CLUB YOU CAN'T GET INTO
Sam Lewitt on "Make Your Own Life. Artists In & Out of Cologne" at the ICA Philadelphia

Make Your Own Life: Artists In & Out of Cologne", Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, 2006, exhibition view

Curated by Bennett Simpson at the Philadelphia ICA, the exhibition title "Make Your Own Life: Artists In & Out of Cologne", cites a statement of Martin Kippenberger's made in an interview with Jutta Koether in 1991. Regarding the resources for artistic practice he asserts: "Install parameters of observation (...) To see the things one sees in the street in another way (...) To achieve this you must make your own the life the basis (...) There is no relation to the art market in that any longer". Simpson endeavors to locate the spirit of resistance to market forces in Cologne's hey day, but like the ideological ambiguity of Kippenberger's imperative, there is a haziness as to the modality of his search: is the exhibition thematic or about social milieu? If either or some combination of both, then what is the specificity of "Cologne" in relation to the present, and further, what is the specificity of the present to the mythical after-image of Cologne in the 80s and 90s?

This ambiguity is codified rather than resolved by the inclusion of works by several artists and artist groups that had no direct contact with Cologne; The "Out" of the exhibition title extends to a space-time precariously constellated between direct influence and a posited spirit of practice. Simpson's sensitivity to the pitfalls of his endeavor is clear in his catalogue essay where he states that "MYOL" was: "predicated on a belief that historical reception is both ongoing and contradictory, a product of desires that are political and intellectual as well as libidinal and economic." As viewers navigate "MYOL"s four successive rooms, this complex characterization of historical reception at times loses distinctiveness as a specifically historical phenomenon as it is put to the curatorial test. For example, installed in "MYOL"s second and central room one encounters Reena Spauling's collectively produced "Flag paintings" and paintings by Blake Rayne which are placed in direct relation to both historical and contemporary works by Cologne veterans Michael Krebber, Albert Oehlen, Cosima von Bonin and others. This direct mixture of times and places inflects "MYOL"s economy of synchronicity so that the accent falls less on the works' relation through chronos, and more on the simultaneity of tactics: no matter how different their manifest form, from video to painting, from analytic critique to performative gesture, the majority of works in "MYOL" take aim at both object categories and their
conditions of display. The tenor of "MYOL"s mixing of registers names "Cologne" as a hovering synthesis of the positions it frames, not as a historically concentrated entity.

However, as one walks through the exhibition, the chronological dimension of this relation at times furtively rears its head. This is true for the final and fourth of the exhibition's rooms which serves as a listening station. Here, where viewers are given a chance to listen to various artists' musical and sound experiments, there seems to be a faint echo of positive milieu consolidation. As Simpson recalls: "In Cologne's art field (...) artists' bands and musical projects were not merely lifestyle but a source of group experiment". Curatorially, the past tense is stronger in this room than anywhere else in the exhibition. It places viewers in the position of reflective survey and is thus disparate from the historically and strategically diverse character of the rest of "MYOL"s logic of arrangement.

This said, the binding principal operative in "MYOL" is heteronomous to what Simpson identifies as Cologne's "no". The latter metonymically condenses around figures of production. The most explicit instance of this is found in what Josef Strau calls the "non-productive attitude". This is not a withholding of productive forces in the vein of general strike, but an iconoclastic "sympathy for an attitude which substitutes image qualities with narrative impulses". Non-production gathers itself as subject and produces a narrative whose telling parries the surplus of fantasy that supports its operation. Politics emerges here as a struggle over the direction and meaning of this surplus. Making one's own life the basis for their work can fleetingly pre-absorb and bar its appropriation by an absorptive, self-affirming culture. It can also end-up intensifying the effect of an artistic subjectivity that becomes desirable precisely because its work spurs the fantasy that what is possessed, ultimately, is the very meaning of the artist. "Non-production" reaches for a degree zero of fantasy's locale in the minimum conditions of the artist subject: the mere statement "I am an artist" is the protocol for this subject's coming to be.

As it is framed here, "non-production" does not seem at odds with certain practices that perform a full-blown immersion into the regimes of traditional artistic labor. The de-sublimation of painterly gesture in the work of artists such as Albert Oehlen has an internal complicity with the fantasmatic suspension of the value of object-based work and its prospective criteria. This is made abundantly clear in his untitled contribution to the exhibition in which a cacophony of seemingly gestural marks melt into a muddy surface which deflects any identification of internal painterly criteria. Something similar can be said for Jutta Koether's "Antibody V (Semi Popular painting)", included in proximity to Oehlen's "Untitled", which travesties the myth of expressive psychological and subjective freedom in painterly production. Both Oehlen and Koether refuse painterly modernism's internal entrenchment of sensuous particularity or the transcendental subject of expressionism. These artists foreclose interpretation grounded in the self-criticism of painting and redirect it toward a performance of production within the social processes into which s/he has been thrown.

The idiosyncratic reduction of the gap between artifact and subjectivity effected by "non-production" becomes conspicuous in the monumental triviality of Martin Kippenberger's work "Input-Output". This work is comprised of 67 drawings of architectural floor plans on hotel restaurant receipts executed over a six-year period. As such, the work reflexively finds its foundation in the banal referent of subjective experience. This work is an interesting choice in the American context where Kippenberger's privileged mode of production (and consumption) is painting. But if Kippenberger seems subdued here, once we turn around to face Andrea Fraser's video documentation of her 2001 performance "Kunst Muss Hängen" (2001) we are reminded otherwise. In this work a drunken speech delivered by Kippenberger at an art opening is homeopathically internalized by Fraser and redoubled as an image of itself. Fraser reflexively offers to discursive thought what she describes as: "that terribly seductive freedom represented by and enjoyed by artists and our enslavement by those very archetypes of freedom, which have often added up to the freedom to destroy ourselves, above all." One must ask: does Fraser's recital of Kippenberger's hyperbole proffer the Selbstdarsteller as an a priori condition of artistic subjectivity? Or, is it a position that electively doubles the artist-subject's self-election as such? There is an irresolvable and demonic ambiguity in the work as to whether Kippenberger's social conduct is continuous with his archetypal overdetermination (as a mere symptom), or whether agency is exercised as a mimetic exacerbation of that condition appearing in the aestheticized medium of a self made life.
The psycho-subjective elements of artistic identity formation transition into the temporal conditions of memorial in Christopher William's 1992 work "Bouquet, for Bas Jan Ader and Christopher D'ArChangelo". Placed within earshot of Fraser's video, one encounters a framed photograph depicting a toppled bouquet of flowers that is positioned on the lower left-hand corner of a specially constructed exhibition wall. These elements act as memorial to both performance artists named in the work's title and referred to by the material procedures of the work's construction. If exhibition value's hegemony is essentially tied to photographic modernity, the disappearing acts of both Ader and D'ArChangelo (one in his work, the other in his life) become ciphers for the exhibition's mnemonic limits. Through the nominative, an allegorical excess of the image glances back onto its own conditions of representation: the "this has been" of the document crystallizes an image of photographic death, of the enduring disappearance of its subject and the ruined remainder of its support.

This dimension of nominal splitting can be extended to the gap between "Cologne" and its ostensible re-inscription into a series of works in "MYOL". Exemplary here is much of the work made as a response to the exhibition itself. As a proper name, "Cologne" stands for the binding of a subject to the gathering mechanism of its nomothetic prescription. Like William's marking of this split, an excess of meaning is bracketed off from the proper name's legislation of identity and cast in the light of its own indigence. This occurs quite literally in Stephan Dillemuth and Nils Norman's "Friesenwall 120 Ruined". A ruined model of the space they helped organize along with Strau and others in the 90s is presented and adorned with work by twelve artists, nine of whom appear in "MYOL" only on this dilapidated stage: This includes Uwe Gabriel, Thomas Kalthoff, Kiron Khosla, Matthias Schaufler, Barbara Schuttpelz, Vivian Slee, Uli Strothjohann, Vincent Tavenne and Iskender Yediler. The placement of these works among the debris of "Friesenwall 120 Ruined" makes apparent the double bind of being embedded in the ambiguous medium of "Cologne". The very act of inclusion under "Cologne's" aegis becomes consignation to obsolescence.

Gareth James' contribution, "Hold. Hold. Don't Go Home (with Roe Ethridge)" (2006) offers another account of this model. This work emerged as a response to the request that he contribute a work from 1998 in which he performed an unresponsive and acephalic Mary Richardson. The request was met with the production of a photograph of the headless Richardson lurking in the initial work's installational environs, reconstructed in the space of the ICA, but physically removed before "MYOL"'s opening. What is left for viewers is the photographic disclosure of an ambulating undead.

Merlin Carpenter drops his own pile of empty shells on the ICA floor. This is in the form of several bags from luxury clothes, music and other stores: leftovers from his $4K exhibition budget with which Carpenter bought items for himself and others. With this confrontational switch of the terms of production to those of
consumption, Carpenter performs his complicity with the social's constitution in the sphere of commodity exchange. All historicizing aims are denied the means of good faith recollection, which frame social relations anterior to the market's function as merely objectified in its purview. Carpenter's work teeters between a reiteration of an already achieved reification and an imitarily acute rendering of the potential for insubordination to the demand that one perform to the super-ego like imperative to "Make Your Own Life".

The temporality projected in this last group of works casts the shadow of belatedness on the exhibition's discursive conditions. This in itself may not fully go against Simpson when he states: "Any act of telling history is also an act of telling the present. If Cologne's attitudes were irresolvable in their moment, perhaps the pause and contradiction they suggest has value for the contemporary situation." What was irresolvable in the past has apparently not been reconciled in the present. With the inclusion of a younger generation of artists Simpson is somewhat successful at staving off the purely hagiographic, which the hermetic and exclusive hallmark of "Cologne" at its peak too easily offers itself to. However, the resulting ambiguity bespeaks a curatorial impasse on the level of contextualization: how can one inter-generationally arrange what has been identified as "negativity" without in turn canceling its local force and efficacy? This impasse is especially affecting when "MYOL" seems to resist, and maybe for good reason, the model of historical survey which would solidify "Cologne" as an inert object of study; A resistance implicated by the way "life" is figured by Kippenberger's imperative: as potentially vital, as potentially enlivened by the fact of its being self-made. This said, with the development of our current climate of extreme political and cultural conservatism, where the rhetoric of a market based pluralism and the increasing ubiquity of ever more spectacular modes of display seem to call out for the renegotiation of the very terms of subjectivity - it is telling and not altogether contradictory that the small group of artists who produced work specifically for "MYOL" heeded the nomination of "Cologne" with the excessively blank stare of the untimely.

"Make Your Own Life. Artists In and Out of Cologne", Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, 21 April - 30 July 2006