one-on-one that to which it refers and because of the setting of that moment render a specific

meaning. For example, during the multiples exhibition in Düsseldorf in 1997, body parts were being offered as candy. The notion of transience was made apparent in this work. Time, elapsing irrevocably during our journey towards death, was trapped in an imprint and thus literally congealed. In the work *THE SWIMMER* (1996) sixteen identical prints of her own face were shown in sixteen water-filled plastic containers, they are floating, unsinkable.

In *THE CONFERENCE*, Silvia Steiger searched for a way to bridge the time. The work consists of sixteen moulds of her own hands displayed on a long table as if they were in a meeting. In each palm a small portrait image has been placed. Sixteen photographs of the artist from her first year to her sixty-fifth year in 2006, the year in which she made the work. Her aim was to start a dialogue between the different ages.

### **The presence of the portrait**

A portrait is also a sign, although it can at the same time never be an imprint, in the way that a photo, in essence, is a replica of something that was once present. Since 1978 Silvia Steiger has used photography in her work. She observes and records the world's surfaces in their everyday settings, whether it be an exotic landscape far from home or the nocturnal aspect of the streets in her own city. But she also observes herself, her own features, with the same attentive detachment as if she were observing the surface of a distant star. In this way she was photographed in a stately self-portrait with her dog Oskar, dressed in a lavish wedding dress and, the dog as the groom decorously dressed in a specially made tail-coat. Irony and seriousness intersect in this iconic image, shameless and uninhibited, but simultaneously hilarious and poetic. In this image Silvia Steiger seems to have immortalised herself in a timeless portrait conveying both mystical and ironic connotations. She is dressed in the white gown like an angel fallen to earth who has kicked off her winged shoes, ready for a dance with Oskar. Both animal and flower join her in this upcoming wedding to nature. Youth and old age join together. She looks at us from the past, while entirely extant in the present.

Five decades already is Silvia Steiger active as an artist. This has led to a rich and varied body of work, which is not just reflective of developments in art for half a century, but which is still remarkably refreshing and current today. Through the years art became increasing like life itself for Silvia Steiger, which, with its trivial manifestations, to her often seems peculiar enough already. Essentially, her entire life she has created 'portraits' of not only people, but also of things, situations, animals, and not in the least: herself. Each portrait has something magical, something holy. A portrait is not just a mimicking but also a presence, an immediate manifestation. She does not redirect, she shows herself.

In this way, all the aesthetic explorations of Silvia Steiger are actually of a semiotic nature, yet magical at the same time, because the visual language she uses is essentially a form of alchemy. In her view, art can change the artist, and so consequently also the observer. That is perhaps the alchemical key hidden in this affluent oeuvre, hidden in a small drawer that

can suddenly open to a philosopher's stone. It is a body of work in which time and again the world is put on its head for just a short moment, survival is not possible any other way. The need for a handstand is more crucial now than ever before. The world is not as it should be, which is why a continual process of inner transformation is required. Upside down, the world on its head.

*Huub Mous, July 2014*

*Translation Karin van Ginkel, January 2015*

## Notes

1. Barthes (1987). p. 81.
2. Roszak (1971), p. 120.
3. *Leeuwarder Courant*, March 7, 1969.
4. Notes (2014).
5. *Leeuwarder Courant*, November 6, 1969.
6. Blotkamp (2002), p. 22.
7. Von Graevenitz (1978) p. 9-12.
8. Cohen (1971), p. 35.
9. Cohen (1971), p. 36.
10. Steiger (2014), p. 44.
11. *De Moanne* (2012), p. 12.
12. *Leeuwarder Courant*, January 26, 1979.
13. Gibbs (1992).
14. *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, October 22, 1976.
15. Foster, 1996, p. 166.

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## Biography

Silvia Steiger was born in 1940 in Linz, Austria and grew up in Cologne, Germany. She studied at the Art Academy Düsseldorf in Germany. In 1964 she and artist Fritz Rahmann moved to Friesland, a province in the north of the Netherlands. After staying there for 15 years she moved to the west of Holland. From 1989 on she lives and works in Amsterdam.

Steiger was visiting artist at the Art Academy of 's Hertogenbosch in the Netherlands and took part of the editorial board of the Dutch art magazine *Ruimte*.

From 1988 on she received several government grants by the Dutch fund BKVB, now the Mondriaan Fund. Galerie ArtKitchen, Amsterdam represents the work of Silvia Steiger.

## Collections

### The work of Silvia Steiger is represented in the art collections of

Art Collection KPN

Multiplemuseum, Amsterdam

Dutch National Bank Artcollection, Amsterdam

RABO Artcollection

The Dutch State Artcollection (RCE)

SBK, Amsterdam

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

and in several private collections world wide

## Exhibitions

### Objects, 1965-2015

Agia Fotia, Kreta / Fries Museum, Leeuwarden / Galerie Art Kitchen, Amsterdam /

Het Troostpaleis, Chassékerk, Amsterdam / Manifestatie Leeuwarden /

Museum Belvédère, Heerenveen-Oranjewoud / Museum 't Coopmanshûs, Franeker /

PICTURA, Dordrecht / Schaamteloos, Breda / Eindhoven /

### Daily Drawings, 1972-1984

Fries Museum, Leeuwarden / Galerie Corps de Garde, Groningen / Galerie De Kruijff,

Groningen & Paris / Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag / Het Kruithuis, Den Bosch

### Bookworks, 1984-2007

Büro Berlin, Berlijn / Galerie Phoebus, Rotterdam / Museum Fodor, Amsterdam /

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam / Stichting Makkom, Amsterdam

### Work through telepathy, 1985 - 1989

Franekergruppe NL / Karl Krüll, Düsseldorf / De Waag, Leiden / Raum 1, Düsseldorf

### Project STEIGER 8 MULTIPLES, 1994-1999

Art Frankfurt / Art Multiple, Düsseldorf / Arthotheek Vlaardingen / De Vest, Alkmaar /

Edition Fils, Düsseldorf / KunstRai, Amsterdam / Multiple Distrikt, Frankfurt / SBK, Amsterdam /

SBK, Schiedam / Studio Marnixstraat, Amsterdam

## Paintings\*Ornaments, 1997-2007

Collection Verkade, Berlin / Eden Rock Hotel, Kreta / Studio Agia Fotia, Kreta /  
Studio Marnixstraat, Amsterdam

## Installations and site-specific objects, 1978 - 2015

Art & Behavior, Amsterdam / Art Frankfurt / Art Multiple, Düsseldorf / Artbox, Frankfurt /  
Arti et Amicitiae, Amsterdam / Büro Berlin, Berlijn / Casa Dei Mezzo, Kreta / CBK Leiden /  
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Galerie XX, Rotterdam / Gemeentemuseum Arnhem / Het Oude Raadhuis, Leerdam /  
Het Troostpaleis, Amsterdam / Kunsthalle Hamburg / Kunstrai 96 – Camp, Amsterdam /  
Museum Fodor, Amsterdam / Museum 't Coopmanshûs, Franeker / Pictura, Dordrecht / SBK Leiden /  
Schaamteloois, Breda / Eindhoven / Stadtmuseum Jena / Stichting De Appel, Amsterdam /  
Stichting Finisterre, Amsterdam / Stichting Makkom, Amsterdam

## Multiples, 1991-2015

Art Fair, Amsterdam / Art Frankfurt / Art Multiple Düsseldorf / Artbox Frankfurt / CBK Leiden /  
De Vest, Alkmaar / Edition Fils, Düsseldorf / Galerie Art Kitchen, Amsterdam / Galerie Fiebig, Berlijn /  
Galerie Phoebus, Rotterdam / Galerie Sander, Hamburg / Galerie XX, Rotterdam / Heart Art, Leiden /  
KunstRai Amsterdam / Nederlandse Bank, Amsterdam / Pictura, Dordrecht / SBK, Leiden /  
SBK, Schiedam / Stadtmuseum Jena / Studio Agia Fotia, Kreta / Studio Marnixstraat, Amsterdam

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Nanne op 't Einde, SCHAAMTELOOS, Breda / Eindhoven 2014  
Huub Mous, DE NOODZAAK VAN EEN HANDSTAND, Heerenveen-Oranjewoud 2015

## Profile online

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