The Ideas, Identity and Art of Daniel Spoerri

Contingencies and Encounters of an 'Artistic Animator'

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Vernon Series in Art

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To God Almighty,
the great Problem-Solver

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Introduction
"*This Spoerri?!*"

By Barbara Räderscheidt, 2017

When Daniel Spoerri came to New York in the early 1960s, he was introduced to another guest at a party as "*Mr. Spoerri.*" This other guest held his emptied glass with its foot against the wall and asked "*This Spoerri?!*" This anecdote demonstrates that Daniel Spoerri had quickly become well-known beyond the borders of France since his invention of "snare-pictures" in 1959. To create such works, Spoerri glued the remnants of a table setting—in accidental (dis)order after some breakfast or dinner—onto a horizontal surface, tilted it 180 degrees and hung it on the wall as a picture. They became his trademark. To be so typecast could not have pleased such a restive, multifaceted man as Daniel Spoerri. Already in 1967 he opted for a "hiatus" and retreated with his domestic partner Kichka Baticheff to a little-known Greek island. "*I didn't want to keep gluing dirty plates onto tables for the rest of my life,*" he later explained. During their nine month sojourn on that isle of Symi, he laid the groundwork for his subsequent artistic decisions: Restaurant Spoerri, Eat Art and ethno-syncretic objects.

The name "Spoerri" remains a synonym to this day for his "snare-pictures," sometimes referred to by their untranslated French name *tableaux-pièges* in English or German as well. They make an obligatory appearance in almost every Spoerri exhibition. He continues to create them, but most often as "*faux-tableaux-pièges.*" Daniel Spoerri calls them "faux" because they deviate from the requirement to arise from a real meal in all its randomness. They are instead arrangements of tableware specifically selected by the artist. With these *faux tableaux pièges* Spoerri quotes himself; sometimes these are "portraits" of his friends, who request or commission a snare-picture.

Daniel Spoerri's artistic creativity seems to follow a logical regularity which unfurls almost inevitably. He has contributed to this impression himself. Between 1961 and 1963, he completed a synoptic view of his artistic inventions and projects: the journal for concrete poetry *material, Edition MAT, snare-pictures, Brevet de Garantie, Détrompe l'oeil, Dylaby, Dorotheanum, Wortfallen* and others.[1] He analyzed these groups of works in terms of "picture" and as a "play"—he was still very close to the theatre and his work as a dramatic advisor, at the time—and formulated open-ended questions about them. This is more than self-assurance; it is the attempt of a man who reflects

on his actions and attempts to systematize them. He wants to make clear to himself what he is doing.

The internal coherence does not appear forced. Each arises from the other organically. It is thus completely understandable that his having to flee Romania engendered in him great inner turmoil. This finds expression in his frantic dancing, which he has called a type of exorcism. It seems almost natural that the exile, the displaced person, nailed down his turf by fixing in place a piece of reality, a table with remnants of a just-consumed breakfast. It is logical that he proceeded away from the "snare-picture," i.e., from the set table into the kitchen. On Symi, he wrote a "gastronomical diary" and upon returning to Germany, opened a restaurant in Düsseldorf. Everything appears conclusive — but it all could have gone in a completely different direction. (Daniel Spoerri: "*I could have become anything and everything.*")

Spoerri's (pre-) occupation with cooking and food does not further the refinement of cuisine such as would a 3-star kitchen; it is above all an examination of the elements of nutrition and of life. What interests Daniel Spoerri (even today) can be termed "gastrosophy." In 1969, he found a term for the artistic treatment of these themes: Eat Art. This marked only the beginning of his artistic biography, one that continues today. Many further discoveries, inventions, events, books, and so on have followed. His restlessness still reigns, as does his curiosity.

Based on her extensive, detailed research and her intensive examination of Daniel Spoerri's creative work, Leda Cempellin demonstrates that there is much more to be discovered than just his "snare-pictures." This is a meritorious contribution to the literature in English on this artist. The author considers his cooperation with other artists to be a significant feature of his artistic personality and underscores his "animatory" capabilities.

Spoerri prefers to call himself a "catalyst," an ingredient that sets artistic processes in motion. Collaborative projects (including *Dylaby, Edition MAT)* were thus comparable to chemical reactions; both occur when the "right ingredients" come in contact. In this context, Daniel Spoerri applied a concept from physics: the principle of communicating vessels. He thereby describes the mechanism in artistic exchange that can function across great distances. An artistic idea can be "in the air" and be implemented by various people in various locations without justifiably being considered plagiarism.

"*The best thing about me is my friends*," Daniel Spoerri stated again and again. It became an oft-quoted phrase until Spoerri inverted it and considered: "*Maybe the opposite is true as well, and* I *am the best thing about my friends*." He repeatedly created a climate (perceived as a "communicating vessel") and brought projects into being that called for the contributions of

other artists, such as *Edition MAT*. In 1970, he founded the *Eat Art Galerie* above *Restaurant Spoerri* and organized exhibits of his friends, for which those artists[2] created edible works of art. The *Rezeptbibliotek* (*Library of Recipe Books)* followed in 1984 (and concluded in 1989). It is a collection of ten portfolios, each containing ten graphics by ten artists-illustrating recipes for the preparation of "blood," "lungs," "heart," "fat,"–"testicles" and others—selected and written out by hand by Spoerri.

The principle of enriching an idea through the involvement of others was also a substantial element in Daniel Spoerri's teaching. One of the many interesting theses in Leda Cempellin's book is her understanding of the artist's teaching as a tutorial in the telling of stories or as encouragement to track down and collect stories. Spoerri's own talent at telling tales is indisputable and his interest in anecdotes and stories is not only attested to by his book *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*. Spoerri let his students at the Kunstakademie München and Kunsthochschule Köln elaborate on a theme (for example the history of the city of Cologne). Such an inquiry can be a multi-headed beast, requiring that a much greater abundance of stories and objects be brought to light, more than one man can root out on his own. [3]

The principle of spreading an idea is inherent in "Hic Terminus Haeret – Il Giardino di Daniel Spoerri," the foundation established in 1997. The sculpture park currently hosts 113 works by Daniel Spoerri and 53 (!) of his friends, among them well-known artists (Arman, Jean Tinguely) and lesser-known names (Birgit Neumann, Jule Kühn). Being a very private, sentimental compilation, the "garden" was once labeled Daniel Spoerri's poetry album. The importance that Spoerri accords his friends (Roland Topor, Eva Aeppli, André Thomkins, Jean Tinguely) to whom he has erected monuments in the garden is tangible, concrete. Yet it is not primarily this "we-feeling," this *esprit de corps*, that has spurred Spoerri on. I see competition (for example, with Jean Tinguely, five years his senior), his "*I'll show them*" wish, as an even more central impetus for Spoerri's creative output. Add to this his urge to research and the joy he derives from experimenting.

Daniel Spoerri repeatedly referred to his "rootlessness" and his doubts as the "engine" of his art. Examples thereof are legion. Spoerri uses artistic means to make us aware of our prejudices and customs. The snare-pictures serve as early examples of his stance: gravity is suspended and we are forced to turn our backs on the usual perspective (that which normally lies flat suddenly hangs, inverted 180 degrees, on the wall). Eat Art likewise calls cultural conventions into question. With his Eat Art banquets, Spoerri laid bare how our sense of sight affects our sense of taste. If we have a bowl of ice cream in front of us, and are expecting something sweet, but are then forced to conclude that it is in fact dyed mashed potatoes and that the chocolate sauce is

gravy, our enjoyment of the dish is dampened. The subversion or reversal of expectations is one of Spoerri's preferred devices.

When something awakens Daniel Spoerri's interest, he often uses the German word "*kurios*." Add to this its other meaning in English, inquisitiveness. Both connotations together summarize Spoerri's outlook on life: he is curious about the curious; the quirky, the outlandish draw his attention. When such curiosity pairs with serendipity, works such as the charming story of the "Idols of Prillwitz" emerge. Daniel Spoerri saw depictions of "antiquities of religious services" of a Slavic ethnic group called "the Obotrites" in a book from the 18th century. The figures depicted—having the heads of lions and wearing birds reminiscent of small ducks as a headdress—amused him greatly. It also awakened Spoerri's doubts: these seemingly dadaesque figures surely could not be creations of the twelfth century, as the book asserted! Spoerri began to search one summer and after a few weeks found the small bronze figures that had served as models for the copper engravings in the bowels of a museum. They had long been considered authentic ancient Slavic relics, even by experts, and had been in great demand. In the meantime, they had been exposed as "fakes" or, more properly expressed, "attributions" crafted by a family of goldsmiths from Prillwitz who were hungry for business.

Daniel Spoerri was not surprised that his hunch had been justified. He was, however, disappointed that the figures were much smaller than he had expected. Shortly thereafter, he crafted his own "Prillwitz Idols," adopting some stylistic devices from the clever entrepreneurial Brothers Sponholz of Prillwitz. He left the vents in the bronze and even added more. The castings were to appear rough and unwrought. A hue called "rust" served him as patina. The sculptures of a series are all somewhat varied, some with more vents, some with fewer. Some had an added offcut that the artist had seen lying around the foundry. "*Why would I want to make twelve identical bronze figures*?" asked Spoerri. "*The work should be fun for me as well.*" No wonder that this artist dislikes being typecast with a single pictorial invention, snare-pictures. It is therefore gratifying, that Leda Cempellin hereby endeavors to introduce him to the English-speaking world in all of his versatility.

Barbara Räderscheidt, 2017

(Translation by Jason Owens)

Chapter 1

From theater to the visual arts: Spoerri's debut into the art world through the *Edition MAT*[1]

Introduction: individual and collective identities

Daniel Spoerri conceived the *Edition MAT* in 1959 as an anthology of multiples in sculpture, with the theme of real or perceptual movement; subsequent editions were published in 1964 and 1965. The *Edition MAT* project marked the passage from Spoerri's beginnings in dance, theater, and poetry toward his debut into the art world through the *tableaux-pièges* (or *snare-pictures*), which gained worldwide notoriety. This chapter aims to make visible the links between those non-visual creative areas of Spoerri's early career and the progressive incorporation of diverse artistic forms—such as Dadaism, Op Art, Nouveau Réalisme, and Fluxus—within an innovative editorial-visual form of collaboration, all elements contributing to Spoerri's unique artistic identity. Indeed, a close analysis Marcel Duchamp's role in the *Edition MAT* and the series *31 Variations on a Meal: Eaten By…* a few years later, reveals a milestone in our understanding of the challenge to the notion of artistic authorship that occurred in late modernism, when experimental structures of artistic collaborations started to proliferate across Europe. In its own peculiar collaborative format, the *Edition MAT* represents a synthesis of an era and a catalyst for a new vision that combined multiplicity and movement within the increasingly social dimension of art in late modernism.

Spoerri did not start as a visual artist; in fact, he most likely did not even have this idea in mind. He began his restless artistic endeavors through the worlds of dance, theater, and finally in experimental poetry. Slowly but surely, he was forming his artistic identity by embracing the two opposite poles of individual expression and collaborative practices. Spoerri knew and understood that the performance of the leading dancer is enhanced by the work of all the other dancers, something evident in his work. His leading vision for the *Edition MAT* integrated his own interest toward exploring the possible ramifications of the idea of movement with the individual visions of the participating artists. His *tableaux-pièges* are assemblages of objects viewed as relics of relations between people sharing a meal together. In Eat Art, Spoerri invited the artists to provide their individual responses to the theme of food, and

sometimes he himself staged banquets as ready-mades to pay homage to his artistic acquaintances. For the *Musée Sentimental,* Spoerri collaborated with Marie-Louise von Plessen, who provided the necessary art-historical component at integration of his poetic storytelling. All the sculptures in the Giardino bear the mark of his friendships developed throughout his long career, echoing the nostalgia of good times past.

There is not a single artistic venture in which Spoerri acted completely alone. He had an extraordinary ability to sense his time, to be in the right place at the right moment, and to find the correct person (or people) to team with for a collaborative vision greater than his own. Still, each work carried a distinctive step of his oeuvre's overall evolution. A visit to the Spoerri Archives at the Swiss National Library in Bern reveals he often reflected and took notes on the evolution of his work. These collaborative practices always had an impact on future work, leading to an extremely coherent path. Spoerri traveled regularly and moved every few years: many of his groundbreaking ideas emerged from the creative synergy he was able to stir up as soon as he moved in a new place. It is no wonder that, as soon as he became aware of the art world, he took a keen interest in artists who explored the theme of movement.

It is also noteworthy to mention that Spoerri's early formative years—the mid-fifties—were a time in which the modes of communication were changing: people and goods moved around with increasing ease, while immigration waves extended relationships through the postal service. Ray Johnson, who is attributed the foundation of Mail Art, demonstrated one of the most salient and successful examples that at-distance collaboration between artists was possible. Though the notion of at-distance collaboration appears very natural to us through email and social media, it is the result of major lifestyle changes several decades prior. Johnson realized the groundbreaking awareness that it is possible to be connected and work together, no matter the geographical location or distance.

The art world was also changing: preceded by the early century avant-Gardes, late-modern artists progressively embraced collaborative practices, often involving other disciplines, in which collaboration was already a more consolidated practice. In 1956 the ICA Independent Group curated the exhibition *This is Tomorrow* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London as an interdisciplinary effort requiring teams of different specialists working on themes. A photo taken by Richard Hamilton shows Lawrence Alloway in front of Spoerri's contribution to *Three Methods of Being Creative*—a mechanical system devised by Spoerri to introduce chance and selection in reading through movable cylinders presented in 1960 at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London (Fig. 1.5)— and reveals how Spoerri was very aware of the British Pop Art's collaborative spirit.

By late 1959, *Equipo 57* experimented with a model of long-distance collaboration, as its members were dislocated between Córdoba, Madrid, and Paris.[2] In 1963, the French Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV), founded three years earlier, presented their *Labyrinth* at the Paris Biennial as a collaborative effort from a group that assumed the configuration of an équipe, despite fluctuating membership and dislocation between France, Argentina, and Spain[3]. In Italy, the gallery Azimut, founded in Milan by Piero Manzoni and Enrico Castellani, became an international link through the exhibition *La Nuova Concezione Artistica* (The New Artistic Concept). This exhibition brought together members of the Gruppo N, whose members were investigating the theme of movement; the Gruppo T, who were interested in creating interactive environments; the members of the German Zero movement; and Rauschenberg and Johns from the US[4]. This was the climate when Spoerri entered the art world.

Spoerri took notice of the surrounding artistic climate and brought together many of these groups through his *Edition MAT* of 1959-1964-1965 and the 1961 exhibition *Rörelse i konsten*. Before detailing Spoerri's debut into the art world, it is necessary to take a closer look at his earlier contributions to dance, theater, and concrete poetry; these activities have left an indelible mark on the artist throughout his long and productive career.

A restless journey prior to sculpture: dance and theater

Spoerri developed his particular approach to the idea of multiples and movement through acquaintance with artists who shared a similar interest in the art world, including Duchamp, Tinguely, and the Op and Kinetic artists. He also worked in collaboration with Fluxus artists, whose scope is still largely underestimated. This notion was already rooted in his personal nomadic lifestyle and lack of roots, as well as in his earlier experiences in the world of dance, theater, and experimental poetry. While most (if not all) the publications dedicated to Spoerri report his earlier professional experiences outside of the studio arts, so far I have yet to find studies on the artist that deepened the analysis of the connections between these early experiences outsides of the visual arts and the subsequent development of the dialectics—namely stasis and movement, object and action, death and life, real and theatrical, and individual vision and collaborative attitude—that we can observe throughout all phases of Spoerri's oeuvre. The emphasis of the *Edition MAT* on movement and the precocious inclusion of the viewer in the artistic act can only be understood in light of the solid multidisciplinary formation of the editor, Spoerri, and of his attitude of building relations within a nomadic lifestyle.

Indeed, from a strictly biographical standpoint, Spoerri's interest in movement parallels his lack of roots: Spoerri was born in 1930 as Daniel Isaac Feinstein in Galati, Romania. When Spoerri was twelve years old, his father was killed by Nazis; he emigrated with his mother and siblings to Switzerland afterward. There he took the name of his adoptive uncle Theofil Spoerri, changing into Daniel Spoerri. Throughout his life, he has retained both family name and citizenship from Switzerland, a land that speaks many languages. While the artist never went back to his native Romania, he recognized the issue of finding his own place as a major source of artistic inspiration. Later in life, he confided to Giancarlo Politi, founder of *Flash Art Magazine*, that his childhood was characterized by lack of both physical territory and deeper answers about life and faith: "*I was a Romanian Jew, evangelical in an orthodox country, whose father was dead, without being certain that he was really dead.*"[5] I argue that some of Spoerri's extraordinary artistic outcomes that interrogate myths, religions, and common beliefs, from the *Heilrituale* and the *Musée Sentimental* in the seventies to the *Prillwitz Idols* in recent years (Chapters 5 and 6), reflect what I would define as a sense of cultural and religious agnosticism deeply rooted in his childhood experiences. Knowing Spoerri's father was made prisoner makes the speculation about his death absolutely plausible, but how can we rule out the doubt that he might have managed to escape, perhaps under a false identity? How does a child elaborate the assumed death of his own father, when he has not actually seen the body?[6] Both the great storytelling skills and the insidious doubts about faith that accompany the entirety of Spoerri's oeuvre seem to me as having been originated in his early painful memories. Though tragic and painful, these experiences sparked the constantly curious and inquisitive mind during his growth into an artist.

From the professional standpoint, Spoerri became interested in movement as development in space through his own formative exposure to dance, theater, and experimental poetry. Around the same period, he was becoming acquainted with a generation of artists who, in the middle of the century, were exploring real or optical movement in their own work. In fact in 1949, while living in Zurich, Spoerri made two acquaintances that became very important in his early formative years: dancer and choreographer Max Terpis, and assemblage sculptor Jean Tinguely.

Terpis was a restless intellectual, whose interests have manifested in dancing, choreography, and finally applied psychology. Spoerri, in his autobiography, recalls awakening after a wild night at the Trester Club only to find a slip of paper in his pocket. On the paper was a drawing of a face and arrows pointing up and down, warning him of the need to find his own center. Max Terpis, the dancer he spoke to the evening before, had left that little sheet in his

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