

Hans Breder, Who Broke Artistic Boundaries, Dies at 81

By [William Grimes](#)

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An undated portrait of Hans Breder. Credit...Chris Coretsopoulos

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[Hans Breder](#), a German-born artist whose interest in straddling the boundaries between disciplines led him to create the Intermedia Program, the first of its kind, at the University of Iowa in 1968, died on June 18 in Iowa City. He was 81.

His wife, Barbara Welch Breder, said that the cause was complications of ischemic colitis.

Mr. Breder's minimalist sculptures were starting to attract attention in New York when his friend Ulfert Wilke, the director of the University of Iowa Museum of Art, recommended him for a faculty position at the university. Mr. Breder accepted, and began teaching an experimental drawing course in 1966.

Friends threw up their hands, warning him that he was leaving the center of the artistic universe for a cultural desert. He blithely replied, “I will bring New York to Iowa.”

He did. Increasingly drawn to conceptual art and the radical political performance art being practiced by the Viennese Actionists, he asked permission to create a program that would embrace video and performance art and encourage students to move back and forth across artistic frontiers — in general, to throw off all creative constraint.

Image



“Chair Dance,” a 1970 gelatin silver print. Credit...Hans Breder/Danziger Gallery

“My program conceived of intermedia not as an interdisciplinary fusing of different fields into one, but as a constant collision of concepts and disciplines,” he told Artforum magazine in 2012.

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The program proved to be an incubator for both students and established artists, whom Mr. Breder invited to teach and work. Robert Wilson, one of the first in a long list of visiting artists, developed his mostly silent drama [“Deafman Glance”](#) (1970) at Iowa. Other visitors included Vito Acconci, Karen Finley, Hans Haacke and Allan Kaprow. ([Mr. Acconci died in April.](#))

Several of the program’s students went on to enjoy celebrated careers, notably Charles Ray and Ana Mendieta. Mr. Breder had a 10-year romantic relationship with Ms. Mendieta, the subject of the “Ventosa” series of photographs that he took on their trips to Mexico.

Under his influence, Ms. Mendieta developed an arresting style of what she called body performances. Her career was cut short when, in 1985, [she fell to her death](#) from the

high-rise apartment she shared with her husband, the sculptor Carl Andre. (Mr. Andre was charged with pushing her but was [acquitted](#) in a 1988 trial.)



From the series, “Body/Sculptures” (1969-1973).Credit...Hans Breder/Danziger Gallery

Hans Dieter Breder was born on Oct. 20, 1935 in Herford, Germany, in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia. His father, Johannes, a railroad worker, died when he was 3, and he was brought up by his mother, the former Hedwig Hoener.

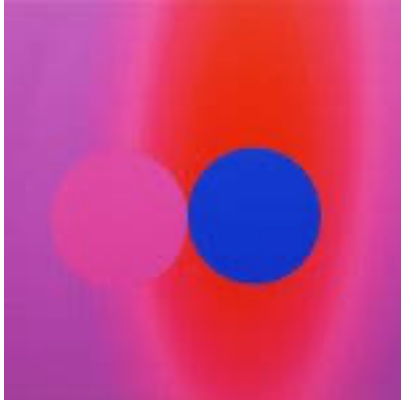
After studying with the Surrealist Woldemar Winkler in his late teens, Mr. Breder enrolled in the [University of Fine Arts](#) in Hamburg, graduating in 1964.

On a foreign study grant he traveled to New York, where he worked as an assistant to the kinetic sculptor [George Rickey](#). His early work — polished metal forms or plastic cubes placed over mirrors or stripes, mingling virtual and real images — attracted the attention of the gallerist Richard Feigen, who organized a solo show of his work in 1967 in Manhattan.

“Marcel Duchamp came to the opening, shook my hand, and said, ‘I like your work,’” Mr. Breder told PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art in 2011. “An auspicious moment!”

[Artistically restless](#), Mr. Breder began branching out. In the conceptual series “Ordered by Telephone” (1969), he called in specifications to an industrial fabricator, who assembled Plexiglas sheets into sculptures that he delivered to the Feigen gallery in Chicago without showing them to the artist.

In “Body/Sculptures,” a series from the early 1970s, Mr. Breder photographed nude models holding mirror-like steel plates that transformed their legs and torsos into a biomorphic tangle.



Hans Breder translated images from the eyes' receptors for "Opsis" (2014).Credit...Hans Breder/Ethan Cohen Gallery

In his recent "Opsis" series, Mr. Breder worked with a neuro-ophthalmologist and a scientific imaging specialist to translate information received by the eye's photoreceptor cone cells into brilliantly colored abstract forms, which he transferred to canvas. His video installation, "[Mindscape/The Subtle Body,](#)" was shown at the Solivagant Gallery on the Lower East Side in 2015.

Mr. Breder was included in three biennials at the Whitney Museum of American Art, in 1987, 1989, and 1991. He was director of the Intermedia Program until 2000 and a founder of the Center for the New Performing Arts at the University of Iowa. His archive from the Intermedia Program has found a permanent home at the [Museum Ostwall](#) in Dortmund, Germany.