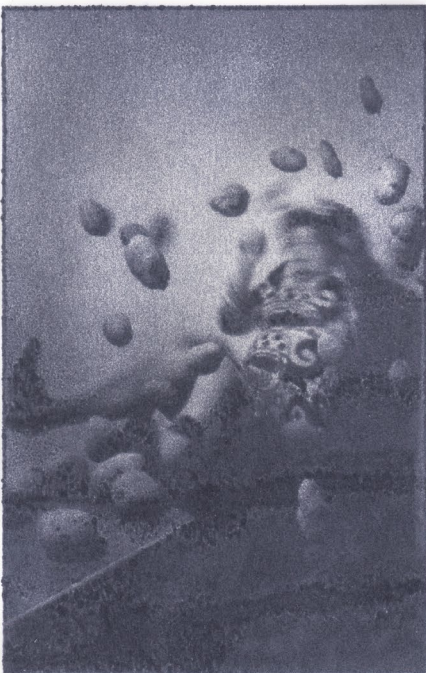


## Anna + Bernhard Blume

Anna Helming and Bernhard Blume were both born in 1937 in rural working class environments in the North Rhine-Westphalia region of Germany. Their Catholic background surfaces in numerous references to Christianity throughout their work. Bernhard's mother developed photographs in the family home for a local processing service, giving Bernhard an early introduction to the practice of photography. The photographs his mother developed were the usual variety of amateur family photographs taken at mundane domestic gatherings. Bernhard's own photographs may be, in part, a response to the glut of domestic subjects he saw at home.

Anna and Bernhard met in 1960 when they each began studies at the Staatliche Kunstakademie, Düsseldorf (Düsseldorf Art Academy). Uninterested in the Pop and Minimalist movements flourishing in American art, both Anna and Bernhard were drawn to the burgeoning international Fluxus and Happenings movements and in particular to the philosophy espoused by Joseph Beuys that "every man is an artist."<sup>1</sup> This idea especially attracted them, because it aestheticized the mundane.



*Küchenkoller (Kitchen Frenzy), 1985*

Both Anna and Bernhard graduated from the academy in 1965 and married the following year. Both taught high school in Cologne and Düsseldorf to earn a living on and off over the next thirty years. In 1967, Anna gave birth to twins and devoted much of the next ten years to raising a family. Bernhard returned to school and studied philosophy at the University of Cologne, where he concentrated on the work of Kant, Hegel, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. It was at this point that the Blumes started to recognize and consider their own domesticism, eventually they began thinking of domestic activities as private performances. In 1980 they decided to work together on a life-long "photo-novel" (although they continued to work individually as well).<sup>2</sup>

Since then the Blumes have been performing for the camera, producing several series of photographs depicting ambiguous narratives which are odd, even absurd. The environments they deal with are generally domestic spaces and nature, often the forest. Their choice of settings punctuates their interest in questioning German middle-class values, cultural stereotypes and clichés.

Much of the expressive and absurd quality in the Blumes' work stems from their chaotic imagery, made possible by their use of dynamic camera movements, stop-action photography, and other technical devices. Inanimate objects take on a life of their own, as they appear to levitate, swirl, attack, and otherwise participate in farce, often conjuring notions of the paranormal. In works such as *In the Room of Madness*, *Kitchen Frenzy*, and *Home Sweet Home*, everything seems to be hysterically out of control, as though an intense build up of emotion and/or anxiety had to get free. As Anna has said of *Home Sweet Home* (a piece that documents the hysteria of a housewife): "The sudden movement has the effect of being self-causal. But in fact these phenomena are caused by the mind."<sup>3</sup>

Installed as huge floor-to-ceiling panels, these groupings are reminiscent of wallpaper, referring to the domestic, while physically altering the space. The sequences read as a kind of photographic comic strip, both in their episodic nature and in the action adventure and absurd quality that are continually being conveyed.<sup>4</sup>

1. Dean Sobel, "Hänsel and Gretel at Play: An Anna & Bernhard Blume Primer," from *Anna & Bernhard Blume*, Milwaukee Art Museum, 1996, p. 11.

2. Ibid, p. 12.

3. Ibid, p. 14.

4. Ibid, p. 13.