

**Marion Rasche (née Schmidt)**  
*born in Spremberg on September 12, 1944*

## The Woman Who Made Things Possible

By Annegret Richter

As in many people's lives, chance often leads people to the places where they will take on important missions. For film club director Marion Rasche, her interest in animation was sparked in the mid-1970s, by a program of films by director Otto Sacher, the co-founder of the DEFA Studio for Animation Films. This initial spark led her to the Animation Studio in Dresden, where she worked as an advisor to well-known animation film directors, such as Kurt Weiler and Otto Sacher, for many years. There, with her interest in painting and experimental forms, she also supported freelance artists, who otherwise would not have had access to the means of production—that is, to the equipment needed to work on their own films. In her position as artistic director, she had leeway but also the duty to comply with cultural-political constraints. Surely not an easy balancing act.

Rasche's father was a soldier in transit; he later became an architect, while her mother was a secretary at the Schwarze Pumpe Power Station. She grew up an only child and was often at home alone; she began to paint and design fabric patterns when she was young. After studying philosophy and theater studies in Berlin, Rasche initially worked as a dramaturg at the DEFA Studio for Animation Films from 1976 to 1980. Although she could work closely with directors, some of whom were on the same artistic wavelength as she, she was concurrently displeased that her dramaturgical proposals were not accepted. In despair over this, she once even had her favorite director, Kurt Weiler, remove her from the credits for the film *Die Geschichte vom Kalif Storch* (1983, *The Tale of the Caliph Stork*). Many years later, he confessed to her that he had gone back to the film and re-edited it.

But it took a few more years before Rasche dared make the leap to directing her own films. She made her first, short directorial foray with a trailer for the GDR's National Festival for Documentary and Short Films in Neubrandenburg, titled *Sieben Rechte für den Zuschauer* (1980, *Seven Rights of a Viewer*, co-directed by Peter Mißbach). Rasche wrote the screenplay, while Mißbach drew the pictures and animated the figures. An unexpected success, this two-minute animation then screened at many international festivals.

In 1981, Rasche became chief dramaturg at the Animation Studio, and later also took over the role of artistic director. In this capacity, she was responsible not only for script development, but also for visual design. This allowed her to both explore her interest in painting and invite freelance artists to participate in collaborations. As Dresden painter Helge Leiberg remembers it:

Marion Rasche did her job rather unconventionally. She obviously wanted to break down the old structures and lead the studio into more artistically contemporary times. But perhaps she also wanted to raise the international standing of [GDR] animated film production and make it more competitive. To this end, she began to hire visual artists who were interested in animated film for individual productions. These included Andreas Dress, quite often Lutz Dammbeck, and me. She gave us great freedom in our creations. For example, I was able to choose the music for my film *Fridolin, der Schmetterling* (*Fridolin, the Butterfly*); I was the director and designer of the film and actively participated in the music, alongside friends who were free jazz musicians. Marion Rasche was thus an important "enabler" in Dresden in the early 1980s. Her engagement cannot be

overstated because, in essence, the hardliners were still calling the shots. For artists who were interested in moving pictures in conjunction with painting, this was a great opportunity to work with professional tools, in addition to Super-8mm film, which was not available anywhere else. Besides, you also got a decent honorarium.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1988, Marion Rasche decided to give up her leadership position. It quickly became apparent that she neither could, nor wanted to return to working as a dramaturg. She therefore announced her intention to begin directing, in order to finally incorporate her interest in painting. For her first film, the cutout animation *Der lange Weg* (1989, *The Long Way*)—based on a text by Friedrich Wolf, “Die Geschichte von Pit Pikus, dem Specht, und der Möwe Leila” (“The Story of Woodpecker Pit Pikus and Seagull Leila”)—she worked with the experimental painter Andreas Dress, who designed the background and characters for the film.

In the animated film *Reisen ist schön* (1990, *Nice to Travel*), Rasche felt her limitations as an animation film director. While working with the illustrators, she became painfully aware that she had hardly any practical experience. And yet, Sascha Anderson—the son of her colleague Monika Krauße-Anderson—had an idea for a film that had a lot of potential, including politically, and that had been acquired by the studio at her insistence. (This was before Anderson was exposed as a Stasi informer.) In the film, a cute little animal gets on a bus, in which all passengers look the same, and gets passed around. When the animal finally gets off, it looks just like everyone else. By the time the film had its approval screening, Rasche herself no longer found her film convincing. Her idols—including [the Polish director and animator] Piotr Dumala, the painter and animation film director Caroline Leaf, and the Quay Brothers—receded into the distance.

Things were different with *Hans im Glück* (1990, *Hans in Luck*), which she still considers to be a well-made film today. Yet, this was precisely the film for which she had few expectations. She had been assigned to the studio’s department of cutout/silhouette animation when the offer arrived. The studio produced the first commissions for [the West German] ARD and ZDF television stations after the Wall fell. *Hans in Luck*, a cooperative project of ZDF and Progress Film-Verleih, was to be equally suitable for cinemas and television. Rasche felt the silhouette film genre was not for her; she considered whether she was in a position to refuse the film, given the general difficulty of getting work after the fall of the Wall. Instead, she decided on a different aesthetic: she designed the characters rough, the landscapes sparingly, with minimalistic backgrounds. Because of this, the gold nugget shone in all its glory.

In 1991, when it became clear that time was limited for the DEFA Animation Studio, Rasche accepted two documentary commissions for the [former GDR’s] Deutscher Fernsehfunk (DFF), which was also in decline. One was about a pastor couple, *...dass sie laufen und nicht müde werden* (...*They Will Walk and Not Get Tired*), the other about the painter and private gallerist Johannes Kühl from Dresden-Neustadt, *Ein starker war ich nie, ein mutiger vielleicht*, (*I Was Never a Strong Man, but Maybe a Brave One*). She considered the production conditions to be unreasonable: completion after only two days of shooting and three days of editing.

For Marion Rasche, the closure of the DEFA Studios also marked the beginning of her discovering herself as a director. She switched completely from animation to documentary. In her works she was henceforth able to combine her passion for painting and her long-standing friendships and connections with artists such as Lutz Dambeck—who, under her supervision, had managed to make experimental films like

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<sup>1</sup> Helge Leiberg, August 2018

*Einmart* (1980) and *Die Entdeckung* (1982, *The Discovery*) despite all obstacles. As one of her first documentary films, she shot *Ohne Phantansie stirbt der Mensch* (1990, *Without Imagination People Die*) about the artist Hermann Naumann from the Dresden-Loschwitz Künstlerhaus. This film resulted in further inquiries from ARD—more precisely the newly-founded regional TV station MDR. Thus, in 1992 she shot *Vor allem aber bin ich Nomade – A.R. Penck* (*But Above All I'm a Nomad – A.R. Penck*), a film about the painter and the first exhibition he put on back in his hometown of Dresden after leaving for West Germany. In *Des Bürgers Traumfabrik – Hollywood in Dresden* (1992, *The People's Dream Factory – Hollywood in Dresden*), she recounts the story of another dazzling Dresden personality, Thomas Bürger. During GDR times, Bürger went to America then, after the fall of the Wall, returned home rich; he opened the Hollywood Discotheque on property that had belonged to the Stasi, and was later shot by his business partner. Portraits of artists, such as *Georg Baselitz trifft Georg Kern* (1999, *Georg Baselitz Meets Georg Kern*), followed.

In 2012, Marion Rasche fulfilled a dream by curating an exhibition that combined her biographical threads and predilections. *Ausflug zum Film – Malerei, Graphik und DEFA Filmbilder* (*An Excursion to Film – Painting, Graphic Art, and DEFA Film Images*) opened in Pirna, southeast of Dresden, in 2012. It included works by Andreas Dress, Lutz Dammbeck, Achim Freyer, Helge Leiberg, Maja Nagel, Gerd Mackensen, Ulrich Lindner, Gudrun Trendafilov, and Strawalde—those in whose presence had always quickened her artistically and as a supporter of the arts.

Today, Marion Rasche continues to work as a freelance documentary filmmaker.

—Translated by Hasret Eleby

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