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Paper to be read on the occasion of the ninth annual conference of the EBHA, September 1-3, 2005,  
Frankfurt am Main, Germany

**NAUGHTY BUT NICE: THE SELF-FASHIONING OF THE SEX PRODUCTS INDUSTRY. THE CASE OF BEATE UHSE.**

Nearly every adult and most young persons in Germany seem to know the name of Beate Uhse and its proverbial significance for the sex business. In the public consciousness, Beate Uhse the woman and Beate Uhse the firm and brand are inseparably entwined. The late foundress of Germany's market leader in erotica became a celebrity in a business whose leading figures usually preferred to stay behind the curtains. That she "openly identified herself, her firm and contemporary German history in her company's early catalogues"<sup>1</sup> perhaps was one of the most successful creations of brand identity via personalized marketing.

Accordingly, Beate Rotermund's (as I will call her from now on to avoid confusion between firm and foundress) autobiography, published in 1989 and republished in the year of her death 2001<sup>2</sup>, wants to tell as much the story of her life as it wants to be the story of her enterprise and a sketch of the development of sexual mores in the Federal Republic. It can also be read, although the author herself modestly refrains from such conclusions, as an autohagiography. It is, however, safe to say that Beate Rotermund and her business have made public claims to have contributed to the sexual liberation in Germany like no other.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, this company like no other has itself put into the role of an agent of social change and offers itself for a closer examination of its public appearance.

Apart from feminist and very conservative circles, the life of Beate Rotermund has been sympathetically received as the story of a clever and courageous woman who made her way in a world dominated by men and false morals. The press as well as business history have regarded her as a successful challenger of established but outdated norms. In his recent book on modern business history, Hartmut Berghoff put her in a row with Coco Chanel and Anita Roddick and called this class of women „innovative provocateurs“.<sup>4</sup> If Beate Rotermund portrayed herself and her business, and was subsequently portrayed, as the pioneer of sexual liberation, we have to ask first if it was

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1 Heineman, Elizabeth: The Beate Uhse Myth: Respectability, History, and Autobiographical Marketing in the Early Federal Republic (forthcoming issue of WerkstattGeschichte 2005, manuscript p. 2). I want to thank Prof. Heineman for her kind advice and for providing her manuscript.

2 Beate Uhse with Ulrich Pramann: „Ich will Freiheit für die Liebe.“ Beate Uhse. München 2001.

3 Cf. e. g. Beate Uhse: Sex in der Partnerschaft. Flensburg 1974. Blurb: "Long before Kolle and the sex wave it was her who brought enlightenment to the people. In spite of severe antagonism and in spite of personal disadvantage, she unflinchingly pursued her aim to remove prejudice and to earn sexuality the acceptance it deserves as an essential part of human life."

4 Hartmut Berghoff: Moderne Unternemmensgeschichte. Paderborn 2004, p. 262.

not what she did but how was told what she did that earned her this reputation; and second, if it wouldn't be more realistic to regard her as the consummator rather than the pioneer of sexual liberation. Before turning to the company's self-representation, let me briefly sketch its development.

The humble beginnings of the later market leader in erotica have always been an essential part of the company's myth and the personal legend of Beate Rotermund. Put very short, the story tells that in the last days of WWII, a young, daring female *Luftwaffe* pilot managed to escape with her baby son from besieged Berlin and to land her plane in a small village in Northern Germany. In order to escape the post-war misery, she started to sell pamphlets on contraception by mail order. With the help of her second husband, the merchant Ernst-Walter Rotermund, she expanded this meagre business into a prospering mail-order firm. The first two decades are described as marked by hard work, an ascetic lifestyle and the priority of the firm before all other things. In so far, the story is told as a textbook case of Protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism. It is the typical success story of the years of Germany's „economic miracle“ and beyond. In 1958, the mail-order business employed a staff of 59, had more than 600.000 customers and a turnover of 3 Million Marks. In that year, it moved to its newly erected buildings in Flensburg.<sup>5</sup> In 1962, the company credited itself to have opened the world's first sex shop in Flensburg. More were to follow soon. The so-called „sex wave“ of the 1960s led to the establishment of numerous small and smallest sex shops. However, it seems that these were no real competition for Beate Uhse. In 1975, pornography was legalized, thus opening a huge potential market for the sex industry. Soon, Beate Uhse started its film business and opened a chain of pornographic cinemas. In consistent pursuit of the firm's PR policy, this engagement in the film industry tried to convey the image of high-quality products and respectability. Beate Uhse's film production firm, managed by her youngest son Ulrich, claimed to make the technically most advanced films of the genre, and the cinemas boasted to possess Dolby surround and air-conditioning as well as a bar with a selection of fine spirits. In brochures and interviews, the sex cinemas were appraised as places where everyman, and especially couples, went as if for some almost innocent pleasure.<sup>6</sup> In 1979, Beate Uhse bought out its reputedly biggest competitor, the Frankfurt-based Dr. Müller's chain of shops that had specialized in products for sado-masochistic practices. By 1980, Beate Uhse's turnover had risen to about 100 Mio DM; since 1975, it had almost doubled. In 1981, the firm was divided between Beate Rotermund and her sons. Two of her sons started a new mail-order business called „Orion“, to which later was added a chain of shops. Beate Rotermund and her youngest son kept the shops and the film companies, and later returned into the mail-order business. In 1998, Beate Uhse was the first erotica business on the

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5 Uhse/Pramann, *Freiheit*, p. 168f.

6 Cf. interview with Ulrich Rotermund in: *KINO: Magazin für Film und Kultur*, Nr. 4, September 1980; company brochure 1980.

stock market.

The development of this enterprise would have been virtually unremarkable if the firm had traded with, say, shoes or cosmetics. Only because it sold condoms and books on sexual education at a time that is commonly associated with the diligent reconstruction of a destroyed country, prudishness and the restoration of old-fashioned decency, it happened that pioneering qualities were ascribed to firm and foundress. Beate Rotermund later was said to have single-handedly revigorated the sex-life of the Germans. Nothing, however, could be more wrong.

In the fifties, her business was neither the first, nor the biggest, nor the best-known trader in erotica, far from each of those. She herself clearly states in her autobiography that she stumbled into a trade in which several competitors were already active.<sup>7</sup> Her business was born out of necessity. Was its subsequent expansion largely dependent on contingencies? Or has one of the favourite stories of older business historiography come true, namely that the personal faculties of the founder lead to success? Fortunately, we have not to decide on these questions here. Rather, we ask for the conveyance of an image that answered the second question with a definite and unqualified „yes“. In the following, I will try to illustrate with examples the co-evolution of social and moral change and of the creation of an entrepreneurial image.

The early advertisements were home-made and plain, but already contained the nucleus of the later strategy. From the start, customers were addressed directly and personally. They frequently borrowed from medicinal, hygienic and psychological discourse. For a long time, the recourse to science should remain a constant trope in advertisement texts.

The leaflet "Is Everything alright with our marriage?" from 1951, one of the very first to be distributed, is explicitly addressed to married couples. This had legal reasons: helping young, unmarried couples to sex in any form was an offence until 1973. We can assume from the picture that the lady on it has a slight suspicion that there is possibly an unexploited potential. Winning the customer over first meant to overcome his inhibitions: „Only open-minded people think about if everything is alright with their marriage...“. In the following, it quotes the American advocate of marriage counseling, Paul Popenoe (who also was a eugenicist and promoter of compulsory sterilization of the mentally ill and mentally disabled). Not surprisingly, „sexual harmony“ is quoted to be the chief of three conditions for a successful marriage, „consent on the use of spare time“ and a „secure income“ being the second and third. This, the pamphlet continues, was because „sexual matters play the greatest part in human life“, as the famous psychologist John B. Watson<sup>8</sup> is quoted to have said. Now that the pamphlet has proved that everything springs from a fulfilled

7 Uhse/Pramann, Freiheit, p. 122; cf. also her statement that in 1952, more than forty mail-order houses were known to the state attorney Dr. Schilling, *ibid.* p. 122f.; cf. also Thomsen, Rudolf: Der erotisch-sexuelle Versandhandel. Köln-Klettenberg, Oktober 1958. (Volkswartbund, Heft Nr. 10)

8 who has become famous not for insights into human sexuality, but for his cruel behaviorist rat experiment on little Albert...

sex life, in its last paragraph it addresses, of course, not the probably imperfectly satisfied wife, but the husband. „Of course, every husband should put more importance on owning a satisfied wife and thus a peaceful home, than on earning a million a year. Wouldn't it, therefore, be worth a thought to make a basis for a twosome life in this matter? - Beate Uhse“. If one believes Beate Rotermund, at that time the „basis“ consisted mainly of dampening salves that abated „too much desire“.<sup>9</sup> The most important trope, however, was not science, but the open identification of Beate Rotermund with her business.<sup>10</sup> The creation of a sympathetic image began from the very start of the business. The personalized approach was expanded during the 1960s. "By the mid 1960s, Uhse was a fixture in the national media."<sup>11</sup>

Advice was as important for this strategy as was advertising. Beate Uhse acted as the understanding, discreet and knowledgeable friend who one could always turn to. As early as 1951, the company had employed a trained physician with the pseudonym of Dr. Rath (i.e., Dr. Advice) who answered delicate questions from customers and tested preparations before they came into sale.<sup>12</sup> The first sex shop opened in 1962 possessed a separate consultation room. In thousands of letters, men (and to a much lesser extent, women) asked basic questions indicating a devastating state of sex education.<sup>13</sup> In the first years already, a trait of the business showed up that was to pervade its whole history until the present day: the insistence on the complete „innocence“, usefulness, and commercial sobriety and honesty of the trade.

The stress on respectability was partly motivated by the association of the manufacture and trade of sex products and media with more unsavoury parts of the sex industry, especially prostitution. The climate of the 1980s still seems to have urged Beate Uhse to insist that the company strictly adhered to the law. In 1983, for instance, the company presented itself with a brochure half of which was dedicated to make clear that everything offered by the different shops, cinemas, and film distributors belonging to Beate Uhse complied with the German laws.<sup>14</sup> Especially, it pointed out that Beate Uhse had nothing to do with so-called „hard pornography“, i. e. pornography that depicted violence, sodomy or paedophilia. The brochure assured customers that what they bought would not only not make them liable to prosecution but also could be purchased without a bad conscience. „For more than 30 years, it has been the endeavour of Mrs. Beate Uhse to liberate sexuality from its taboos and its suspicious, illegal existence. As a source of supply for products serving the satisfaction of intimate needs, we make a contribution to discovering, strengthening or recovering human happiness and physical as well as mental harmony in the field of sexuality.“<sup>15</sup>

9 Uhse/Pramann, Freiheit, p. 140

10 Heineman, Myth, manuscript p. 7.

11 Heineman, Myth, manuscript p. 19.

12 Uhse/Pramann, Freiheit, p. 128

13 Uhse/Pramann, Freiheit, S. 140

14 Company brochure, 1983, p. 6.

15 Company brochure, 1983, p. 2f.

If the emphasis in the company's self-representation still was on the assistance in leading a fulfilled marriage, its business strategy had moved towards promoting hedonistic pleasure-seeking. Accordingly, Beate Rotermund's public image changed. A 1980 quote from a German quality newspaper sums it up: "Yet, the more famous she has become in the last years, the more the public image associated with the name of Beate Uhse has altered: from the frank, taboo-breaking helper with the most intimate problems of marriage and partnership, it more and more shifted towards the absolute market leader and up to pornography."<sup>16</sup> In an interview given a year earlier, Beate Rotermund denied that her motivation was that of a missionary. She explicitly claimed that, as a businesswoman, it was not her aim to promote a few million orgasms a year, but to sell.<sup>17</sup> Yet when asked if she had not deviated from her original business idea of offering advice and contraception when she focussed on the pornographic business, her answer still retained a liberator's attitude: „I am a businesswoman, and as such must offer to the people what they need. And that's different in different times. *Our time today just needs stimulation, and it needs it bitterly* [my emphasis, M.J.]. And that I try to offer."<sup>18</sup> Yet, the constant recourse to fulfilling needs could not conceal the fact that the sex business followed the general trend of a saturated economy from supplying a demand to creating a demand. The confidential tone of the 1950s advertisements had been exchanged for an unvarnished appeal to the customer's possessiveness: „You as a customer stand at the centre of our work! [...] Certainly, you will find here some things again that you would like to own. So, fulfil your wishes and simply order what you like."<sup>19</sup> In an industry that knew no or almost no innovations,<sup>20</sup> marketing and advertising had again, and again to revigorate the sense that shopping for sex was an adventure in itself.<sup>21</sup>

In the case of Beate Uhse, we can observe a gradual movement out of a niche situation that had to borrow from the hygienic and medical discourses for its self-representation to a more self-confident and increasingly liberal stance towards the matter. The image of a pioneer was acquired at a time when the saturation of the market for advice demanded a strategy that aimed at provoking desires. As we have seen from the last couple of quotes, Beate Uhse's general image tried to reconcile

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16 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 16.12.1980.

17 STERN, Nr. 41/1979, S. 176ff

18 Interview im OMA (Othmarscher Magazin), Oktober 1980, gefunden in: FZH 18-9.2.3., Ordner „Firmengeschichte 1976-1985“

19 Address to the customer from a 1983 catalogue.

20 The vibrator was received as an innovation in the 1960s, cf. "Mannheimer Morgen" Nr. 165, Donnerstag, 19. Juli 1984, S. 7. However, it is a much older device, see: Maines, Rachel: The technology of orgasm. 'Hysteria', the vibrator, and women's sexual satisfaction. Baltimore 1999.

21 "Es gibt heute zahlreiche Hilfsmittel, mit denen Menschen ihre sexuellen Neigungen und Vorlieben entdecken und verwirklichen können. Ich möchte Sie dazu ermutigen, sich das vorliegende Heft über erotische Spezialitäten vorurteilslos anzusehen. Achten Sie darauf, welche Artikel Ihren Blick anziehen. - Vielleicht wird hier nicht nur Ihre Neugierde geweckt, sondern ein ernstes Interesse, das ein reichhaltigeres und Ihnen gemäßerer Sexualleben erschließt, als Sie es bisher kennengelernt haben." Preface to a 1988 catalogue on sexual aids.

several contradictory images. The emphasis on individual traits varied with time and context, but the resulting general image always remained paradoxical. Medicine, hygiene and social science were to provide seriosity to a trade associated with morally unsound practices and frivolity. Sexual hedonism was coupled to commercial honesty and sobriety, and the most intimate details of human life were addressed with the simultaneous promise of complete frankness and perfect discretion. The evolvement of a commercial consumer culture is reflected in the early erotica business as the exploitation of a discourse that regarded marriage as an almost sacred institution with an intrinsic value, and offered marital happiness from the mail-order catalogue.

It might well be that the paradox that Beate Uhse presented in its self-fashioning could only be resolved by personalization. The business was successfully humanized because the identification of the biographies of Beate Rotermund and Beate Uhse allowed to ascribe a complexity to the business that is usually reserved for the human psyche. Public opinion started to believe what the business told about itself because that story was affected by its feelings towards the foundress. Economic success could not be explained away. If it was achieved against moral and legal resistance by an extraordinary and at the same time comprehensible mother-of-two (or four), then the cause could not have been fundamentally wrong, and sporadic aberrations appeared much more excusable than if they had been committed by an anonymous enterprise.

This is where I would like to introduce the term „self-fashioning“. I borrowed the concept for this paper from a literary critic's book on the Renaissance<sup>22</sup> because the idea of fashioning one's self through expression and communication against resistance describes very well Beate Rotermund's tale about her struggle to make herself and her line of business agreeable. Nevertheless, her insistence on the hostility of society, expressed in the number of lawsuits against her company and public condemnations, must not be taken at its face value. Those who prosecuted her were not typical, but were mainly connected to very conservative circles, like the Catholic „Volkswartbund“. The company's tale in the aftermath successfully planted the story that it took up the struggle against formidable resistance because it had to follow an ideal. The fact that in each but one court case the result was an acquittal is ascribed to our heroine's courage and shrewdness. In that, the story of the single liberator of German sexuality uses an archaic narrative. This heroic mode in telling a story is also supported by the attainment of market leadership and the disappearance of serious competition. Like in the Odyssey or the tales of Sindbad, the competitors and companions have to be removed in order to make the hero more glorious. That Beate Uhse spawned its greatest competitor, Orion, itself, gives the story an ironic, almost tragic note. The Beate Uhse myth still proves so strong that most people today, at first including myself, believe that indeed this company alone arose from the ruins of WWII.

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22 Greenblatt, Stephen: Renaissance Self-Fashioning. From More to Shakespeare. Chicago et. al. 1980.

In the end, it was long-term social change, and not a pioneer business, that led to a different attitude towards sexuality and commerce.<sup>23</sup> In the words of a biographer, Beate Uhse spoke about itself as the doctor, but in reality only provided the instruments.<sup>24</sup> Beate Rotermund presented herself as a pioneer of sexual liberation when a more sympathetic mental climate allowed her to make the claim sound plausible that selling sex also meant saving sex from oppression. The commercialization of erotics, however, might have altered the outward shape of sexuality, but certainly not the essentials of sexual behaviour.<sup>25</sup>

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23 Cf. Dagmar Herzog: Sexual Morality in 1960s West Germany, in: *German History* 23 (2005), no. 3, 371-384.

24 Uta van Steen: *Liebesperlen. Beate Uhse: eine deutsche Karriere*. Hamburg 2003, p. 166.

25 Cf. König, Wolfgang: *Geschichte der Konsumgesellschaft*. Stuttgart 2000, p. 264.