

Pressinformation

The George Cup Research Center

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A. C. Greenspan about George Cup & Steve Elliott

A Reconstruction

There are artists who suddenly disappear from the field of vision of the art world, although they had an exemplary significance for their contemporaries. The artist-couple George Cup & Steve Elliott represent one of those cases. Only a small group of art collectors and friends, among whom I count myself, has preserved their memory during these last twenty years.

George Cup was convicted in 1986 for the alleged murder of his romantic and professional partner Steve Elliott and was imprisoned in a New York penitentiary. As a consequence, the oeuvre of these two artists, who numbered among the founders of American Minimal Art, was almost completely "erased." In recent years, none of us believed that their oeuvre would experience a belated recognition some twenty-two years after this grievous error of justice. It is above all due to the initiative of the George Cup Research Center, established in 2006 with offices in New York and Hannover, that the works of the two artists may now be seen in Germany for the first time since their last exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York in 1985.

In a dramatic manner, George Cup's state of health deteriorated so extremely during the preparations for the exhibition that in July 2008, two months before the opening in Wolfsburg and barely a year after his name was cleared and he was released from prison, he died at the age of seventy-eight.

The family of George Cup, who was born in 1930 under the name of Georg Anton Kupsch in Heßlingen, the city which today is Wolfsburg, immigrated in 1936 to the United States and settled in New York City. Steve Elliott, born in 1933 in Nordhorn under the name Stefan Berliott, grew up at only a few miles' distance from George Cup, on the other side of the Hudson River in New Jersey. The two met in 1954 at the Art Students League in New York, where Steve Elliott was studying. At this point in time, Cup was still pursuing his ambition of becoming an architect, but he definitively abandoned these plans in 1960. Designs dating from 1956 for a house shaped in the form of a cube and covered in black slate slabs, however, already provide indications of his subsequent artistic development.

As is typical for many artistic couples, George Cup & Steve Elliott were connected by an ambivalent relationship. George Cup had an uncontrollable temper and was known for his quarrelsomeness, resistance to compromise, and aggressivity. Robert Rauschenberg even described his imprisonment as the logical consequence of his hot-tempered character.[1] And I myself increasingly came to view Cup as unpredictable. One time in an exhibition, he even spit and urinated on works that displeased him; during disputes he knocked glasses from the hands of gallerists, or he stomped to pieces his own works which had already been sold. This sort of behavior may have a positive effect on the image of some artists, but not with Cup and Elliott. According to Betty Parsons, "...everyone took offense at his arrogance,"[2] and Andy Warhol stated repeatedly, "He's an asshole," and added, "an asshole, but a handsome one." [3]

Steve Elliott, on the other hand, appeared to be the exact opposite of the eccentric personality of George Cup. He was introverted and always courteous when I visited him in his studio, where he could be found day and night, whereas George to a large extent made his appearance alone or in the company of other men in New York's gay community.

Although the works almost without exception were signed by George, many considered Steve to be the actual creative and dynamic force of the couple. André Emmerich described their relationship in 1974 "...as a fragile give-and-take that had its ups and downs. George needed Steve for inner support and Steve needed George for external representation." [4] Even if the assignment of creatorship proves to be problematic in individual cases, a comparison of the autonomous early works of Cup and Elliott with the oeuvre of the artist-couple and

the late works of Cup which were created in prison demonstrates that two independent artists had found in their mutual connection a "critical mass" which is perceptible even today as a source of inspiration.

At the end of the nineteen-seventies, George Cup began for a while to shift his chief place of residence to Paris. The reason for these stays in Paris was the relationship to an "official Frenchy," as he was affectionately called by Cup. All the way down to today, it remains unclear what individual was hidden behind this designation. Even the George Cup Research Center remains discreet and speaks only of a "respected personality from public life in France." [5] The foundation established in 2006 by this unknown Frenchman has made available on loan a majority of the works which are to be seen at the Kunstverein Wolfsburg: "The French Collection." Because the collection was stored in a cellar in the Parisian arrondissement du Louvre and was exposed to humidity, extensive restoration work was necessary in the run-up to the exhibition.

"The French affair" was initially no more a burden upon the relationship between Elliott and Cup than were the other affairs which Cup openly conducted during his thirty-two-year relationship with Elliott, and with which the names of John Cage, Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg have been linked. At the end of 1985, however, Steve Elliott took what had become an inevitable step and moved out of their common New York apartment. The separation thrust Cup completely out of his unstable equilibrium. Attempts to clarify the situation ended with Cup's violent intrusion into the new apartment of Elliott, who answered with a restraining order. The situation escalated in the spring of 1986: Cup, who could no longer control his aggressions, was the subject of two complaints for bodily injury after fights in New York clubs. It was only possible to avert judicial processes through the payment of damages for pain and suffering. These two events were of decisive importance for Cup's indictment and conviction when, three months later, Steve Elliott was found dead in his New York apartment. The media and popular opinion were unanimous in their belief that George Cup had killed his partner. Thus even before the trial began, the New York Post ran the headline "Cup Kills Elliott!" [6] Eyewitnesses from the neighboring building claim to have seen Cup at the scene of the crime on the night in question. His extensively documented proclivity for violence along with further pieces of evidence led to a lifelong conviction, which he began to serve in November 1986 in a New York penitentiary. During the course of his imprisonment, there began an almost systematic "erasure" of the artistic works by Cup and Elliott. Sculptures were disassembled and disappeared; works were removed from the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Guggenheim Museum, and today they cannot even be found in the inventory lists. Up to the founding of the George Cup Research Center, it almost seemed as if the artist-couple had never existed. The reasons for this radical sequence of events are puzzling and even today the matter has not been cleared up, nor are any written statements by responsible figures to be found. [7] Even when surprisingly, at the beginning of 2007, George Cup was able to prove his innocence with regard to the death of Steve Elliott and, with no attention being paid by the media, was released from prison as a free man, numerous questions remained unanswered. Why had Cup not commented for twenty years concerning the events that took place in 1986? Why did he continue to remain silent after his exoneration? For whatever reasons he possibly held himself responsible for the death of his partner, here as well he never gave us an answer.

In the summer of 2007, the George Cup Research Center contacted the artist and prepared, in cooperation with the two exhibition houses in Wolfsburg and Nordhorn, Cup's and Elliott's respective places of birth, a first inventory-taking of those works which, in addition to those from the "French Collection," were still available. Already in 1991 a storage site in Brooklyn had been dismantled and its works destroyed. During the course of its investigations, the Research Center became aware of my collection consisting of forty-two works, most of which are being presented for the first time in the Städtische Galerie Nordhorn. The models and photographs of objects and installations from this compilation were taken as the basis for the realization of the exhibitions in Germany, which were conceived in close cooperation with Cup. The large-format installation SQUARE-ROUND # 4, dating from 1973, has been reconstructed for the Städtische Galerie Nordhorn according to drawings and designs. Ten square wooden panels set up one behind the other present to view a succession of ten squares cut out of the panels, each varying by a few degrees so that in a certain sense there is created a squaring of the circle, which is gradated from the black of the first panel past various shades of gray to the white of the final panel. This installation is characteristic of Cup's and Elliott's works from these years. Reduced geometrical surfaces in various sizes which nonetheless are always related to human dimensions subdivide, individually or serially, the entire space, floor or wall. In spite of rigorous structural clarity and monochromatic coloration, there arises a complex interplay among open and closed volumes, internal and external forms,

object, space and viewer. In addition to the space-encompassing installations, various wall objects combined with fluorescent tubes and dating from the late nineteen-sixties are presented, as well as paintings from 1956 and 1962 which are integrated into the three-dimensional objects. They already point towards the development of a seminal new vocabulary of reduced, three-dimensional bodies, a formal language which is characteristic of the late works of Cup and Elliott. The static forms of the oil paintings were set in motion in later years with the help of animated films, so that the interplay of movement and music, the tradition of Oskar Fischinger, Hans Richter and other representatives of the early abstract film, was taken up and reinterpreted. The connection between form and sound consists of twenty-six animated films which were created between 1974 and 1979 on 8 mm film and which, because of their bad condition, have been digitally remastered for the exhibition. In the experimental film *Loop # 25* (1972), the camera zooms towards a photograph which Cup is holding in his hands and which, for its part, shows Cup with a photograph in his hands. For five minutes, the camera zooms in a straight line through the sites depicted on various photographs. Further animation films and kinetic objects, as well as artist's books and the video installation *BLACK BOX # 2* from 1979 are distributed between the two exhibition houses and offer a comprehensive view of the oeuvre of George Cup & Steve Elliott.

These first two exhibitions of the German-American representatives of Minimal Art, George Cup & Steve Elliott, since their disappearance from the field of vision of the art world hopefully represent only the beginning of a new evaluation of their work. The future will show whether this rediscovery of George Cup & Steve Elliott will remove the shroud of silence from them once and for all and will assign to them their well-earned status in the history of art.

[1] Robert Rauschenberg on 12.05.1986 in a letter to the author.

[2] Betty Parsons on 05.10.1979 in a letter to the author

[3] Andy Warhol on 03.24.1979 in a letter to the author.

[4] André Emmerich in a letter to the author on 01.12.1974.

[5] The George Cup Research Center on 03.28. 2007 in a letter to the author.

[6] New York Post from 05.14.1986, p.1

[7] The George Cup Research Center on 06.11.2007 in a letter to the author.

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