

Speech by Petra von Olschowski at the Opening of the Exhibition *Sabine Reuter – What We Did Not Know*  
Galerie Valentien, Stuttgart, 8 February 2015

– Check against delivery –

Ladies and Gentlemen,

### Looking back

In a catalogue from the late 1980s, Sabine Reuter prefaces her pictures with two Ludwig Wittgenstein quotes. One of them reads: "It is important to imagine a language in which our concept of 'knowledge' does not exist."

Currently, artists are rediscovering Wittgenstein – especially conceptual artists. Broadly speaking, this is because his "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" allows a world of expression beyond language, and not only in philosophical terms. It opens up new spaces. Art becomes an expression of possibility and search, or, as we refer to it today, research.

It is very much in this sense that, towards the end of the 1980s, art scholar and curator Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen stated in his essay *Tendenzen der Gegenwartskunst* (Trends in Contemporary Art), published in the then-popular book *Spielregeln* (Rules of the Game): "The extraordinary thing about art is that it uses a very idiosyncratic way of reflection. An artist's pieces express an attitude towards reality and the world, but they do not put it into words. The method of art perfectly corresponds to its object: art analyses reality by participating in it, or, to put it the other way round: by participating in reality, art analyses reality."

This also applies to Sabine Reuter's works from that time and from the subsequent 15 years, the period covered by this exhibition: from about 1987 to 2002.

The show's beautiful title *What We Did Not Know* – a quote from one of Sabine Reuter's works – opens up a vast and, indeed, poetic field of references rooted in the time in which these pieces were created, but also pointing beyond. Also, this title is immediately affirmed by the pictures themselves, in a very special presentation that is as whole as it is open, with all of its elements seemingly in movement. Recognising and not-knowing wheel around each other. As we will see, contradictions are immanent in this oeuvre.

But let's try and find a starting point on our way to – in the sense of the exhibition's title – what we did not know.

I did not know Sabine Reuter. Unlike Margarete Sander, I don't know how Sabine Reuter talked, how she moved, laughed, thought. I first set foot in her top-floor studio just a few weeks ago.

The light comes from above. And from the North. A clear, unbroken, direct light. Not beautifying anything. Unfinished canvasses sit on the floor, bearing testimony to the struggle involved in arriving at the final

picture. A hotchpotch of photos, newspaper clippings, notes, colours, strange materials, things, found objects and tap handles. Bits and bobs are scattered on the large table and in the shelves and cupboards surrounding it in a kind of messy order that is only comprehensible to the one who created it.

A few facts form the background against which the encounter with the work takes place: born in Stuttgart in 1953, Sabine Reuter first trained as a porcelain painter in Ludwigsburg before moving to Vienna to study both art and music: graphic design master class with Maximilian Melcher and guitar class with Luise Walker. She graduated in both courses with an MA (German Diplom). She then travelled but returned to Stuttgart because, very early on, she found a gallerist there who supported her: Freerk Valentien.

And yet, Vienna was to remain the artistic focus of this multi-talented artist. The music, the theatre, the literature, the philosophy, the art. "One might just be happy a few times a year / in this city, walking across the Kohlmarkt / or the Graben, strolling down / the Singerstrasse in the spring air" writes Thomas Bernhard, one of Sabine Reuter's favourite authors, in his play *Heldenplatz*. I can see the palace in front of me, the Meierei, the Museum of Art History, I can smell the trees in May and I think back to my own short period of studying during a beautiful Vienna spring. You can't simply shake off Vienna.

Eventually, it's the pictures that make me jolt. Because I begin to remember, to recognise the pictures. Where have I seen them? How is it that I, who forgets so many things, suddenly know with absolute clarity: I know these pictures. They are burrowing their way into my mind.

### In front of the pictures

Small explosions. Brown, bubbling puddles. Material reacts with material. Drops form and create streaks. Moisture leaves behind traces. Particles whirr through space. Seemingly randomly. Salt crystals, sand, shellac, plaster, glued-on paper scraps and colours mix as if in some kind of petri dish. Matt, glossy, painterly, linear. Everything is in a process of transformation. Canvas and paper become fields of experimentation, the study becomes a laboratory.

Rulers and graph paper create the impression that something or other could be controlled – or measured. Curves seem to record someone's heartbeat. However, as Sabine Reuter herself noted in one of her pieces on paper, this is actually about resisting any attempt at measuring. At some point, the whole process suddenly stops, a moment freezes. Into a picture?

In his book *Measuring the World*, Daniel Kehlmann has Humboldt, who is trying to measure the world, say that nothing was reliable, not the tables, not the devices, not even the sky. "You must be so precise yourself that the chaos cannot affect you."

Precision as a shield against the menace posed by chaos – that could be one of these images' principles. The pictures are composed naturally, musically, rhythmically; they have incorporated the movement of the

artist's body in front of the more-than-two-metre-large canvas in the form of splashes, lines, blots, painted surfaces, collages, stamps and – time and again – in small black circles that, similar to counterpoints, jump from canvas to canvas, from paper sheet to paper sheet.

In her essay on Sabine Reuter, Julia Lutzeyer states that the picture's elements seem to 'swim' across the surface. That is an apt description. Fields of tension arise, spanning across individual pictures, similar elements appear here and there, with the same powerful effect in both small and large formats. This is shown particularly well in this presentation, which is not arranged chronologically but according to the pictorial rhythm.

Despite all the dynamics in the details, the pictures have an intrinsic clarity. Pure. There is air and space. Despite their vagueness and mysterious poetry, the pictures are determined. They are both questions and statements. Both search and destination. Rules form the frame that allows irregularity.

For brief moments, the outlines of objects and figures seem to emerge from the compositions. Heads appear from painted-over city maps; body parts, organs, but also chairs or stools arise from the ground of the experimental surface. Manifesting. There is a vague resemblance to the more figurative pieces from Sabine Reuter's early work.

When staying in front of the pictures for a longer period of time, one also discovers the skilful way in which the artist uses colours: transparent against opaque, light against dark, but also closed form against open form, line against surface, outline against pulsating interior, drawing against painting.

Some pictures seem to be light and playful, funny, frivolous, even. And then again it becomes powerful and heavy. Many pictures appear to have been created spontaneously, others have been reworked several times until they felt right. Objects, too, for example the moulded tap handles, find their way into the picture. Pop Art sends its regards. But, first and foremost, one would have to mention Fluxus, Beuys, Polke and also Yves Klein as artistic references. Sabine Reuter cites them, just as she cites herself, in a confident and free manner in the context of art around the turn of the millennium.

With a steady foot, Sabine Reuter balances between poles. Her way, as the pictures tell us, is both a dance and a search. In 2005, this way ended abruptly. Unfinished.

What does Thomas Bernhard say in his *Old Masters*?

"Our greatest pleasure, surely, is in fragments, just as we derive the most pleasure from life if we regard it as a fragment, whereas the whole and the complete and perfect are basically abhorrent to us. Only when we are fortunate enough to turn something whole, something complete or indeed perfect into a fragment, only then do we experience a high degree, at times indeed a supreme degree, of pleasure in it."

Despite being whole and finished, Sabine Reuter's work is a fragment, both as oeuvre and as individual picture. That's what gives the pieces their openness and power. And, at the same time, as Schmidt-Wulffen puts it, in each moment, the work expresses a stance towards reality and the world that cannot be captured in simple concepts. And that's why this work touches us today as it did ten or twenty years ago. By looking at it, by reading and questioning it, Sabine Reuter's work is alive.