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**RADICAL DEPARTURE:
THE BERLIN SERIES AND GESTURE PROJECT**
An Interview with Gary Kuehn by Cindy Hinant

Installation View, *The Berlin Series and Gesture Project*,
Gaa Gallery, Wellfleet, MA, 2016

CINDY HINANT Let's start by discussing your early interest in German culture.

GARY KUEHN As a student I was instinctively drawn to Northern European art, but it wasn't covered except in a perfunctory way. My high school, like many others in the 1950s, took German language out of their curriculum because of the war. When I was an art history student at Drew University, little attention was paid to the work of German artists. The focus was always on The Netherlands, France, and Italy.

My first visit to Germany was through an invitation from Rolf Ricke in 1967 to have an exhibition in his gallery, which was then located in Kassel. Being there, I realized immediately how temperamentally close I was to the German and North European sensibility. The art, literature, and culture had a visceral effect on me that was affirming in terms of my own identity.

CH Could you talk more about your time with Rolf Ricke and your experience working abroad?

GK Ricke's help was invaluable in terms of finding studio spaces and helping me to secure the materials that I required. On occasion, he even helped me make the sculptures for our exhibitions. Through Galerie Rolf Ricke came a number of shows including a large-scale exhibition at the Neue Galerie der Stadt Aachen in 1971. Working in Germany took me out of my well-equipped studio situation in New Jersey and forced me to consider new and unfamiliar materials and to face obstacles related to temporary and improvised studio spaces. The challenge of working in a new environment caused my work to develop in new and unexpected directions.

Ricke also introduced me to German artists of my generation and to the Cologne art scene that was so alive and vital.

GK There was an active exchange of ideas at the time between the German artists and the Americans that was very exciting and informative for everyone involved. This open atmosphere lasted for a few years and paralleled the productive dialogue and exchange that was taking place in New York between similarly engaged artists.

CH In the 60s and 70s you were working in Germany with some regularity. Did you ever think about moving there long-term?

GK I did seriously think about it as I had been offered a teaching position at the academy in Braunschweig, but ultimately realized that I couldn't live in Germany on a permanent basis. Whatever complaints I had about the US, I wasn't really prepared for the European lifestyle. The social boundaries and customs may not be immediately evident, but after having spent significant time there I realized that they are considerable. I wouldn't have been able to abide them in order to successfully expatriate. So I was in a bind. The German art world was generally receptive and supportive of my work, so as a young artist I took every available opportunity to work there, even though a permanent move seemed impossible.

CH Can you talk about your residency in Berlin and how this influenced your work?

GK I went to Berlin in 1979 for a one-year fellowship through DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) that provided an apartment, a studio, and a monthly stipend, which allowed me to dedicate time to my work. In this time a shift in my thinking gave rise to what became known as the *Berliner Serie*, these paintings and collages were a radical departure from the painting and sculpture that I had been doing throughout most of the 70s. I found living and working in Berlin provocative and stimulating, it was the ground zero of cold war politics.

GK There was a certain urgency and energy that I was responsive to, perhaps because of the left wing politics that I grew up with.

CH The *Berliner Serie* (1979) was made in Germany and the subsequent works made in the United States are titled *Berlin Series* (1980). The *Berlin Series* paintings have a thick, frosting-like paint application, and the *Berliner Serie* paintings are much flatter and perhaps relate more to the pre-determined shape of the canvas. Could you elaborate on the difference between these works?

GK The availability and limitations of materials account for the difference between the *Berlin Series* and the *Berliner Serie*. I was looking for an alternative to the American acrylic paint that I was familiar with and the conservator at the Nationalgalerie in Berlin suggested I use Caparol-Binder. Following his advice, the Caparol-Binder had to be applied in successive layers to approximate the physicality of a single layer of acrylic that I had been using in New Jersey. Also, the Caparol-Binder needs to be painted in a singular direction. The ordered lines of the *Berliner Serie* canvases were constructed to facilitate this uniform paint application.

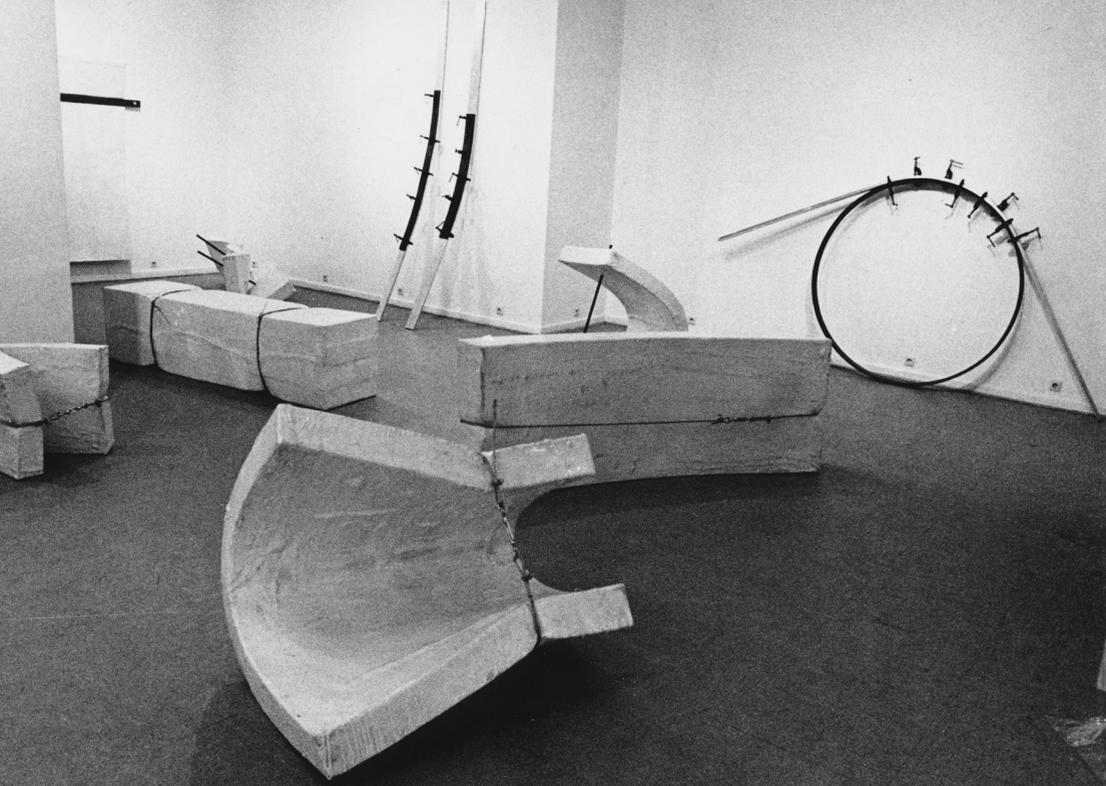
CH How did you determine the shapes of the canvases?

GK I was interested in eliminating any reference to negative space and I spent a considerable amount of energy making stretcher frames that would accommodate the essential elements of the paintings. This was easy enough to do with the paintings, but to accomplish the same effect with the collages I had to weave the objects so that they punctuated the third dimension with cutout paper.

CH You mean that you didn't want to have a picture plane.



Berliner Serie, acrylic on linen, 36 x 66 inches, 1979



Installation View, Galerie Ricke, Cologne, 1969

GK Yes, the canvases are shaped because I wanted to eliminate the picture plane. I was thinking of the tyranny of the format, the rectangle that is always there to be worked with, for, or against.

CH The *Berliner Serie* and *Berlin Series* are dramatically different from your earlier work both formally and conceptually. Could you elaborate on this shift in your practice?

GK Most of my sculpture up to that point had to do with compressing materials, squeezing things towards a center, creating a kind of density, mostly by force, constrained with wire, cable, and bolts. I had been thinking about the physical phenomena of compression and containment, but there were clearly personal and psychological needs that I seemed to be addressing as well. At some moment that I can't really account for, an impulse to work in the other direction emerged that was open, expansive, time-related, and sequential. I became interested in how we are conditioned to read texts and horizontal images from left to right and I started to think about more open landscape situations, narrative situations, works with a horizontal emphasis being drawn out in time as is the case with the *Berlin Series*. And I guess lurking behind it, and it shows up in very oblique ways, is an interest in alchemy and mysticism, the workings of the solar system, the sun moon cycles and things of that sort. There's a poetry in such musings that impacts my work. It seems to me that the *Berlin Series* had an openness that anticipated my subsequent work. Somewhere along the line I thought of a phrase to describe some of my *Gesture Project* works, which is, "the hand seeking the gesture that is the motion of the universe." In a personal way I was seeking something that was more expansive and outside myself.

CH Some of your earliest work is gesture work.

GK There's the big *Box Piece* from 1971. I had just started teaching at Rutgers when I made that piece.



Box Piece, graphite, ink, paper, canvas and wood, variable dimensions, box size: 24 x 33 x 17.5 inches, 1971

CH That's an interesting piece to think about because it has hand-drawn gestures that are each contained by a picture plane, and the drawings themselves are escaping from the box that holds them. The *Gesture Project* works all have a tension between the free-wielding gesture and the format that suppresses them.

GK Some of the *Gesture Project* pieces have an open format with grand sweeping gestures. I think there's an aspect of them that's poetic or romantic. Others approach the drawing format as a trap, the dimensions of the paper being the boundaries of the universe. Years later I came to call these works The *Gesture Project* for want of another name and I continue to find this body of work engaging.

I started this series by thinking about what a drawing could be, and asked myself what is the relationship between the pencil to a given space. I suddenly came to the idea of the picture space as a trap, both formally and metaphorically, which opened a new area of inquiry for me. I made hundreds of works that tried to address the question, in the broadest sense, of what could a drawing be. At the beginning I thought that my approach was formal, investigative, and rational. Looking back, I can see how fraught and psychological it was at the same time. I think all my issues about freedom, constraint, paranoia, social controls, societal controls were lying just beneath the surface in those works.

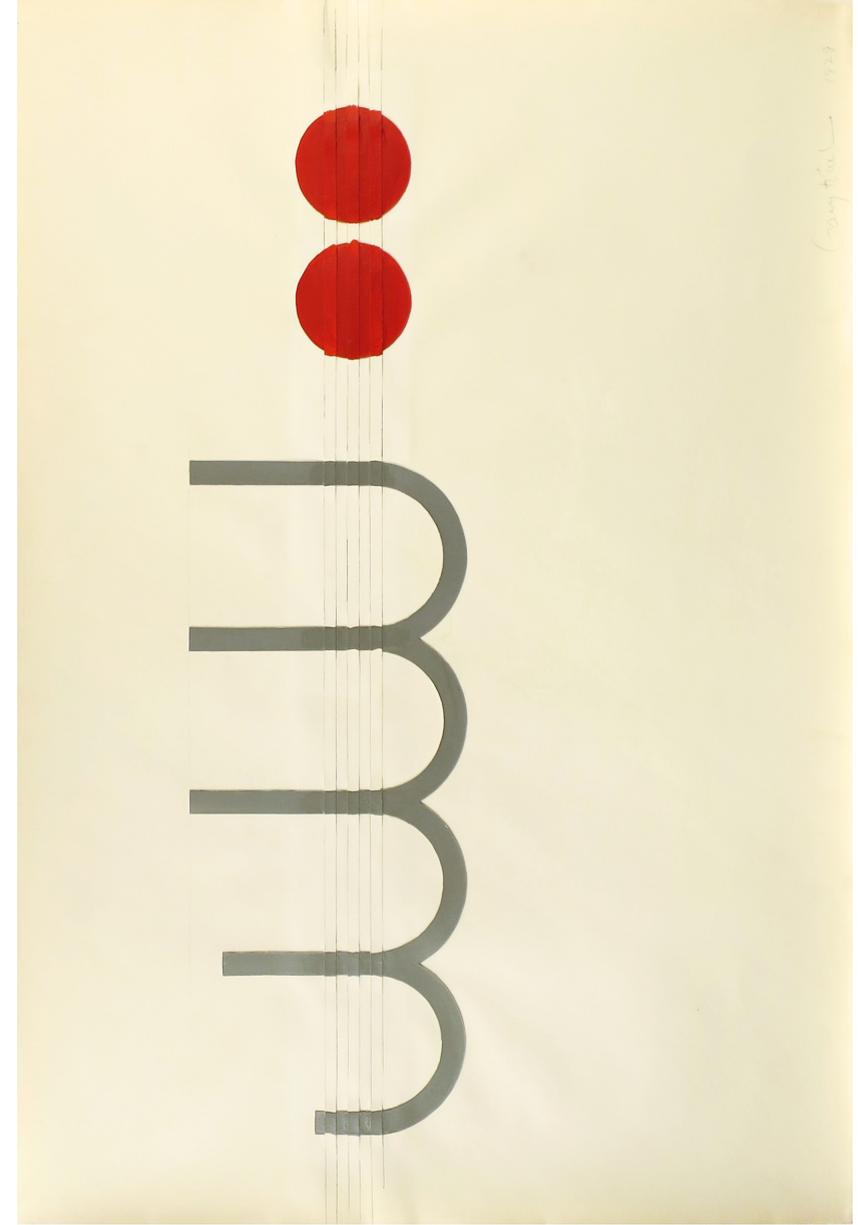
CH Do you want to talk specifically about the silver *Gesture Project* works from 1981 that were made with aluminum paint?

GK I think there is a celebratory aspect to those pieces. The speed and recklessness of the gesture is constrained by the circular stencil that thwarts the centrifugal force that would otherwise send the gesture off into space and infinity. It's like the child who is being reckless in the presence of a parent, confident that he will be saved if the situation were to get out of control.

CH I never thought about the boundaries in your work as being something comforting.

GK Yes, I just thought of them in this way myself, particularly the silver *Gesture Project* works.

Toward the end of my academic career I required my students to read only two things. The first was "The Grand Inquisitor" chapter of *The Brothers Karamazov* in which Christ comes back to Seville and meets with the Bishop, and they have a discussion about freedom on Christ's side and the need for control and direction as viewed by the representative of the church. The other was Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, which I think up to a certain point is brilliant in terms of what freedom we're willing to give up in exchange for the security gained by submitting to the social order. This seems to be the eternal question.



Berliner Serie, tempera and graphite on paper, 30 x 42 inches, 1979