

Broadway, at the corner of Georgenstraße

Between Schwabing and Manhattan: In the thirties, the young Bavarian painter Hans Hofmann moved to New York. He inspired an entire generation of great American artists. Caro Jost from Munich searches for the traces of his time.

Written by Jochen Arntz

New York/Munich - A window overlooking Broadway in the middle of Manhattan, the panes are large and old, the wooden frames look friable in some places. Traffic, cars, screaming people and hard braking vans are clearly hearable up in the old apartment. The entire city. Neil Diamond once called this "Beautiful Noise". And it is still such a beautiful noise.

Downstairs, outside the window, are the colors. The yellow cabs of New York, almost a cliché, the red brick facades and the traffic lights at the crossroads, quickly changing lights. But inside, in the tiny room, there is so much black, not dark but clear black. The floor, the clothes of the people that are walking up and down the old atelier talking about art.

All of this is not by a coincidence since a number of the most famous black paintings in art history were created in this room. These few square meters on the third floor of a small house at Broadway were the atelier of Ad Reinhardt, one of the great painters of the American modernism. He was one of the people around Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning and of course Jackson Pollock.

Reinhardt died here in August 1967, convulsing with a heart attack on the floor of the atelier, he stopped breathing. He was not even in his mid-fifties. But still today, more than four decades after his death, he is part of this city. A few blocks north in the MoMA, the Museum of Modern Art, his large black painting is displayed in a cool expressionistic exhibition. And what is happening on this spring day in the old atelier of Ad Reinhardt is also due to this painting.

Two women standing on the black floor are talking to each other. One of them came here from Munich, a 9-hours flight in the economy class full of excited anticipation of this encounter, but also full of nervousness. The other woman came here from Philadelphia, only a 3-hours drive accompanied by her daughter, but it felt like an eternity. And it cost her quite an effort.

The woman from Philadelphia is Rita Reinhardt, the widow of Ad, she has not been in this atelier in New York since the sixties. Now she is back and all she says at first is: "So, here I am."

At the end, his path of life will cross the path of life of Jimi Hendrix.

Maybe she had never more climbed up these stairs, if Caro Jost, the woman from Munich, had not asked her so strongly to do so. Jost is an artist; she has an atelier in Schwabing and saw Ad Reinhardt's large black painting "Abstract Painting" for the first time more than twenty years ago at a MoMA exhibition. At this very moment, although she was not completely aware of it at that time, her search for traces began, leading her again and again to New York and also to a small street in her neighborhood in Schwabing.

The Georgenstraße in Munich - this much can be said already - will cross Broadway in this story and a Bavarian painter will come across Ad Reinhardt and Jimi Hendrix.

Rita Reinhardt is wearing elegant black trousers, a black T-shirt and a grey cardigan. Caro Jost chose a black female suit that morning. One could say that it is almost a miracle that Rita Reinhardt finally came here. She is old, beautiful and slim and leans serenely against a wooden stool. She does not even pay attention to the cameraman that Caro Jost brought with her for her film project, a film about the abstract expressionists of New York of the forties, fifties and sixties. At the beginning, they had still been poor, cooking tomato soup by mixing ketchup and hot water in the Waldorf cafeteria on 6th avenue. "That is where I met Ad", says Rita Reinhardt. The morning light of Broadway now shines on her face as well as a silent laughter that extends from the corner of her eyes to her cheeks and to the tip of her slim chin. Then the laughter becomes louder when she talks about this Bavarian painter who spoke a very, very funny English, but was for all of them, for Reinhardt, Rothko, de Kooning and Pollock, in those years the "Elder Statesman" of the scene, an inspiring person and teacher from Germany, from Bavaria.

His name was Hans Hofmann, a strong, communicative man. "He was truly admired", says Rita Reinhardt.

Caro Jost will later explain that she had to think of a stone and an iron hook fixed in the floor at the very moment when Rita Reinhardt spoke about admiration. That is nearly everything of Hans Hofmann, the teacher, and his art school in Schwabing that remained in Munich. Just before she came to New York, Caro Jost had once again been to the Georgenstraße to look at the last traces of the old house where the art school of Hans Hofmann had once been. This one rough stone on the driveway to the yard and the floor hook of an iron gate. All the rest is a newly constructed building. One glance, one second only and the memory is gone.

Hofmann came to the USA in the early thirties and finally stayed there. He knew that what he regarded as art was no longer regarded as art in Germany. And he felt that young painters waited for him in New York. Rita Reinhardt had to leave Germany, Braunschweig, at that time too. She does not speak a lot about that time. She only says that when she visited her home country a few years ago, she was irritated to see that it was now possible to talk to the Germans there. "They are people like myself." That surprised her.

Caro Jost has once already kneeled down in front of the old house on Broadway, the atelier of Ad Reinhardt. This has not necessarily to be considered as deference. It is rather her technique of making art. She calls this "streetprints". She captures the structure of the streets on canvas, the rough surface of the world's streets. These imprints, snapshots, are both concrete and abstract. They are stocked neatly sorted in the cellar of her atelier in Schwabing, the testimonials of the paths of the big cities and in this case also the paths of art. That is what put her on the track.

During a dinner, not long before his death, he talked about the encounter with Picasso.

"I have always liked the streets of New York", she says. But many people say that and make nothing out of it. But she rediscovered Hofmann, Reinhardt and the expressionists' places. And above all: People who remember.

"There was this art critic, Irving Sandler, who always wanted to buy a painting from my husband Ad. But he had no money. Ad asked him then: Which amount really hurts you? Irving told him the amount that would already hurt him and that was the price Ad sold the painting for."

Rita Reinhardt has to laugh because the price was probably ridiculous after all. That is how this time was like. "When Ad was painting here, he hung the sugar for coffee and tea in plastic bags on the wall so that the mice sitting all over the floor could not reach it."

At that time the art market was still more art than market. Reinhardt, Rothko, Pollock and de Kooning painted pictures, no investment projects. "In the forties, I hardly knew one artist in New York who woke up in the morning having a hangover", said Elaine de Kooning, the painter's wife, once. They had not yet had money for Whisky. But this should soon be different.

Rita Reinhardt leans against the stool in the atelier at Broadway and says: "I stopped going to the bars, to the Cedar Tavern, when my daughter Anna was born." She survived the storm of these ecstatic years, just as Irving Sandler, who bought a small black picture from Ad Reinhardt back then.

Sandler lives just around the corner of the atelier at Broadway, he never acted as a bohemian and he soon started to write down his memories. Today, he is 85 years old and lives in an apartment house and welcomes his guests in the lobby, being in high spirits and cheerful. "Shoot", he says when Caro Jost and her cameraman stand in front of him. Ask your questions. He answers them via detours.

He remembers the wild ladies of New York, such as Ruth Kligman - "she was the nightmare of every wife". Kligman was with the great Jackson Pollock, the very drunken Jackson Pollock, when he died in a car accident. Kligman, a beautiful woman, survived and stayed in her humble atelier in the Village for the next decades. She painted, posed, loved artists and never gave up on her view of New York. She died more than a year ago. Her atelier is untouched, that is what her heirs want. Her toothbrush and her make-up sticks are still in her bathroom. There is a photograph of her and Jackson Pollock on the wall. A summer picture of almost happy times.

Irving Sandler, the man who knows all about these people and their lives, sits in the lobby of his high rise and looks gently around. Somewhere in the city, in a bank vault, as safe as possible, he stored the old painting from Ad Reinhardt; today it is Sandler's life assurance, maybe a supplementary pension, in case he will need it once. But this is unlikely. He always lived solidly and he did benefit from knowing everyone. It is needless to say that he also knew Hans Hofmann, the painter from Munich, who made a new start here, when the young America suddenly had so much more culture than the old Europe that had become barbaric. A refugee.

Irving Sandler remembers this old phrase by Hofmann, that brought everything up: "I lost my German and I have never learned English." That is how the man from the Georgenstraße saw things when his life crossed Broadway. When he was old and became famous, already being 64, Peggy Guggenheim staged his first New Yorker exhibition.

Sandler says that Hofmann always said "nicker". That is what they understood back then, when the Bavarian said "nicht wahr". "He influenced the entire scene", says Sandler. He knows that some of Hofmann's paintings are now being displayed again in the MoMA. These strong, drawn and pressed geometrical forms that are still so unpredictable. "A few months before he died in 1966, he invited me for dinner", says Sandler. "Hofmann told me about his early years in Paris and about Picasso, whom he had met." Hofmann assessed his life, painted once again his picture of Europe that he had brought to America. A modern picture.

But that is not the only thing that Hofmann left in New York, the memories of Irving Sandler, of Rita Reinhardt and the works in the MoMA.

Sandler made a short pause, to then talk about the art school at 8th Street, again only a few blocks from here. In New York, everything is - funnily enough - just around the corner, just as the old art school of a German who had influenced so many artists. It still exists, or rather the house where it once was does. A three-floor building with the greyest of all grey plasters, with curtained windows and a facade that is ugly to the core. But the house is famous, just the way it is. Only not because of Hofmann, the fewest know about that, but because of Jimi Hendrix, the Rolling Stones, Patti Smith, AC/DC, David Bowie, Christina Aguilera. And Herbert Grönemeyer.

On the 8th street, where Hofmann taught, Jimi Hendrix later had his recording studio. And this studio still exists, the "Electric Lady Studios". Famous musicians still record their albums here or have their songs mixed. This is basically fine, but not for Caro Jost.

She found a lot during her search for traces in New York, even an old atelier of Mark Rothko, where some of his most important paintings were created and where deck boards are today still full of red color; she also knows exactly where Hans Hofmann did his teaching in the house on 8th street. On the third floor in the back.

But she never had the chance to enter this house because the manager of the recording studio watches over his musicians not being disturbed. That is why Caro Jost always met with polite refusals when she asked the manager if she could take a look at the room in the back of the third floor. She thus stood again and again in front of this house and when flying back to Munich she had to acknowledge to herself that she had again not seen the place where the Bavarian painter Hofmann had laid the trail to the abstract expressionism in America and where the way from Georgenstraße led to.

She brought a piece of memory back to where he started - to the old Europe.

On that day things are different however. A moment ago she was still standing at the corner of the street where the Waldorf cafeteria had once been and where the artists had made tomato soup. She was still able to hear Rita Reinhardt's words that she met her later husband Ad at this very corner, in the cafeteria.

And now Caro Jost once again walks up the street a few meters to the Electric Lady Studios. Suddenly the door is open. A young man with a guitar case keeps it open. "Thank you", says Jost and walks inside, up to the third floor, right into Hofmann's room.

What she sees is probably the best disappointment that one can imagine. Nothing is left of Hofmann. The room has become sort of a temple, a quiet chamber of rock music. There are brown leather sofas on a carpet, electric guitars leaning against them. Old tour posters of the Stones and a Hendrix poster are hanging on the walls. On the shelf stands the platinum record for Back in Black by AC/DC. The album was recorded here in the studio. It seems that the room on the third floor, Hofmann's old classroom, is a good place for art. There is no need to believe in feng shui to see that. "Now", says Caro Jost, "now, I have seen it." Then one of the studio managers turns up. Yes, he knows the history of the house. "But this is no public museum."

Outside on the street, just next door in the bookstore Barnes & Noble, historic picture books are displayed in the shop window. "The Disappearing Face of New York".

When Caro Jost arrives back in Munich a few days later, driving through the Georgenstraße to her gallery, passing the stone and the iron hook, that left over of Hofmann's school in Munich, she has a tiny small piece of wood in her coat pocket. A piece of Broadway, wood from the floor of Ad Reinhardt's atelier. A piece of America that is now where Hans Hofmann once started off with his art. In Munich.