

# INTERMEDIA

## A Consciousness-based Process

### Hans Breder in conversation with Herman Rapaport

**H**ans Breder is a prolific artist who has worked in virtually all media: drawing, painting, sculpture, installation, photography, performance, and video. He was born in Herford, Germany in 1935 and studied at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Hamburg, Germany from 1959 to 1964 before moving to New York in 1964 with a fellowship of the Studienstiftung des Deutschen Volkes, where he became an assistant to the sculptor George Rickey. In 1968 he founded the Intermedia and Video Art Program at the University of Iowa, which he directed until 2000, and later co-founded the Center for the New Performing Arts there. He retired from the University of Iowa as the F. Wendell Miller Distinguished Professor in 2000, and in 2007 he was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Dortmund.

Breder's work has been shown at the Richard Feigen Gallery in New York, multiple Whitney Biennials, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. He was included in *Painting Beyond the Death of Painting* (1989), the first group exhibition of American Art, at the Kuznetzky Most Exhibition Hall, Moscow. Among the places his work has been collected are the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; the Whitney Museum of American Art; the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the Museum Ostwall, Dortmund, Germany. His most recent show, *Inmixing*, was at White Box Gallery, New York, in 2010. This interview was conducted in January 2010.

*What were the very beginnings of your formation as an artist?*

Between 1953 and 1955, I apprenticed in my late teens with the surrealist artist Woldemar Winkler in Gütersloh, West Germany. What I remember from that experience today is that I was drawing and that, at some point, I had worked myself into what I can only describe as an altered state. When I came out of it, I looked at the drawing and said, this is the best drawing I have ever done—but *I* didn't do it. After that experience, I ran accidentally into an older woman in Gütersloh who had a large collection of Buddhist literature, and when I described the experience of drawing and entering an altered state, she said, "You are talking about a Buddhist

state. Here, take these books.” When I read them, they illuminated and validated my experience.

*Did you have that insight on account of the performativity of a drawing?*

Yes. Once I was aware of this transcendent state, I would try to get there again. I made a practice out of that quest. I learned that I could not make this transcendental awareness happen. This state of consciousness comes to you as a gift. But how does one sustain that kind of experience?

*The issue of consciousness has been a lifelong interest of yours. Can you explain this in the context of your earlier work and how it developed?*

Like most artists of my generation, I embraced the gesture, and at the same time I was inexorably drawn to Eastern philosophy. For the first time, I began to understand the harmony of thought, feeling, and consciousness.

*In the past, you’ve talked to me about your mentor. Who was he and how did he set you on the way toward becoming an artist?*

That’s an important question. As it happens, I had been walking down the hallway every day at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Hamburg, then still West Germany, where I was studying between 1959–64, and felt an energy that I could not explain. One day, I knocked at the door with my portfolio under my arm. Professor Willem Grimm looked through it, smiled, and said, “I am inclined to take you in.” In that moment, I had found my mentor, my spiritual father, who transmitted to me a set of values that continue to guide my way of being in the world. The generosity of this man, his insight, and how easily he could accept my very uneven education at that point, amazes me still.

*Of course, both of you shared the experience of the war and its aftermath.*

Grimm lived through it. I lived through it. His canvases had been burned by the Nazis. And my experience was that of a child. Children look at horror with open eyes. Every experience is a phenomenon. In time, Grimm and I developed an intimate relationship. When I left, when I said goodbye, I was sitting on a trunk with my paintings; I looked up, and this man was crying. I just thought about that today. It’s more emotional now. At that moment I wanted to get away from Germany and from Grimm.

*At that time, what were you interested in?*

I was reading Borges and beginning to understand space in a way I had never understood it before—through Borges, not through art. And at the same time, of course, I was surrounded by constructivism. Former Bauhaus students were teaching in Hamburg at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste. Constructivist works were on display at the Kunsthalle. There I met George Rickey, who wrote a book



Top: Site-specific sculpture. Stainless steel. West Lebanon, New York. 1964. Bottom: *Cube on a Striped Surface*. Plexiglas and aluminum. 1964. Courtesy Hans Breder.



on constructivism. Later when I arrived in New York City, in 1964, I became his assistant for a while.

*We've now heard three things that are very similar. One is that meditation came to you naturally, another is that you had a natural connection with a mentor, and now we have the natural connection with constructivism. That was around you and was intuitively in place.*

Right.

*I want to ask you about constructivism and the relationship to meditation because they seem related.*

Well, we can try. As I said earlier, I made at one point the connection between drawing and meditation. For a while, this was from 1982 to 1986, I did a drawing a day based on a circle. It was a kind of meditation. This four-year drawing event was the exploration of the concept of wholeness or, as Karl Jaspers says, "Every being seems in itself round." I called these drawings *Archetypal Diagram*, which speaks to the concept of thought/non-thought. Relative to this and other works, I face my art with the detachment of an uninvolved spectator. I don't want to puzzle the viewer by expressing obscure emotions, but make my work anonymous, sensitive, and serene.

*Long before that in the 1960s, however, you were making sculptures. What kinds of works you were making and why?*

The central question that motivated me in constructing these sculptural works was the spectator/object relationship. I rejected the form/content unity when I realized that the content was clearly the context of the object. I began to explore chance which is a concept of non-order or non-coherence. The spectator is asked to investigate the object and to share in its creation by cautious new ordering of the elements. His interpretation is then organized in the conscious, non-reflex movements of his hands and becomes a realization of his aesthetic responsiveness. Yet, in the pieces themselves, no profound change has been induced. Keeping their identity, they have acted as catalysts in activating the sensitivity of the spectator. When I showed these at the Richard Feigen Gallery in 1967, Marcel Duchamp came to the opening, shook my hand, and said, "I like your work." An auspicious moment!

*You were making objects, namely, cubes on striped surfaces that seem to have been constructivist invitations to meditation. They are reminiscent of the Fluxus interest in chance because these cubes are supposed to be moved as if they were pieces on a game board.*

Yes, they are not fixed. Actually, my thoughts behind these works are body-related. I'm talking about stillness and about the awareness of potential movement. It is the position of an object within a field. For example, *Cubes on a Striped Surface* (1964) and the *Body/Sculpture* series (1967–73) from that time. Of my work, George Rickey said that I set polished or transparent cubes over mirrors or stripes to mingle virtual with real images, and thus removed the barrier between the real and the looking

glass-world. The virtuality he was discussing was also very relevant to the *Body/Sculpture* series.

*You had moved permanently to New York. How did you experience it at the time? Where did you live? Whom did you meet? What movements did you encounter?*

By complete chance my first New York City apartment was on St. Mark's Place, epicenter of cultural revolution. I never did drugs, but it was wild nonetheless. What impressed me were Andy Warhol's films. He put the camera on a tripod and, of course, that changed our way of looking at the world around us.

*Did you meet Warhol?*

Yes, I met him and many other artists, because at that time the art world was a very small world located at Madison Avenue and 57th Street. Everyone knew each other. I would run into Hans Hoffman in the elevator or bump into Mark Rothko and Ad Reinhardt. Nam June Paik, Hans Haacke, Willoughby Sharp, Jack Smith, and so on were all people I encountered there and took an interest in. I was more or less associated with op art, which was sandwiched in between pop art and conceptual art, which, of course, interested me a lot.

*How did you get to Iowa from New York?*

I knew nothing about the University of Iowa, except that Philip Guston had taught there. I had seen his paintings at the Documenta and seen a photo of Guston with the students in Iowa. That's how I imagined Iowa, so that made an impression on me. It reminded me a little of where I was coming from. I thought it was a very loose art school situation. Probably with Guston it was. But, of course, Guston didn't stay at the university; he produced a couple of good students and went to New York, and you know the rest. At Iowa I was invited to teach an experimental drawing class and I stuck around. This is amazing, when I think about it, but it had to do with a sizable grant from the Rockefeller Foundation (1970–75). I could bring artists to my Intermedia Program whom I already had been talking to. Among them were new artists people didn't know, like Robert Wilson, Nam June Paik, Dennis Oppenheim, Vito Acconci, Elaine Summers, Karen Finley, Hans Haacke, and Allan Kaprow. The students participated with each artist in the making of work, which is where the learning occurred; this was the whole idea of the visiting artist program. A lot of these visitors, not only the students, developed new concepts about intermedia and took that knowledge with them.

*After you got to Iowa, how did you get the intermedia idea?*

I was teaching an experimental drawing class and immediately encouraged the students to get off the page. Any space can be a classroom. One of the students did a piece, which I will always remember. He created a square of salt on the central crosswalk in Iowa City. The cars drove through, eventually over time the square disappeared,



*Body/Sculpture*. Photograph. 1967. Courtesy Hans Breder.

and in the process the cars left tire traces of salt. The square of salt, “Homage to Malevich,” was translated into a time-based event.

At that time, in setting up the Intermedia Program at the University of Iowa, I argued that intermedia makes up an increasingly large segment of contemporary artistic endeavors and that the present state of an artist’s critical and creative competency is limited usually to a specialized area. I maintained that existing programs of the various academic departments are designed for specialist training with little or no provisions for interdisciplinary experience. The purpose of an Intermedia Program would be to create a program of supervised media research to expose people to technical and aesthetic considerations of various arts; to provoke creative work and experimentation; and to stimulate speculative work on a scholarly, theoretical, and aesthetic level.

I argued that the nature of the arts and technologies then, as today, create their own types of interdisciplinary structures, both material and aesthetic, and that the artists involved would respond to this condition—which, in fact, has happened, incidentally. It is by design then that no overall intermedia “style” or philosophy would be created, that intermedia would not essentially be anything in particular. By insisting upon an artistic orientation, rather than an art-oriented program, the individual artist’s special creative insights would be continually stressed and challenged. This approach, by the way, was arrived at independently of what Dick Higgins was thinking and saying. Intermedia is a term and a concept that we both arrived at on our own, probably because the time was right to imagine things from this perspective.

*Tell me a bit about the early days of the Intermedia Program. You had that ability to transfer what you learned from one medium and situation into another. How was that realized in the program?*

By the mid-1970s, I met Stavros Deligiorgis from comparative literature. He began coming to my workshops. He liked the group dynamic and the way I was running a workshop. Quite a few faculty from other disciplines were often present as well. You start talking and you realize that you have a lot in common, particularly comparative literature, anthropology, music, and so on.

*You and I share this idea that all the disciplines are the same thing. And that’s intermedia already. There’s really no difference between all these activities.*

That’s right. Of course, collaborative work became more of an issue because I couldn’t find anything in art that interested me. The university environment with its limitations also opens up new ways of thinking once you step outside of your respective discipline. The environment in which we live always has a profound influence on us, and I made use of the university environment as best I could, which is a creative activity in and of itself. Of course, we were already all over the place. I said to the students, “Now we are not in art school but are existing outside of that framework. However, the problem is that even if we are here, among each other, we still use

approaches that are hard to overcome, because they turn into the very thing we try to escape in terms of the discipline.” So then I said, “Let’s have a summer course at Lake Macbride.” These students, who had started with me, were very clear about how different their position was in relation to the painters, sculptors, etc. Also, I would bring in visitors like Vito Acconci and Elaine Summers, who did *Street Dance*. So, every change in my thinking that mattered at the time was somehow reflected by the visiting artist who came through.

*You were empowering students by bringing them into contact with these people. You were also putting them in the historical moment of the present, so that the work has a historical significance.*

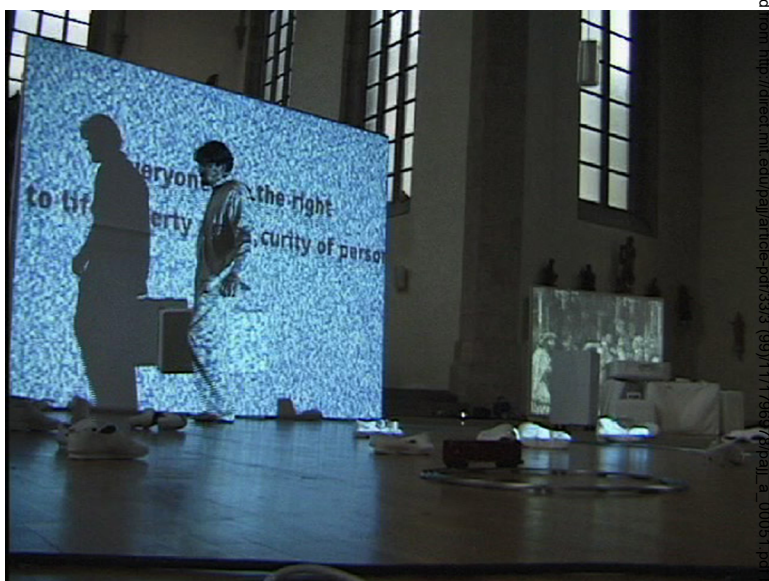
Absolutely, which is why it was so important to bring in outside artists, critics, and writers, for only in that context can students be on the cutting edge of what is historically unfolding in the fine arts. Students have to meet a creative person in the arts and be part of the process of the making. Elaine Summers did film dance in those days; she made a couple of great movies in Iowa City with my students. She preferred my students to the dancers, because they were not ruined yet by ideas of dance. It was really powerful, because this destroyed everything most people believed in. When Robert Wilson came first to Iowa City all the dancers and actors left in protest; they left the theatre because he was “destroying dance, he was destroying theatre.” And then, a few weeks later, they were doing something that was almost similar, but not admitting it, literally stealing our ideas. So it was a constant battle.

After class, there was always a discussion. The discussions would last into the night, into the morning hours. These were the classes that started at 7:30 in the evening and wound up at 4 A.M. at somebody’s house. Also, students were not using the classroom; they were performing at their apartment or whatever site they chose. So we were constantly moving. This was just sort of a natural thing. I had a student in a drawing class. He came one day to class and he brought drawings he had made during a lecture in anthropology, and I said, “Listen, from now on all you have to do for me is go to Al Roberts’s class and draw. This is what I can accept as a drawing project.” I talked to Professor Roberts. “Al, this guy is phenomenal. His best work he is doing in your class, so why don’t we both grade him on the basis of his drawings?” And Al, of course, was totally open to that. It was amazing to see what happens when students can cross disciplines, when faculty members are open to this possibility.

*During this exciting time you were making the Body/Sculptures, the work with models holding mirrors, which was done between 1967 and 1973, sometimes with Ana Mendieta as your model. How did you get from the early work of making mirrored cubes on stripped surfaces to models holding mirrors?*

It was a very straightforward move. It was a way to get away from the commodity-oriented work that these objects still presented.





Top: *Ursonate 1986*.  
 Video installation. 1986.  
 Middle: *Mass in A-Minor  
 for Suitcases*. Site-responsive  
 performance. St. Petri  
 Church, Dortmund,  
 Germany. 2000. Bottom:  
 Video installations.  
 White Box, New York.  
 2009–2010. Left, Tlactalula.  
 Right, Icarus. Courtesy  
 Hans Breder.

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*You were saying that the photographs were documents of these bodyworks. The work is one thing, the photograph is another.*

These were photo documents of ephemeral events. How does an event translate into a photograph? A good example for that is the work of Ana Mendieta, for which I was often the photographer. Nobody, in that case, could reconstruct the original because of the process of abstraction that occurs in the photography.

*By the 1970s, you had begun to make video art. Isn't that right?*

The first video works were video documents made in the 1970s of my intermedia performances. I moved from video documentation to making video works. I was editing on the fly. I would play the video switcher with one hand and the sound mixer with the other hand. *My TV Dictionary* (1986) was done in this performative mode. And why again performative? As we spoke about it before, it lets the unconscious come in. Because I make decisions on the fly that means I can't think about it. And here I am watching and listening at the same time. Later on, in Italy, I did the piece *My Body Sees You* (1992) which was in-camera editing. The whole piece was finished after a walk through a monastery, in 120 degrees, just unbelievable humidity and heat and in an altered state. The title is an issue that is always present in my work. I was thinking already about the body and how the body sees, how the body listens, and how senses take information from the environment around us, and that mind is really something that comes after that. In my piece, *Eclipse*, the movement of the performers is dictated by projected images or patterns on the floor. This discipline imposed from the outside makes movements rigid and deprives them of grace and balance. Natural conditions are reversed and are thus being made aware of.

*In your video you make technology a kind of second nature. You've said in the past that you like the density. What would be meant by the word "dense" in this context?*

That's a good question. It doesn't mean complicated. It has simply something to do with time and how we perceive time. Once you enter this meditative process that we have been talking about time stops, and as most physicists today would say, there is no time, only a series of nows.

*You were layering that material which creates density and the layers break through each other. It's less about the media, you're saying. But some of that '80s work was about broadcast television, stuff taken from film.*

Now all the stuff comes, first from whatever comes to me, and what I call source material. Some of these pieces are really pieces of music but they have one more element which is the visual element. Everything is part of the same score. And it all relates, again, to the notion of intermedia, which I define now as a sensibility, a way of being in and acting upon the world. Intermedia is what happens at borders. Intermedia is liminal and collaborative. Intermedia is a not a merging or a fusion. It

is a break with the past, a paradigm shift in the arts in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Intermedia is a practice, a consciousness-based process, a time-based nomadic enactment. Intermedia follows the law of attraction: a deliberate meeting or a chance “collision” of distinct realms, of a new language, new potentialities. Thus, boundaries are blurred or displaced. The new image/text requires a reorientation in intertextual space/time.

*Speaking of intermedia, you have also done work that could be considered ethnographical.*

During the '80s I conceptualized, articulated, and worked within a new genre of video art for which I coined the term “aesthetic ethnography.” This refers to processes and forms that attempt to illuminate people and cultures in specific historical moments and through an aesthetic rather than a scientific methodology. Aesthetic ethnography is a hybrid intellectual and art form that exists at the margins of video art, anthropology, and cultural studies. At the conceptual level, the pieces within this genre explore the margins between fact and fiction, excavating the subjective and creative dynamic of historical memory. The work centers upon the intersection between individuals and cultures, and focuses not on what happened collectively or individually, but on how what happened has been cast up by individuals, by cultures.

*What makes that work so powerful is that you have integrated it with your meditative approach to video art making, a meditative process that was so strongly embedded in the technological per se, for example, in your homage to Schwitters, Ursonate 1986, in which a dot matrix printer on a box is turned into a sort of musical instrument.*

*Ursonate 1986* is the result of a transference process utilizing computer and video technology to transport the 1932 phonetic poem, *Ursonate* by Kurt Schwitters, from the cultural setting of that period into a contemporary context. In the early part of the century, Dada artists who experienced with phonetic poetry were exploring the concepts of pre-language and pre-consciousness. The title of Schwitters's piece, *Ursonate*, can be translated as “primordial sonata.” In my *Ursonate 1986* video and computer technologies, extensions of the nervous system, are used to parallel and extend Schwitters's attempts to excavate the roots of language and to articulate the primordial. Repetition creates a pattern. In *Ursonate 1986*, for example, as you just said, it gets you into a sort of trance. The concept of this piece then is for the listener to get into a state of non-thinking.

*From what I recall, your video Under a Malicious Sky (1987) marked a new moment in your work that could be called autobiographical in that you were going back to your childhood in Germany during the '30s and '40s.*

This video represented a performative mode in which I used five video sources that were edited spontaneously. In work like this there is no linear thinking but a layering of elements that was done by way of improvisation on a video switcher, something that I played like an instrument. What I wanted was to get into a flow of performativity through which I could tap into the unconscious. Also, I was exploring aesthetic

ethnography, which we were just talking about, in order to retrieve culturally specific images that work upon consciousness as an object for sustained contemplation. In *Under a Malicious Sky* and *Mass in A-Minor for Suitcases* (2000) ethnographic elements from my childhood were retrieved in order to serve as meditative elements for reconstructing a historical moment of impending political maliciousness, one that was part of everyday consciousness during the period.

*You made your Liminal Icon series of paintings during the early 1990s, followed in the late '90s by the Limikone series. In 2000, you mounted Mass in A-Minor for Suitcases in Dortmund, Germany, which, let me add, used one of the Liminal Icons as a projected backdrop. And then after the turn of the century, you went back to the media of photography and video art, something that was exhibited at White Box Gallery in Soho in 2010. Especially impressive in the show is the video piece entitled The Passage (2010), in part because of the intensity of the sound, which you synthesized.*

In *The Passage* we are dealing with the idea of what I call abstract reality. Essentially, what I am aiming for is a dematerialization of content. This is already under way in *Under a Malicious Sky*, but here it is taken much further. First of all, instead of using ready-made sound—for example, music composed and performed by others—I am attempting to develop sound that enters the note, that is microcosmic, as it were, so that I get into the very stuff of material existence in a way that paradoxically dematerializes it. By entering into the microstructure of material things, I achieve the immaterial, because what is that microstructure but what in physics people speak of as ephemeral phenomena that cannot be reduced to mere things. In *The Passage* what you think you see is some sort of grass being blown by the wind, but in fact it is the hair of a woman. What appears to be landscape is really the body in relation to an interplay with light. The dematerialization of the image, the radically microcosmic experience of it, is both abstract and real: it is reality abstracted.

This abstraction is the context for something autobiographical that has to do with my childhood in Germany, so that here again I am going over the sort of thing I was attempting in *Under a Malicious Sky* and *Mass in A-Minor for Suitcases*, but that instead of disassembling and collaging I am now doing something far more radical in terms of getting into and thereby entering matter—the stuff that is existence. It is here that I begin to ask if subjectivity is built into the universe. If you pay attention to the video, you will know the answer to such a question.

*In recent years you have established a foundation and archive at the University of Dortmund where you received an honorary doctorate in 2007. Can you explain what has been undertaken there?*

The intermedia archive (1968–2000) is housed in the Museum Ostwall in Dortmund and sponsored by TU (Technische Universität) Dortmund in Germany. The archive is conceived as a repository of critically significant intermedia works as well as an active dynamic center of intermedial thought and activity. It supports and implements artistic collaborations, symposia, lectures, and international exchange projects.

A primary goal of the archive is to make historical and intermedia works available to diverse public and academic audiences through open access and special programs.

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