

Jürgen Raap

**“Let it be”**

### **Notes on a Rainer Junghanns project**

“Zu neuen Ufern lockt ein neuer Tag” (“A new day<sup>1</sup> beckons to another shore”) Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832)

“Es wird ein Gehen sein, ein großes, weit über die Grenzen, die sie uns ziehen” (“There will be<sup>2</sup> a going, a grand one, far beyond the limits they set us”) Paul Celan (1920-1970)

Ever since the Beatles released their twelfth and final album “Let it be” in May 1970 and the film by the same name appeared in cinemas, the English saying “Let it be” or “Don’t worry about it” has become a common catch-cry in other languages too. Rainer Junghanns chose “Let it be” in the sense of “Letting go” as the title and underlying thread of an artistic travel project that begins in November 2014 and takes him via Thailand to lectures at the university and Goethe-Institut in Wellington, New Zealand and then back via Thailand again to neighbouring countries like Laos, Myanmar (formerly known as Burma), Singapore and Hong Kong.

Along the way an artistic work will emerge every day, usually in the form of a pen and paper drawing, as a deliberate nod to the historic roots of the visual arts. After all, line drawings in charcoal or chalk are known to be the oldest form of art in history and, as for almost every other visual artist, drawing marked the start of sculptor and multimedia exponent Rainer Junghanns’ artistic career. It is also possible that these diary-like works will include other material such as photos, video footage, poems or other texts. Potential publication forms include blog-like web postings, subsequent documentation in a catalogue, or sculptural works like the set of drawers exhibited as a “Light Box Archive” (2013) or “Khun Load” (Düsseldorf, Tbilisi/Tiflis 2014).

With “Let it be”, Rainer Junghanns is consciously picking up the threads of earlier projects, many of which like “Trans and Form” (2001-2004) or “Neue Tischgemeinschaften” (New Table Companions) (2003-2006) were designed to be participatory and communicative, or carried out as travel projects, like “Global Move” (2005/2006) or under the working title “GMT+ - Greenwich Meantime+” (2007, 2009 and 2010).

In the case of “Trans and Form”, the invited participants contributed to a “Culinary Archive” in the form of a wine bottle or stories about a particular grape variety that had personal significance or brought back special memories to the storyteller. Even at that point, Rainer Junghanns was already demonstrating his desire to abandon traditional forms of sculpture. To him as an artist, it has never been solely about producing static objects but rather about exploring the process of social encounter and communicative exchange in constantly changing situations. “Let it be” radicalises that preoccupation with process by adding an element of nomadic mobility.

Back in 2001 when he first completed the “Trans and Form” project, Rainer Junghanns abandoned his Düsseldorf studio, because as an artist he no longer believed in the “ritual of the studio”, where the artist locks himself away like a hermit guarding his workroom secrets. Instead, he prefers to celebrate “Let it be” as a “ritual of movement in time and space”. The act of “journeying” is a source of inspiration and at the same time only ever a temporary production space.

The “Neue Tischgemeinschaften” (New Table Companions) that Junghanns gathered together in

2003-2006 in the form of a table sculpture included, amongst other things, the “time traveller” Kurt Creischer. He tells the story of a painting dated “1916” featuring a church in Belarus presumably painted by a German soldier during the First World War. Some 90 years later, the “time traveller” took himself off to that remote location in order to see for himself what the church looks like today.

A trip, (really a journey through time), forms the basis of an oral history here. This method of interviewing eye witnesses has become a recognised form of historical research and includes the recording of oral stories from the subjective vantage point of personal experience, as a means of complementing the traditional emphasis on fact finding, whereby historians trawl through official documents and other archive material as objective empirical records. The fact that there are sometimes gaps in memories, events recalled in a distorted way or occasionally even elements of fiction built in or myths created is something that is accepted as part of the process. But in the case of the epic tales supposedly handed down by legendary knights of the round-table, medieval kings and keepers of the Grail, it ultimately came down to the literary suspense rather than the mere recital of facts.

In the current age, an artistic-poetic project like “Let it be” could equally end up being an adventure tale or a picaresque novel like Grimmelhausen’s “Simplicius Simplicissimus” (1668/69), which traces the adventures of a vagrant on a rollercoaster ride through many different places during the turbulent Thirty Years’ War. It certainly cannot be ruled out from the start that “Let it be” will take on the character of such a coming-of-age novel, although Junghanns as a concept artist always focuses in his projects on developing certain structures or subdividing his projects. That element of structure is essential in the sense that it forms the basis for the images, objects and films – particularly when it comes to their subsequent presentation in exhibitions – enabling a specific aesthetic to emerge and later be communicated.

The structuring process occurs as part of the preparation of media and sculptural elements of these projects, when items are sequenced in a certain order, a certain timeframe or in specific juxtaposition with one another.

In 2005 Rainer Junghanns asked seven residents of the South African townships near Cape Town to imagine what the architecture of the future might look like (“New Places”). He combined their seven statements with a video film documenting a seven-minute car ride through a township settlement.

In his “Global Move” initiative (2005/2006), he gathered together photos and videos from overland journeys he made all over the world. For instance, Junghanns took a car trip in New York from the legendary “Chelsea Hotel”, which was once home to many artists and writers, to the piers and back again. All day long he repeated that seven to ten-minute trip every three hours. From each of the eight videos that emerged, he selected one minute of footage for a subsequent artistic presentation. The artist then applied the same systematic approach in Dubai, where he photographed the changing light reflections on the glass façade of a bank building every three hours. Here too, the three-hourly intervals added up to a full day of photography, and thus traced a full rotation of the earth. In this instance, the (earth’s) movement in these static images is seen in the form of reflections on the glass façade as the light changes throughout the day.

“Khun Load” (2014) was the outcome of a three-month stay in Thailand involving daily visits to the Buddhist monastery Watphadarabhirom. The sculpture of wooden drawers consists of 91 compartments. Each one contains three images or photos: 91 aphorisms from the temple garden, 91 temple images and 91 photos of the surrounding area (“environment” images). As in “Trans and Form”, where participants contributed a wine bottle and in “New Places” where South African interviewees gave their statements in front of the camera, the structured content of “Khun Load”

was combined with a participatory element or exchange. People who visited the exhibition in Tiflis were able to write a personal comment and place it in one of the drawers. In return, they were allowed to remove the environment photo from that drawer and take it home with them.

What provides the structure in the case of “Let it be” is the daily artistic work that emerges, or rather the selection of a single work from the drawings and photographs produced over a single day to represent that particular day. As mentioned earlier, intervals of time always play a big role in the work of Junghanns, although not in the classic sense of the “daily workload” or number of tasks casual labourers in the Middle Ages were expected to perform between sunrise and sunset, but as the number of works in relation to the length of the journey. Compared to some of his earlier, highly organised and well-resourced projects, a more sparing approach was taken to “Let it be”. Paradoxically, it is that very element of omission that lends structure to the project.

The reference to the literary genre of the coming-of-age novel is quite legitimate in the case of this travel project, because the journey to the Thai monastery in the (European) spring of 2014 and the continuation of it in “Let it be” in the autumn of 2014 share some of the features of a pilgrimage. A pilgrim’s journey is always associated with an exercise in humility – in the Middle Ages pilgrims had to travel on foot and overnight in simple hostels or monasteries, just as modern pilgrims do on the Way of St Jacob to Santiago de Compostella. The idea is that only self-denial can lead to purification and a truly spiritual experience. The three basic principles of Buddhism, to think good things, do good deeds and only allow good thoughts to enter your consciousness, or the insights that can be gained from an educational tour cannot simply be conveyed *ex cathedra* as abstract academic knowledge, for they have to be experienced first-hand and – even in the internet age – on site, as part of an actual, physical journey.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, with his 1786-88 “Italian Journey”, was considered to be the pioneer of such educational journeys in the Humanist era, although his was actually more of an escape, because at the time the Weimar Minister was suffering from a form of burn-out syndrome, as we would call it today, which had the effect of temporarily stifling his literary creativity. He hoped that an encounter with classical Italy would give him new intellectual and artistic inspiration. Strangely enough, Goethe took off in secrecy on a stagecoach, even travelling under a false name in the early stages of his journey to avoid recognition. What is more, in Italy he was only interested in the traditions of antiquity; he was quite indifferent to Renaissance and Baroque architecture and equally uninterested in the political events of the time. By the time Goethe returned to Weimar two years later, he had thousands of drawings and watercolours in his luggage, as well as a diary that he did not publish until he was much older, in 1829.

While in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century it was the ancient world that gave archaeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann and literary giant Goethe their aesthetic and educational reference points, these days in the age of globalisation, it is the Asian cultures that attract artists like Rainer Junghanns. The monastery, as a place of temporary refuge, provides pilgrims with a home in both a local and an emotional sense, and that applies as much to medieval Roman pilgrims as it does to today’s travellers to Thai monasteries. Irrespective of which culture or religion is involved, such journeys are always associated with ritual cleansing, and the holy waters are often healing waters too, promising medicinal relief, like the holy water of Lourdes, which is still a popular destination for pilgrims. In the German language, there is not only a phonetic but also an etymological link between holy (“heilig”) and healing (“heilend”) and between “sanctus” and “sanitary”. The secular equivalent to this is the healing water of spa resorts and it is ironic that, back in 1780-1800, journeys to “take the cure” began to become popular at the same time as the first educational journeys were being made in the age of Early Romanticism.

Artist Daniel Spoerri siphoned off healing water from 177 Brittany fountains and springs into little

bottles and in 1981 exhibited them in a six-door wooden shrine as a “Bretonische Hausapotheke” (“Brittany Household Medicine Cabinet”). Together with Marie-Louise von Plessen, Spoerri also co-authored a book about the healing rituals and popular beliefs associated with the restorative or prophetic powers of such waters. That book, incidentally, was never sold in any book stores – it could only be obtained in exchange for another book.

While the GMT+ travel projects of Rainer Junghanns tended to be research expeditions, where the measurement of specific positions and notation of the relevant dates point to the scientific-technical impetus behind the artistic messages, “Let it be” seems to pick up on traditions from literary history, where myths and their origins, patterns of human yearning and aspects of emancipation play a role. There are many epic tales and novels where the hero of the story has to undergo an endless series of tests (of character or strength) along the way. The outward (travel) adventure and inward or intellectual development of the protagonist always go hand in hand with each other in such cases.

Whenever the restless were drawn to pastures new in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they were advised to go West, to the USA, and from there even further West to become pioneers of the new frontier. In a sense, the clichéd image of the Western movie, where the lonely cowboy rides off into the sunset, has a certain symbolic significance in terms of its cultural orientation. However, the Beat Generation literature of the 1950s ushered in a paradigm change. Jack Kerouac’s novels “On the Road” (1951/57) and “The Dharma Bums” (1958), though stylistically akin to the spontaneous prose genre, nevertheless convey a certain Neo-romanticism in their attitude to life. They also mark a tendency of the beatniks and later the hippies to look towards East, to the Asian cultures and their respective religions. The first heyday of this movement was reached in 1968 when the Beatles, mentioned at the start of this article, chose to spend time in India.

Coincidentally, external circumstances (a lecture tour to New Zealand) have Rainer Junghanns heading off in the same direction – to the East – but to lands of the rising rather than the setting sun.

1 Philip Wayne 1949 translation of Faust (Penguin edition 1969)

2 Wieland Hoban 2010 translation <http://www.new-books-in-german.com/english/781/272/272/129002/design1.html>