LAUGHTER AND CULTURAL PESSIMISM:

THE JOKE IN WEST GERMAN ART, 1974-1989

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York

2006

UMI Number: 3294241

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
Graduate Faculty in Art History in satisfaction of the
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

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Advisor: Professor Romy Golan

This dissertation examines the work of a generation of West German artists who launched their careers in the late 1970s. Georg Herold, Martin Kippenberger, Albert Oehlen and Rosemarie Trockel first gained public notice in the art scenes of Berlin, Cologne and Hamburg. Their earliest projects were carried out in the wake of the so-called *Tendenzwende*, a term used in the mid-1970s to describe a shift in the West German socio-political climate. Scholars and journalists alike took note at the time of the widespread perception that the protest movements of the 1960s had failed to enact lasting social transformation. The resulting conservative political retrenchment and escalating anxieties associated with domestic terrorism of the 1970s had repercussions across the breadth of cultural production. Artists who came of age after the onset of post-sixties pessimism no longer heeded the earlier calls for a brighter future, instead prioritizing jokes, semantic obscurity and linguistic play over clear political messages.

The comedic and ironic visual language dominant in much of the art produced from the mid-1970s through the 1980s is closely linked to the contemporaneous discourse around postmodernism. It is thus subject to the same sense of doubt and ambiguity that marks this period. The works of art under consideration have occupied the space between

incisive criticality and what the critic Diedrich Diederichsen has called the "Coming Of Cynicism." In the process, the artists have experienced both the advantages and pitfalls of jokes: they can function as highly valuable tools, affording a degree of conceptual flexibility that allows conflicting meanings to be communicated with great subtlety. However, they can also lead to complicity with the object of critique, serving merely to reinforce the status quo. Divided into six chapters, the dissertation examines jokes and humor from several standpoints: the historical situation of West German culture in the 1970s; the generational move toward humor in the 1980s; the importance of social context in the formation of jokes; the ways in which the art object prompts different types of laughter; the unstable relationship between the artist and the audience; and the divisive critical reception that the work inspired.

Acknowledgements

Researched and written in New York and Berlin, this dissertation has benefited from the support and expertise of numerous individuals and organizations. The two years I spent in Germany were made possible by generous grants from the Fulbright Program and the Berlin Program for Advanced German and European Studies. I am particularly grateful to Karin Goihl of the Berlin Program and Ines Horbert of the Fulbright Program for their professionalism and collaborative spirit.

Whether through casual advice or the writing of recommendation letters, the following helped to enable my research in Germany. Although the degrees of assistance varied, for simplicity's sake I convey my gratitude in alphabetical order: Christoph Bannat, Ilka Becker, Julia Bernard, Sabeth Buchmann, Werner Büttner, Gisela Capitain, Diedrich Diederichsen, Barbara Engelbach, Harald Falckenberg, Rike Frank, Gerrit Gohlke, Karola Grässlin, Isabelle Graw, Nina Gülicher, Lilian Haberer, Eva Meyer Hermann, Manfred Hermes, Carina Herring, Erika Hoffmann, Markus Huemer, Anke Kempkes, Kasper König, Michael Krebber, Georg Krefeld, Clemens Krümmel, Doris Krystof, Susanne Leeb, Elke Marhöfer, Friedrich Meschede, Jessica Morgan, Frank Motz, Aranka Müller-Matits, Christian Nagel, Caroline Nathusius, Christian Scheidemann, Ludwig Seyfarth, Monika Sprüth, Gregor Stemmrich, Karin Tebbe, Viola Vahrson, Barbara Wien, Chrisdian Wittenburg and Florian Zeyfang. I also want to thank Michael Diers, Professor of Art History at Humboldt-Universität in Berlin, for serving as my advisor during the Fulbright grant and allowing me to present my work at his graduate colloquium.

Many friends and colleagues in the United States contributed to the formation of my ideas. This is only a short sampling of those with whom I had productive conversations, but I extend special thanks to Alexander Alberro, Saul Anton, Jan Avgikos, François Bucher, Andrea Codrington, Lynne Cooke, Maura Coughlin, Paul Fleming, Andrea Fraser, Bettina Funcke, Emily Gephart, Philip Glahn, Carol Greene, Fred Gross, Roy Grundmann, Ronald Jones, Jordan Kantor, Jutta Koether, Cary Levine, Elizabeth Mangini, Claudia Mesch, Sina Najafi, Peter Nisbet, Jeanne Nugent, Stephen Prina, Steven Rand, Bennett Simpson, Olav Westphalen and Lisa Jaye Young.

My dissertation advisor, Romy Golan, has consistently provided thoughtful advice, tough criticism and moral support; I am tremendously grateful for her collaboration. Anna Chave, as second reader, gave the dissertation an insightful and much-needed editorial treatment late in the process. Robert Storr and Richard Wolin took part in the defense and offered useful suggestions for future changes. The project first took root a decade ago at Tufts University with a paper I wrote for Eric Rosenberg, whose encouragement continues today. I am also indebted to Georg Herold and Rosemarie Trockel for granting interviews in Cologne.

Finally, it is to my family that I extend the deepest gratitude. My parents Bonnie and Lloyd Williams, and sister Toby Williams, have, with their curiosity and enthusiasm, sustained my studies over many years. The greatest source of strength has been my wife Bianca Baader, whose wise counsel, sense of humor and calm thinking during crises have made all the work possible, even pleasurable. Our daughter Mila never failed to prompt the laughter that put the whole thing into perspective. This dissertation is dedicated to Bianca and Mila.

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Illustrations

Chapter 1—Introduction: Late Arrivals and Postmodern Humor

The joke does not count among the qualities that members of other nations think of when they say "German."[1]

Otto F. Best

Dead Jokes

Otto F. Best's assessment of Germany's reputation for humorlessness should hardly come as a shock. For hundreds of years, nationals and outsiders alike have characterized the Germans as overly serious, self-involved, morbid, or at least incapable of mirth. In his 1993 book on the subject, Best, a German scholar of comparative literature, takes the reader through the 300-year history of the word *Witz* as a means toward comprehending the origins of these lingering assumptions.[2] Initially defined under the influence of the French *esprit*, *Witz* in the late 17th century connoted *Geist*, or spirit, closely related to the English "wit." This salutary development was contested from the beginning by the French themselves, with whom German philosophers argued for over a century regarding the potential for *esprit* within Germanic language and culture.[3] By the twentieth century, argues Best, *Witz* had lost its depth: "In German, one describes *Witz* as the gift of reason and *Witz* as a type of text with the same word. Other languages make a distinction. *Esprit*

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[1] Otto F. Best, *Volk ohne Witz: Über ein deutsches Defizit* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1993), 9; "Witz gehört nicht zu den eigenschaften, an die Angehörige anderer Völker denken, wenn sie 'deutsch' sagen."

[2] Best spent the majority of his teaching career in the United States, where he taught in the Department of German Studies at the University of Maryland from 1968 to 1996. He is currently Professor Emeritus.

[3] Best, *Volk ohne Witz*, 21-27.

exists in French next to *bon mot*. Wit in English is next to joke."[4] Best claims that modern Germans have the disadvantage of relying on one conception of *Witz* that has come to signify nothing more than light wordplay.

According to another joke theorist, the form has suffered from a loss of the ability to edify, one of the key virtues associated with the *Witz* of the Enlightenment. Carl Hill writes that from the 18th century on, the "punch of tendentious jokes often contained a far-reaching yet immediate critique of repressive social structures."[5] Hill blames the jargon of post-structuralism and theory in general for trapping the joke within a "protective theoretical hypostatization."[6] It should be stated at the outset that the goal of this project is not to counter Hill's assessment by claiming a renewed importance for jokes in German culture. Nor can the dissertation's scope do justice to the long tradition of German aesthetic philosophy and its treatment of the joke's parent modes of humor and the comic. Rather, this historical background will be kept in sight as I explore how West German artists of the 1980s tapped into their country's long-running, if often downplayed or ignored, engagement with the comedic. For despite the term's loss of philosophical strength, the artists in question still occasionally revived *Witz* in its classical form, even if this was performed with evident irony.

This dissertation examines the work of four artists who, in 1980s West Germany, simultaneously revived and mocked the historical fortunes of *Witz*. Georg Herold, Martin

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[4] Ibid., 159; "Im Deutschen bezeichnet man Witz als Verstandesgabe und Witz als Textsorte mit dem gleichen Wort. Andere Sprachen machen einen Unterschied. 'Esprit' steht im Französischen neben 'Bonmot,' 'Wit' im Englischen neben 'Joke.'"

[5] Carl Hill, *The Soul of Wit: Joke Theory from Grimm to Freud* (Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 227.

[6] Ibid.

Kippenberger, Albert Oehlen and Rosemarie Trockel are part of a generation (all were born between 1947 and 1953) that prioritized wit, wordplay and joking as appropriate strategies for artists working in the wake of modernism. For this group, the weakness of *Witz*, as diagnosed by Best, did not present a disadvantage; its supposedly corrupt status was actually one of its attractions. The current status of *Witz* as everyday joke provided the artists with lowbrow punch lines that could nevertheless hint at the term's earlier associations with highbrow culture. Joking is also a mode of communication that is not typically described as innovative. Run-of-the-mill jokes tend either to be up to date, preying on current political or social ills and deriding those responsible, or they fit into classic categories, such as ethnic or profession-based topics. Regardless of the format, the telling of traditional jokes has long been a relatively tired narrative form, despite its resurgence during the age of the Internet and email message-forwarding. Joking was the perfect vehicle for the expression of cultural pessimism.

Before briefly sketching the historical context out of which the artists emerged, it bears mentioning that one of the most common clichés encountered within writing on humor is the acknowledgement that it is impossible to explain coherently what it is that makes us laugh. Laughter is thought to be located beyond words, originating at some unidentified place deep within the recesses of our bodies, seemingly detached from the brain's putative logic and order. Commentators on the mechanisms of joke-making often take on an embarrassed tone, as if apologizing in advance for the pointlessness of their project. The real problem, of course, lies in the fact that to explain a joke is to destroy its effectiveness, especially if this takes place before the telling of the joke. The shock and surprise of a good joke can only inspire laughter if the audience does not foresee the

punch line. Yet as one humor theorist has optimistically pointed out, "Humor analysis need kill humor no more than artistic analysis need kill art."[7] Hopefully this remark clears enough space for the analysis of a certain segment of German contemporary art in light of its humoristic impulse.

1960s RIP

In 1970, West German artist-activist Klaus Staeck made the seemingly self-evident announcement that the 1960s had come to an end. His small sculpture, *Requiescat in Ludwig* (fig. 1), claimed as much in the form of a mock tombstone fashioned out of a catalogue published the same year containing highlights from the private collection of Aachen-based chocolate magnate Peter Ludwig. Located at the time in Cologne's Wallraf-Richartz Museum, the Ludwig collection was weighted heavily toward US-produced Pop art of the 1960s—Staeck sought to attack the American influence on art consumption then being practiced by the West German cultural elite. He affixed a metal plate engraved with the decade's dates and the Latin for "rest in peace" to the book's cover, partially obscuring a prototypical Pop painting by Roy Lichtenstein, to reinforce a message of historical passage.[8] The modest object was to be displayed on the floor standing up as if marking the spot where the outgoing decade had been buried for good.

In a noteworthy development for a work that overtly thematized death, Staeck's piece was granted a second, and perhaps more significant, life at Documenta 6 in the

[7] Murray S. Davis, *What's So Funny?: The Comic Conception of Culture and Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), xiv.

[8] Staeck used the expanded edition of the catalogue, designed by the Fluxus artist Wolf Vostell; see Gert von der Osten und Horst Keller, ed., *Kunst der Sechziger Jahre: Sammlung Ludwig im Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Köln*, 3rd ed. (Cologne: Wallraf-Richartz Museum, 1970).

summer of 1977. The point Staeck had initially made about how decades become associated with styles and movements, each of which follows upon the death pronouncements made over the last big thing, had new meaning as the 1970s was beginning to approach its own conclusion. Documenta 6 took place in the aftermath of the transition made by the student and worker protest movements to organized violence and just prior to the German Autumn, when the key members of the Baader-Meinhof group died under questionable circumstances at Stammheim prison.[9] The mid-1970s had seen the social fabric of West Germany come under enormous strain, prompted by an economic downturn that had started in the oil industry in 1972[10] and the social crisis engendered by domestic terrorism. By 1977, as Documenta 6 curator Manfred Schneckenburger signaled with his inclusion of the Staeck object, whatever traces of sixties' optimism—whether in the political, social or cultural realms—had lingered into the next decade could now be declared forgotten. Thus it was that by virtue of current events Staeck's unimposing sculpture had gained measurably in terms of its power to resonate for a historical moment frequently characterized by pessimism.

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[9] The classic account of the Red Army Faction's rise and fall is still Stefan Aust's *The Baader-Meinhof Group: The Inside Story of a Phenomenon*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Bodley Head, 1987) [originally published 1985]. Other notable books on the subject that have appeared recently are Gerd Koenen, *Vesper, Ensslin, Baader* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2003); Klaus Pflieger, *Die Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF)* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2004); Jeromy Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); and the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Zur Vorstellung des Terrors* at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin (January 30 to May 16, 2005): Klaus Biesenbach, ed., *Zur Vorstellung des Terrors*, 2 vols. (Göttingen: Steidl, 2005).

[10] For general summaries of the oil crisis in the 1970s, see Philip Armstrong, et al, *Capitalism since 1945* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991); Anthony Sutcliffe, *An Economic and Social History of Western Europe since 1945* (London: Longman, 1996).

Staeck's consistent use of satirical humor as a means to highlight greed, corruption and hypocrisy represented one option among many to artists emerging in the mid-1970s who sought to invest their work with socially critical subject matter. In Staeck's work from the early 1960s to the present, the politically motivated art object is designed to broadcast a clear message of critique with the aim of pointing out problems and instigating change for the better. His position is by no means naïve, but it stands in contrast to that of the subsequent generation, which is the primary subject of this dissertation. While numerous young artists who experienced the sixties as children and teenagers were permanently affected by the era's protest-oriented mentality, they came of artistic age in the late 1970s at a moment filled with doubt and insecurity, often perceived to be empty of the promises of the previous decade—the notion of taking a concrete, identifiable position was fraught with difficulties. The primary artists under consideration arrived on the West German scene after the groundbreaking work associated with neo-avant-garde groups and individuals like Fluxus and Joseph Beuys had apparently failed to unite art and life in a lasting way. What was felt by younger artists to be a closed historical chapter led many to consciously adopt a compromised second-order status, thus abandoning the avant-garde's historical drive toward renewal and innovation. These artists heralded what the cultural critic Diedrich Diederichsen would later wryly label a genre, the "Coming of Cynicism,"[11] a condition often attributed to the market-driven 1980s.

It would, of course, be far too simple to claim that cynicism is the inevitable condition of artists emerging in the aftermath of the 1960s. Diederichsen's highly loaded

[11] Diedrich Diederichsen, *Sexbeat*, rev. ed. (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2002), p. x. [originally published in 1985].

term, one that presupposes an acceptance of defeatism, is more a provocation to discussion than an honest representation of the outlook of a generation. Certainly there existed a wide spectrum along which West German artists could have situated themselves in terms of political and social commitment within cultural practice of the mid-to-late 1970s. But a number of them did make clear in their work at the time that they no longer had much faith in art's power of direct political persuasion. When viewed from the perspective of the art object itself, a general tendency can be identified among this generation toward the adoption of humor and jokes as communicative strategies. Rather than a group aesthetic, it is perhaps most accurate to speak of a series of loose affiliations and shared attitudes that reflect a deep sense of pessimism rather than a withdrawal into cynicism.

The move toward laughter stands in contrast to what many in the Anglo-American realm perceive as contemporary (West) German art's objectivity and seriousness as conveyed, for instance, by the sober images produced by students of Bernd and Hilla Becher in the photography department at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf—e.g., Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth and Candida Höfer. The artists to be explored also occupy a space that is separate, though not entirely removed, from the emphasis by various contemporary painters (for instance, Georg Baselitz, Jörg Immendorff, Markus Lüpertz and Anselm Kiefer) on grand historical themes and the exploration of German identity. The tone taken on by the individual works to be examined vary from boisterous overstatement to cool understatement, with all manner of expressive modes in between. Yet a thread of humor and linguistic play running throughout the projects serves to link them and enable the positing of a collective sensibility.

If Staeck's miniature anti-monument can serve as a kind of bookend to the historical period of post-sixties art in West Germany, then Martin Kippenberger's artist's book, *Das Ende der Avandgarde* (fig. 2), can also locate its own temporal boundary. Produced for an exhibition at the Galerie Gisela Capitain in Cologne in 1989, the year in which West Germany would begin to incorporate its eastern counterpart, it is one of countless artist books and editions that the exceedingly prolific Kippenberger produced from 1977 up to his death in 1997. Typical for his work is the partially accidental nature of the final product. The misspelled title as printed on the book's cover was the result of a printer's error, but Kippenberger liked the outcome since it reinforced the message of the content inside. This consisted of six pages printed in silkscreen with a balloon motif, an image that Kippenberger frequently employed. Within the balloons, which resemble speech bubbles in comic strips, he inserted images and texts that illustrated aspects of his life and work. The relevance of the avant-garde, a balloon about to implode, is suggested to have been compromised by Kippenberger himself, or to have come to an end because of his efforts. A mixture of willful and fortuitous humor, both of which thematize questions of failure and ineffectiveness, is highly typical for Kippenberger and a number of his contemporaries. The primary aim of this dissertation is to locate the particular varieties of humor developed by these artists as well as to comprehend why various modes of joke-making were so frequently mobilized at this point in German cultural history.

Although the focus will be placed on a particular generation operating within three cities in West Germany, the inquiry conducted here could also be applied to other international contexts. Related sites of production might be located in Los Angeles or

New York, London or Moscow, though these spaces would of course open up their own avenues of analysis. The larger project of which this dissertation forms a part is the ongoing assessment of the status of postmodernism, now that the term has had a regular place in cultural writing for several decades.[12] At the beginning of the 21st century, it seems that we are in a position to look back to the 1970s and 1980s with just enough historical distance to enable an analysis of cultural developments that have come to seem firmly entrenched within current artistic production. The generation of the late 1970s and 1980s emerged at the moment when the notion of postmodernism gained currency in everyday discussions within the West German art world. The idea of a break with the modern was thus almost a received notion by the time these artists first started exhibiting their work.

Tendenzwende

The dates chosen to frame this project (1974-1989) are both somewhat arbitrary and rather obvious. Its endpoint is determined by the fall of the Berlin wall, when the Federal Republic of Germany began the process of absorbing its eastern neighbor and erstwhile enemy, the German Democratic Republic. However, in terms of locating a single year in which the project of the 1960s could be said to have collapsed, 1974 could have also been 1972 or 1973, or perhaps even later in the decade. Various theories have been developed that attempt to explain a shift in the political, social and/or cultural climate around 1973/74, most of them under the rubric of an alleged *Tendenzwende* (shift in tendency).

[12] Andreas Huyssen makes a persuasive argument that theories of the postmodern first begin in the late 1950s in the United States. See "Mapping the Postmodern," in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), 178-221.

The term was already circulating within the mass media beginning around 1973 in the wake of the first oil crisis of 1972, with an increase in frequency as Helmut Schmidt took over from Willy Brandt as chancellor in 1974.[13] David Roberts identifies two meanings of the concept: on the one hand, a neo-conservative reaction to the late-sixties student revolt; on the other, a wider transformation in consciousness that can be considered a proper paradigm shift once the post-war era definitively ended in 1968/69.[14] According to Roberts, the economic recession that began in 1973 ushered in a pessimistic mood that found its expression within literature and the visual arts. Jost Hermand has succinctly described the resulting climate: "In the process there emerged among the would-be-revolutionary supporters of the protest movements a feeling of helplessness, a lack of orientation, a sense of powerlessness, indeed a hangover."[15]

In addition to following the general dating suggested by Hermand and Roberts, 1974 was selected as a starting point for this study because it saw the publication of Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.[16] Bürger's widely read and highly influential analysis of the historical avant-garde provided a further indication of early-1970s pessimism; indeed, Roberts interprets Bürger's epitaph for the avant-garde as a symptom

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[13] See Jost Hermand, *Die Kultur der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1965-85* (Munich: Nymphenburger, 1988), 471.

[14] David Roberts, "Einleitung," in David Roberts, ed., *Tendenzwenden. Aspekte des Kulturwandels der Siebziger Jahre* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1984), 7-9.

[15] Hermand, *Die Kultur der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, 471; "Was dadurch entstand, war gerade unter den revoluzzerhaften Mitläufern der bisherigen Protestbewegungen ein Gefühl der Hilflosigkeit, der Orientierungslosigkeit, der Ohnmacht, ja des Katzenjammers."

[16] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) [originally published as *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974].

of the *Tendenzwende*.[17] For Bürger, the 1960s demonstrated that the intended unity of art and life in progressive cultural practice had irreparably failed, leading to a lack of direction among contemporary artists. Despite widespread agreement over Bürger's characterization of the avant-garde as having run its course, Roberts and numerous subsequent writers have taken Bürger to task for misdiagnosing the situation of the "post-avant-garde."[18] In the foreword written for the English translation of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Jochen Schulte-Sasse largely agrees with Bürger's assessment of the historical avant-garde's fate, yet he finds Bürger's depiction of the future to be inadequate in that he "fail[s] to pursue the logical conclusions of his own analysis and relate it to a body of texts that has begun exploring this potential."[19] Schulte-Sasse sees Bürger as being mired in the same cultural pessimism that had characterized Theodor W. Adorno's negative assessment of art's ability to function as a socially relevant agent. According to Schulte-Sasse, Adorno's support of art's autonomy and separation from everyday life, or the "social totality," led him to promote the idea that art is "the medium of hibernation in bad

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[17] David Roberts, "Avant-garde und Tendenzwende: zum Problemhorizont der nachavantgardistischen Kunst," in Roberts, *Tendenzwenden*, 110.

[18] Bürger uses the terms "neo-avant-garde" and "post avant-gardiste" interchangeably throughout his text. Neither of these terms appear in two widely read publications on the historical avant-garde that appeared prior to Bürger's book (and to which he was partly responding): Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "The Aporias of the Avant-Garde," trans. John Simon, in Gregory T. Poletta, ed., *Issues in Contemporary Literary Criticism* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1973) [originally published 1962]; Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1968) [originally published 1962].

[19] Jochen Schulte-Sasse, "Foreword: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde," in Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, xlvi.

times."[20] For Schulte-Sasse, Bürger is similarly burdened by his negative views on art's powers of social persuasion; his book contains no prescription for an art of the future that might take up where the historical avant-garde left off in seeking to reconcile art and daily life. Yet these very shortcomings go some way toward explaining why Bürger's book was so typical for the negative attitude of the mid-1970s. The punk motto "no future" had resonance far beyond the music scene.

The relevance of the avant-garde for contemporary practice was not discussed merely in artistic and literary circles. A parallel and not entirely unrelated use of the term occurred in writings associated with the Red Army Faction, the West German terrorist organization that formed the most radical outgrowth of the student protest movement. "Avant-garde" appears in at least two of the early declarations written by the group's core members, where it is used to make historical reference to political, revolutionary vanguards of the past in order to grant the movement a sense of legitimacy, even inevitability.[21] As the Dutch artist and theorist Theo Ligthart points out, there are abundant points of ideological overlap between the aesthetic and political versions of a neo-avant-garde. Ligthart writes, "Both the politicized artistic avant-garde and the avant-garde urban guerilla demand the primacy of existential content and a resulting

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[20] Schulte-Sasse, "Foreword: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde, xviii. On the concept of hibernation in Adorno's aesthetic theory, see Irving Wohlfarth, "Hibernation: On the Tenth Anniversary of Adorno's Death," in Gerard Delanty, ed., *Theodor W. Adorno*, vol. 1 (London: Sage Publications, 2004), 361-390.

[21] The two texts are *Das Konzept Stadtguerilla* (April 1971) and *Über den bewaffneten Kampf in Westeuropa* (May 1971), printed in Martin Hoffmann, ed., *Rote Armee Fraktion: Texte und Materialien zur Geschichte der RAF* (Berlin: ID-Verlag, 1997), 27-111.

revolutionary life praxis."[22] In addition to the political exhaustion within the cultural realm, the second half of the 1970s witnessed the violent deaths of the Red Army Faction's first-generation leaders, culminating in the "German Autumn" of 1977. The crisis of the left had reached its pinnacle, dashing hopes for both the aesthetic and political avant-gardes.

There certainly existed points of intersection between the two avant-gardes in the 1970s and 1980s. However, these connections moved typically in one direction, with the remnants of an artistic avant-garde looking to its more politicized relative for inspiration and guidance rather than the latter profiting from artists' proposals for radical social change. Many German artists who experienced the 1960s while already actively producing work in their studios would later express their own ambiguous attitude toward art's political agency in images that left a lot of room for interpretation. Perhaps the most trenchant and frequently discussed example is Gerhard Richter's series *October 18, 1977* of 1988.[23] Several factors come together in this group of paintings that make it stand out among contemporaneous works that treat politically charged subject matter: the temporal delay between the original events and Richter's treatment; the distancing effect of his technique of blurring; the minimal degree of commentary or mediation that can be read

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[22] Theo Ligthart, "Avant-Garde," in *Zur Vorstellung des Terrors: Die RAF-Ausstellung*, ed. Klaus Biesenbach (Berlin: KW Institute for Contemporary Art, 2005), 68; "Sowohl die politisierte künstlerische Avant-garde als auch die avantgardistische Stadtguerilla fordern das Primat des existentiellen Inhalts und eine daraus resultierende revoluionäre Lebenspraxis."

[23] For two thorough histories of the series, see Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter: October 18, 1977* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2000); Kai Uwe Hemken, *Gerhard Richter: 18. Oktober 1977* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 2001). See also Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "A Note on Gerhard Richter's 'October 18, 1977,'" *October* 48 (Spring 1989), 88-109.

into his seemingly analogical employment of the photographic source material; his unwillingness to make straightforward public statements that might clarify his intentions in tackling such a touchy subject.[24] Klaus Theweleit has referred to Richter's series in terms of its "abstract radicalism," claiming that it was partly a product of fear: "The painter, fearing that his own production would deteriorate into triviality, takes on a complex like the 'the RAF' as a subject not because of agreement with its goals or ideas, but rather because of an abstract identification with its exceptional situation: its radical isolation, its persecution, the way they occurred at the end of the seventies."[25] Indeed, the mood of elegy, or underlying message of melancholy, that has often been ascribed to the series might be read as a result of Richter's own acknowledgement of the artist's political ineffectiveness**.**

The artists under consideration here, i.e., the generation to emerge after Richter and Sigmar Polke, confronted the already deeply entrenched situation of political ambivalence in works that employed humor as a sort of coping strategy. When ideologies of all stripes had come to seem suspect, or even completely bankrupt, joking offered a fallback plan for artists who still wanted to address political content but rejected dogma. Each of the artists had had different experiences with leftist political and social activities

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[24] On Richter's relationship with his interviewers, see "Interview with Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 1986," in Gerhard Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings 1962-1993*, trans. David Britt (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 132-166.

[25] Klaus Theweleit, "Bemerkungen zum RAF-Gespenst: 'Abstrakter Realismus' und Kunst," in *Ghosts* (Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld, 1998), 68; "Die Angst, des Malers, mit der eigenen Produktion in Belanglosigkeiten zu verfallen, nimmt sich einen Komplex wie 'die RAF' zum Sujet nicht wegen einer Übereinstimmung mit ihren Zielen oder Ideen, sondern aus einer abstrakten Identifikation mit deren exzeptioneller Lage: ihrer radikalen Isolation, ihrer Verfolgung, wie sie Ende der Siebziger passiert."

in the years during which they were educated. Albert Oehlen, for example, had been involved in 1972 in the *Mietersolidarität* (Tenants Solidarity) movement with Immendorff, whose own work had centered on political engagement since his years of studying with Joseph Beuys at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf in the mid-1960s. Martin Kippenberger had lived for a period in 1974 at Sigmar Polke's commune at Willich near Düsseldorf, an experiment in alternative living typical for the era. Beginning in 1978 Kippenberger worked as co-manager of the Kreuzberg punk club S.O.36 and played in his own band, "Die Grugas."[26] Rosemarie Trockel had already taken part in the student protest movement through the influence of her older sister in the 1960s.[27] Georg Herold, for his part, had trained as an artist in his native East Germany before being briefly imprisoned for an attempted escape and eventually "bought free" by the Federal Republic of Germany; contemporary politics thus played a distinct role in his formation as an artist.[28] Yet in each case the direct involvement with political action was short-lived and more experimental than defined by serious commitment. Politics and social critique would find their way into the images, editions, objects and posters, but always observed from an oblique, ironic angle.

In order to further establish the context in which the members of this artistic generation emerged, two publications that represent the mood among the political left after the demise of sixties' radicalism are worth examining. The first was an issue of the political journal *Kursbuch*, published in June 1977, the same summer that Documenta 6

[26] Kippenberger is typically described as having been apolitical, which may be true, but he had regular contact with left-oriented art and music scenes.

[27] In a studio visit with Trockel in Cologne (29 April 2005), she recalled handing out anti-war fliers with her older sister in 1966 at the age of fourteen.

[28] Herold's transition from East to West will be discussed in chapter 4.

took place. Its theme was dedicated to a consideration of *Zehn Jahre danach* (Ten Years After), which entailed taking a retrospective look back at what had happened since the first full flowering of the student protest movement in the summer of 1967 during and after the anti-Shah demonstrations on June 2 in Berlin.[29] Taking stock of their situation a decade later, the editors of *Kursbuch* commissioned texts by over a dozen writers analyzing the current state of affairs that had developed in the wake of the *Tendenzwende*.[30] With essays like Klaus Hartung's analysis of the anti-authoritarian movement's crisis, several of the authors painted a fairly defeatist picture of how the left had devolved into factionalism in the early 1970s as various Marxist-Leninist groupings vied for influence largely in response to the RAF's growing militancy. Hartung described the sense of loss resulting from the lack of unity in the following way: "It is not the feeling of an 'unknown loss,' of petty-bourgeois melancholy, but rather that of a *conscious* loss resulting from a real state of being lost."[31]

The late 1970s were characterized by a general sense of burnout, whereby politics and everyday life were seen to have become increasingly incompatible. In a second essay in the *Kursbuch* issue, Johann August Schülein attempted to explain, from a socio-psychological perspective, how the *Tendenzwende* had led to many individuals of the protest movement returning to focus on improving their personal lives outside of the

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[29] For a concise summary and analysis of events, see Konrad H. Jarausch, *Deutsche Studenten, 1800-1970* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), 226-241.

[30] The editors at the time were Karl Markus Michel and Harald Wieser, with the cooperation of founding editor Hans Magnus Enzensberger.

[31] Klaus Hartung, "Versuch, die Krise der antiautoritären Bewegung wieder zur Sprache zu bringen," *Kursbuch* 48 (June 1977), 15; "Es ist nicht das Gefühl des 'unbekannten Verlusts', der kleinbürgerlichen Melancholie, sondern das des *bewußten* Verlusts, resultierend aus einem wirklichen Verlorengegangensein."

public political arena. Labeling this development the *Rückzug ins Private* (retreat into the private), Schülein attempted to identify typical problems and responses that had cropped up since the early 1970s as protest turned into rigid dogmatism. This led him to remind his readers that self-critique was also indispensable for the process of critiquing society: "The identity that a subject requires in order to become politically oppositional under the conditions of the *Tendenzwende* must be fundamentally *self-reflexive*. Critical fantasy alone is no longer enough."[32] For Schülein, the attention devoted to the problems of the *Alltag*, or everyday, was not entirely negative, despite the fact that it was not clear whether most people would be capable of resisting a *Wiederkehr des Verdrängten* (return of the repressed). Rather, the return to the private represented a "*historically necessary concentration on everyday problems* that until now hindered and distorted political praxis."[33] One could therefore view the current situation as prompting a necessary regrouping, a time in which to seek new strategies that took into account the failings and omissions of the previous decade.

Two years after the *Kursbuch* issue, Jürgen Habermas edited a widely read collection of essays on "The Spiritual Situation of the Age," a term that derived from Karl Jasper's book of the same name first published in 1931. Habermas's two-volume anthology was divided into thematic sections that focused on specifically German-related

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[32] Johann August Schülein, "Von der Studentenrevolte zur Tendenzwende oder der Rückzug ins Private," *Kursbuch* 48 (June 1977), 112; "Die Identität, über die ein Subjekt verfügen muß, um unter der Bedingungen der Tendenzwende politisch oppositionell zu werden, muß wesentlich *selbstreflexiv* sein. Kritische Phantasie allein reicht nicht mehr aus.

[33] Ibid, 116; "…*historisch notwendige Konzentration auf die Alltagsprobleme*, die bisher politische Praxis behindert und verzerrt haben."

questions as well as those of a more general, international scope.[34] As in the *Kursbuch* issue, the writers took into account the turn of events during the 1970s and widely agreed that the "spiritual situation" of the time was in need of a new direction, or at least a sound analysis. In the letter that Habermas sent out to roughly 50 critics, writers and social scientists in order to solicit essays, he clarified the necessity of a *Zeitdiagnose* (diagnosis of the times) by making reference to the waning influence in the 1970s of the intellectual left: "That with which we identified, if I may put it so generally, and still can identify has been militantly called into question in the past half-decade. All things considered, the left is reacting meekly to a New Right…."[35] For Habermas, this New Right threatened to eclipse the Left's position in the postwar era as maintaining the primary responsibility for the formation of public opinion. The collection would provide something of a test to see whether the Left could reassert its former influence.

Two particular essays in the anthology merit discussion here. In the first, Karl Heinz Bohrer distinguished between what he called the "three cultures": Old Culture, New Culture and Popular Culture.[36] For Bohrer, 1978 could be seen as the final endpoint in West Germany, France and Italy for the utopian projects of 1967/68. He argued that by this later date the New Culture, defined by the self-styled neo-avant-garde as it attempted

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[34] Jürgen Habermas, ed., *Stichworte zur 'Geistigen Situation der Zeit'*, 2 vol. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979).

[35] Jürgen Habermas, "Introduction," in Jürgen Habermas, ed., *Observations on "The Spiritual Situation of the Age"*, trans. Andrew Buchwalter (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), 2. The book's broad scope was in part determined by the fact that it would be the 1000th edition of the Edition Suhrkamp, a series launched in the early 1960s to promote philosophical and sociological writings.

[36] Karl Heinz Bohrer, "The Three Cultures," in Habermas, ed., *Observations on "The Spiritual Situation of the Age"*, 125-155.

in the 1960s a revival of the classic avant-garde, "has either lost its fascination or has come to approximate the Old Culture."[37] Thus far he repeats, without the same note of bitterness, the thesis posed four years earlier by Peter Bürger. Interesting in the context of the artistic generation of the mid-1970s is Bohrer's more positive theory that New Culture had given way throughout the 1970s to the predominance of Popular Culture, an idea in line with contemporaneous discussions around postmodernism. In contrast to the failed New Culture, Bohrer claims that "the Popular Culture, borne by petit bourgeois and proletarian youths, is somewhat protected from such scruples of reflection. Beyond the objections of cultural criticism, it possesses the vitality of its own self-regenerating reality."[38] Popular, consumer culture became one of the primary subjects and sources for the artists of the 1980s. The danger for these artists, as will be explored in subsequent chapters, is that their works could so easily be interpreted as strictly affirmative of the status quo.

In many ways, a split between three generations—that of the postwar period, the 1960s and the 1980s—negatively affected the belief in what might constitute a contemporary version of a critical, avant-garde practice. Hans Platschek—a German painter of the postwar generation whose own prolific critical writings on art appeared beginning in the 1960s—treated the specifically German history of the avant-garde, flatly arguing that Germany never had a proper avant-garde, thus any talk of a neo-avant-garde would be pointless: "An avant-garde that never was, the German one, met with an avant-

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[37] Ibid., 136.

[38] Ibid. This version of events will be considered in greater detail in the discussion of defining an audience in chapter 3**,** since it suggests an explanation for the appearance of a contemporaneous punk-inflected humor in art produced in West Berlin and Hamburg.

garde that is no longer."[39] This late-arrived superficial avant-garde was, in Platschek's view, embodied by the figure of Joseph Beuys, who could only convince the public of his work's value by cloaking it in myth and claiming an inheritance from the historical avant-garde. In reference to Beuys's work with fat, Platschek wrote, "The meaning of smearing margarine in the corner of a room remains obscure unless one presents such a thing as avant-garde art."[40] According to Platschek, the avant-garde was only present in the form of its shadow, in murky references to once-revolutionary gestures. From such a perspective, the best thing one could say was that the quixotic attempts by Beuys and the Fluxus artists to revive the avant-garde in the West Germany of the 1960s may at least have been tied to a noble cause, but by the time the generation of the 1980s made its appearance, all such efforts could have only been received as deeply misguided.

This admittedly cursory discussion of the state of cultural politics in West Germany of the late 1970s is intended to establish the sociopolitical backdrop against which artists born around 1950 had to situate themselves and their artistic practices. It is not to overlook the fact that there were still those from the Left who held out hope for the effectiveness of the *new social movements*—including the anti-nuclear, women's, gay rights and environmental movements—which distanced themselves from the student

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[39] Hans Platschek, "Schüsse in Hornberg oder Der Streit um die Avant-garde," in Habermas, ed., *Stichworte zur 'Geistigen Situation der Zeit'*, vol. II, 630; "Eine Avantgarde, die nie eine war, die deutsche, hat sich mit einer Avantgarde getroffen, die keine mehr ist."

[40] Ibid., 628; "Der Sinn, Margarine in eine Zimmerecke zu schmieren, bleibt im dunkeln, es sei denn, man gibt dergleichen als Avant-gardekunst aus."

movement.[41] In an interview in *Kursbuch*, the sociologist Oskar Negt argued that the collapse of the student protest movement was only half of the story: "The other half consists of a restructuring, unprecedented in German history insofar as it is continued in the Federal Republic, of the power relations of the universities, in the organization of learning and in the mediated contents."[42] Clearly, positive transformations had been enacted as a result of the anti-authoritarian movement and would continue to take place throughout the 1970s and 1980s in a shifting constellation of causes. But this does not take away from the fact that the mood dominant among the left, in particular in the realm of cultural production, was fairly grim.

Rejection of the Lofty

In 1976, Albert Oehlen and his frequent collaborator Werner Büttner formed the *Liga zur Bekämpfung des widersprüchlichen Verhaltens* (League for the Prevention of Contradictory Behavior) in Berlin. Under the auspices of their absurdist organization, Oehlen and Büttner published three issues of the magazine *Dum Dum*. One of their key interests, as the critic Roberto Ohrt has explained, was the incorporation and manipulation of sloganeering language associated with political groupings and leftist agitation. As these modes of address had lost a lot of their impact since the late sixties,

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[41] For a cogent summary of the various movements making up the *Neue sozialen Bewegungen*, see Hermand, *Die Kultur der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1965-85*, 508-612.

[42] Oskar Negt, "Interesse gegen Partei: Über Identitätsprobleme der deutschen Linken—Ein Gespräch mit Harald Wieser," *Kursbuch* 48 (June 1977), 176; "Die andere Hälfte besteht in einer für die deutsche Geschichte, soweit sie von der Bundesrepublik fortgesetzt wird, bisher beispiellosen Umstrukturierung der Machtverhältnisse der Hochschulen, in der Lernorganisation und in den vermittelten Inhalten."

Oehlen and Büttner saw it as their task to employ such rhetoric in an effort to expose its obsolescence. Ohrt writes, "…the only way of showing faith in the essence of the matter, of showing that they were still 'working on the truth,' was to construct an impossibly tense relationship between the highly charged promise of the sign and its failure to deliver the significant goods."[43] The moment of consensus around the left's failed undertaking and the concomitant loss of belief in the continuing relevance of the avant-garde could only be met with a rejection of clear and cogent messages. Politics as a route to enacting lasting social transformation was no longer viable, but neither could an artist schooled in political discourse simply ignore its potent language. Büttner and Oehlen would incorporate this language into much of their later work, whether in the form of titles appended to paintings or, perhaps most effectively, in artist books and editions. *Dum Dum*, with its ring of infantilism and glancing reference to Dada, functioned as a launching pad for numerous subsequent books and catalogues that would come to make up a major part of each artist's body of work in the early years of their careers.

When it came to sheer material abundance, no one among his group of peers could surpass the efforts of Martin Kippenberger, who became known throughout the 1980s for publishing a book, edition, poster or catalogue for virtually every exhibition he produced. Büttner and Oehlen were introduced to Kippenberger in 1977, a year after he had left the Hamburg Hochschule für Bildende Kunst (Academy of Fine Art) without completing his degree. The three of them would be responsible for numerous collaborative and solo projects in myriad physical forms. If the aims of Beuys's "Social Sculpture" to integrate life and art according to long-established avant-garde principles

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[43] Roberto Ohrt, "A Tale of the Inappropriate," in Burkhard Riemschneider, ed., *Albert Oehlen* (Cologne: Benedikt Taschen, 1995), 17.

had appeared to founder, Kippenberger, et al, would partially succeed by setting more modest goals. Turning Beuys's maxim that "every human being is an artist" on its head, Kippenberger proclaimed, "every artist is a human being." Daily life would be infused with artistic invention and any opportunity to create an object to mark an event would be seized upon. In contrast to Beuys, who gave the impression that his output was made according to a cryptic master plan, these younger artists avoided meta-concepts. The specific artistic media most favorable to this approach were those of an ephemeral nature. And if painting was eventually turned to as a "dead" medium, the mode of execution needed to prioritize speed of execution.[44]

Rosemarie Trockel, though not directly a part of the group around Kippenberger and Oehlen, occasionally exhibited with them in Cologne beginning in the early 1980s. Her work needs to be addressed as part of this context of critiquing the art world from within while simultaneously adapting oneself to its standards. Trockel is today well known for the artist's books and editions that have frequently accompanied her gallery and museum shows. As with Kippenberger and Oehlen, her steady production of smaller-scale objects and printed matter will be examined in tandem with the more singular, physically imposing works for which she is better known. Trockel infused her practice with an ironic, arch humor that offered a welcome break from the more childish jokes of some of her male peers. The subtlety of her comedic sensibility comes across in all of her

[44] In the chapters that follow, I will discuss both the ephemeral (editions, posters, small catalogues, etc.) and more traditional mediums (painting, sculpture) used by the artists. It should be clarified at the outset, however, that these artists tended to prioritize rapid production in the early years of their careers, i.e., from the late 1970s until the late 1980s. Their "mature" work of the 1990s will only be referred to occasionally. In a future essay I hope to explore and identify changes in their work after 1989.

works, whether they take the form of an elaborately arranged vitrine or a mockup for an artist's book.

The fourth artist to be discussed is the least known outside of the German-speaking art world. Although Georg Herold received regular, albeit modest, attention in the United States and Europe starting in the late 1980s, his most significant exhibitions have not traveled outside of Germany.[45] Herold deserves a more significant reputation outside of his own country, alone for the reason that his dual background in the East and West enabled him to produce potent commentaries on cultural and political dichotomies at play during the Cold War. Herold also forms an important bridge between the "masculine" and "feminine" modes of laughter that I will introduce below and return to throughout the dissertation. His disregard for traditional sculptural material and preference for the low and cast-off (cheap construction materials, underwear, used office furniture) places his style of humor somewhere in between the bawdy jokes of Kippenberger and Oehlen, and the understated ironies of Trockel.

When considered in detail, the artists' ephemeral and aborted projects take on a weight beyond what one might expect from such subsidiary objects. While giving due attention to the more visible and well-known works, equal emphasis will be placed here on the side projects, which have often been overlooked in the artists' critical reception. Such output has long provided a counterweight to the commercial forces of the art market. As I hope to demonstrate, the question of artistic success in the late 1970s and early 1980s was not as straightforward as the general hype around eighties' careerism

[45] Herold had his first solo gallery exhibition in the United States in 1988 at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Numerous gallery exhibitions followed in the United States and Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s, though he has never received a retrospective exhibition outside of Germany.

might seem to indicate. These artists, who were far from shy when it came to self-promotion, were at the same time critical of the art industry and all of its trappings. Part of the emphasis they placed on the testing out of ideas and approaches was directed toward allowing room for false decisions and bad planning. It would be an overstatement to say that they strategically worked toward failure, an impossible task by definition—one cannot intend to fail "successfully." Yet missteps were built into their practice that offered an important side-route toward the reading of their work.

Full of humor and self-irony, these tangential projects held great value for the artists, as well as for the informed members of their public. What ultimately allows them to maintain their significance, as is also the case with the more "finished," exhibition-ready works, is the priority the artists place on semantic and linguistic play. Jokes flourish in the context of one-off pieces and in the titles appended to the more self-sufficient paintings and sculptures. The mocking of lofty ideas and artistic tradition carried out by Herold, Kippenberger, Oehlen and Trockel did not, however, preclude the presence of "weighty" concepts and historical references. Such signifiers appear in the works as specters that recall centuries of German philosophy and politics. The chasm opened up between form and content marks the classic ground on which jokes are bred.

The Gendering of Laughter in the 1980s

Throughout this project, the joke will be considered as offering two distinct structures: a traditional narrative device with a set-up and punch line (the everyday *Witz*) as well as a more metaphorical conception of the term that allows it to encompass both humor and irony (closer to the Enlightenment *Witz*). Together, humor and irony provided the

vehicles by which these artists could still treat political subject matter without losing sight of the perceived impossibility of direct action. The question arises as to whether the two communicative modes could legitimately function as politics by other means. I will argue in subsequent chapters that the space in which humor and irony rub shoulders afforded the artists a certain license to embrace ambiguity while still making critical statements. The two-part structure of *Witz*, as described by Best, helps to reject what some scholars argue is the inherent split between humor and irony, which I will call into question. According to the literary theorist Candace D. Lang, humor is commonly linked with empty wordplay (Best's standard verbal joke) whereas irony is the trope more associated with a philosophical spirit (Best's *esprit*).[46] The works by this generation of German artists may have gravitated more often toward the former, but the latter was not entirely forsaken. Projects that look at first like frivolous gags require closer examination to reveal more intricate and layered patterns of thought.

One of the difficulties that arise when seriously engaging this work is that it often deploys the most heavy-handed of visual clichés, in particular those related to gender. Occasionally, as in the work of Trockel and Herold, gender stereotypes were directly employed in order to reveal, with humor, their limited capacity for describing the behavior and characteristics of the sexes. In these works, one can easily recognize that the object communicates in an ironical fashion; in the process, stereotypes are critiqued and exposed. However, in other examples, especially in the work of Kippenberger and Oehlen, the jokes partake of a blatant sexism that seems to lack the redeeming quality of critique. The following chapters will explore a range of individual works in order to

[46] Candace D. Lang, *Irony/Humor: Critical Paradigms* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 42.

determine when and how the artists were capable of maintaining critical distance. Since the gender-based jokes encountered in their work stem largely from the group context in which each artist operated, I will also analyze the role of audience formation. Laughter is a social response, one that presupposes at least a loosely shared set of cultural assumptions.

In an exhibition and subsequent book, the art historian and curator Jo Anna Isaak identified laughter as a potentially subversive tool for women artists of the 1980s. Her 1983 exhibition, "The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter," included works by Mike Glier, Ilona Granet, Jenny Holzer, Mary Kelly, Barbara Kruger and Nancy Spero that produced "irruptions in the production of meaning and what is the same thing, the idea of value."[47] The 1996 book, greatly expanding the exhibition's scope, described in detail how the social codes of jokes lend themselves to a gender-based analysis.[48] For Isaak, laughter "is meant to be thought of as a metaphor for transformation, for thinking about cultural change."[49] Isaak's approach will prove useful here in locating the moments when the work of these German artists initiates laughter as a transformative response. However, as often as not, their jokes reinforce, rather than undermine, the stereotypes upon which they trade. The subversive possibilities of laughter may have been recognized in theory, but they were often ignored in practice.

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[47] Jo Anna Isaak, *The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter*, exh. cat. (New York: Protetch McNeil, 1983), not paginated. See also Jo Anna Isaak, ed., *Laughter Ten Years After*, exh. cat. (Geneva, NY: Hobart and William Smith Colleges Press, 1995).

[48] Jo Anna Isaak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 44.

[49] Ibid., 5.

In particular, the decidedly macho brand of humor practiced by the circle around Kippenberger and Oehlen was anything but subtle. They relied on well-worn clichés of masculinity to loudly trumpet their status as a group without committing to any stated program of action. Looking beyond the obvious impulse to provoke the audience and gain attention, there are two different interpretations of the work that are not mutually exclusive. The first is the idea that these artists mocked and ultimately rejected the masculinist streak running through the history of modernism. One might argue that, in taking on the look and language of a men's art collective, they performed what two exhibition curators in the mid-1990s dubbed "the masculine masquerade."[50] This position allows the artist to inhabit a gender role, but to do so with the knowledge that he or she might treat it as something flexible. Such an approach opens up a critical response to pre-determined behavioral patterns by granting the performer the necessary agency to operate outside of "the role's textual givenness."[51] However, as will be shown, it is difficult to attribute this position in a convincing way to Kippenberger and Oehlen, who preferred to remain ambiguous in terms of the work's legibility as critique.

The second interpretive route centers on this critical ambiguity, what Craig Owens described as the contemporary artist's "double-bind."[52] Owens writes, "if the modernist imperative is obeyed, then the norm is simultaneously upheld; if the modernist

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[50] See Andrew Perchuk and Helaine Posner, ed., *The Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity and Representation*, exh. cat. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

[51] Harry Brod, "Masculinity as Masquerade," in ibid., 16.

[52] Craig Owens, "Honor, Power, and the Love of Women," in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 148.

imperative is rejected, it is simultaneously confirmed."[53] Kippenberger and Oehlen could both reenact and distance themselves from the *Männerbünde* (men's societies) that surrounded artists of the previous generation such as Baselitz, Immendorff and Lüpertz. These artists, for all their provocation, were still tied to the waning traditions of modern painting and its social groupings. Masculinity and authenticity remained inextricably linked for this generation. Kippenberger and Oehlen could depict the overweight, feeble-looking body of the male artist in their self-portraits as a means toward undermining the more stable self-image of the older artists. In doing so, they were relying on a long-established tradition of uncertain representations of the male body that went back to the late-18th and early 19th centuries. These contemporary German artists could almost take for granted what Abigail Solomon-Godeau has termed "male trouble" to describe the crisis in representing the male nude in the neo-classical and romantic periods.[54] In the case of Kippenberger and Oehlen, the debased body they presented was not always their own and it was not always male; bodies of all kinds were ridiculed, which led some members of their audience to take offense. A number of critics began, in the second half of the 1980s, to respond negatively to what was seen as sexist and homophobic content in the artists' work.[55]

Like a conceptual counterweight to their masculinist project, the work of Rosemarie Trockel has often been discussed in terms of its viability for promoting

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[53] Ibid.

[54] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997).

[55] In particular, writings by Wolfgang Max Faust, Harald Fricke and Marius Babias were highly critical of Kippenberger. These articles will be discussed in chapter 6.

feminism. Trockel studied and began showing her work around the same time as the others, and it was partially as a feminist-oriented response that critics and art historians have described her approach. I want to complicate this picture while not denying the feminist aspect of Trockel's work. Her humor takes on a very different cast from that of Kippenberger and Oehlen; it is less oriented toward slapstick and more geared toward the cerebral. Humor theorist Leon Rappoport has written that for contemporary women comedians, "the self-critical themes are primarily brought up in order to ridicule the stereotypes they are based on.[56] Such a claim surely applies to Trockel, as she does not simply place herself outside of the social processes that she attacks. Like Kippenberger and Oehlen, her work is full of self-irony.

Trockel's work will be discussed in the context of carving out a feminist position distinct from that of the *Männerbund*, yet at various points these seemingly different projects overlap in revealing ways. For all of these members of the "hinge generation"[57] came of age at a moment when politics no longer seemed transformable via artistic practice. Wilfried Dickhoff has discussed Trockel's emergence in the art world of the 1970s as occurring at a time when the political utopias of the 1960s had been replaced by

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[56] Leon Rappoport, *Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Humor* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), 108.

[57] This term (in German, *Scharniergeneration*) appeared in a magazine article on Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's advisor Frank-Walter Steinmeier (the current Foreign Minister), who is ten years younger than his former superior. The writer places Steinmeier in the "hinge generation between the '68 movement and the more pragmatic 80s." ["…Scharniergeneration zwischen der 68er-Bewegung und den eher pragmatischen achtziger Jahren."] See Corinna Edmundts, "Kanzler in der Krise 3: Kann er Schröder retten?," *Cicero* (August 2004), 60.

the drive to "continue politics by other, artistic means."[58] Art is considered unsuitable for achieving authentic, lasting political change, though it is still capable of commenting on the processes by which politics writ large is carried out. In Trockel's case, this also led her to seek "new paths of feminism while simultaneously avoiding feminism's 'ism.'"[59] It is my aim to continue the evaluation of Trockel's practice in light of its feminism, but I will also point out aspects of her work that complicate what has often been an insufficient acount.

In the case of Herold, as mentioned above, his work occupied a unique position somewhere between the masculinist antics of Kippenberger and Oehlen, and the feminist leanings of Trockel. Though gender as a subject has not been his primary concern, he has produced numerous sculptures and paintings that humorously engage visual clichés of sexuality. Herold has a knack for employing ham-fisted references to sexual difference that poke critical fun at stereotypes without appearing to reinforce them. At the same time, his work gives every indication that he is aware of the difficulties involved when trying to step outside of prescribed social roles. Herold's ridiculing of the masculine tradition in sculpture as it evolved from Michelangelo to the Minimalists demonstrates that he was commenting on what Barbara Ehrenreich termed the "decline of patriarchy."[60] Like Ehrenreich, Herold is highly conscious of the fact that such a long tradition is hardly going to be dislodged by his small, symbolic gestures. The potential for

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[58] Wilfried Dickhoff, *After Nihilism: Essays on Contemporary Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 195.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Barbara Ehrenreich, "The Decline of Patriarchy," in Maurice Berger, et al, ed., *Constructing Masculinity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 284-290.

failure must always be acknowledged, something that the art object is able to perform with its own inadequacy.

Slippery Authenticity

Despite the differences in terms of gender relations, these artists are firmly linked by their common drive to pit the trivial against the lofty. This split was constantly maintained, undone, and ultimately reestablished in order to demonstrate their awareness of the difficulty of sustaining or promoting authenticity. Following Paul de Man's essays on irony written in the 1970s, we can gain a better understanding of the dilemma facing these artists, namely, the extent to which ironic language indicates a divided self. De Man's own relationship to postmodern critical theory has been conditioned by his compromised status since the revelation, in the late 1980s, of his wartime support as a journalist for the Belgian government collaborating with the country's Nazi occupiers.[61] There is an odd overlap between de Man's posthumous reception and that of some of the artists to be discussed. Though definitively occupying separate categories, the view held by sectors of the academy that de Man's writings were now irreparably damaged goods coincides in time with the increasingly negative critical responses to the work of Kippenberger and his colleagues as they repeatedly offended their audience. Their play

[61] For a series of diverse reactions to the discovery of de Man's long-hidden writings some four years after his 1983 death, see Werner Hamacher, et al, ed., *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism* (Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989). A damning account of de Man's past as well as his theories is offered in David Lehman, *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1991). Richard Wolin has written a balanced and nuanced assessment of problems in the philosophy of de Man, Martin Heidegger and deconstruction; see "Deconstruction at Auschwitz: Heidegger, de Man, and the New Revisionism," in *Labyrinths: Explorations in the Critical History of Ideas* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 210-230.

with signs of sexism, racism and fascism walked a fine line between critique and affirmation. De Man's theories turn out to be highly useful in interpreting their work in both its visual and textual manifestations. Christopher S. Wood has written that de Man focused on the "sign's tendency to swerve unpredictably out of the code and generate still further signs, all demanding further interpretation."[62] This succinctly describes the layered meanings that compete for the viewer's attention in many works by this group of artists.

Discussing the gap between the ironist's self of sense and his or her use of language, de Man writes, "The ironic language splits the subject into an empirical self that exists in a state of inauthenticity and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity. This does not, however, make it into an authentic language, for to know inauthenticity is not the same as to be authentic."[63] The notion of inauthenticity will be addressed within the following chapter through an examination of how these younger artists sought to position themselves in the West German and, over time, international art scenes. What we might describe as a typically postmodern condition of the inauthentic did not prevent artists from seeking isolated moments in which an authentic gesture might be made. But the possibilities were certainly seen to be limited, such that de Man's divided subject could be said to define a generation. Humor and irony were ideal tools for coping with a divided subjectivity.

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[62] Christopher S. Wood, "Paul de Man and Art History," *Flash Art International* (Summer 1995), 87 [originally published as "Paul de Man und die Kunstgeschichte," *Texte zur Kunst* 14 (June 1994), 83-89].

[63] Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 214.

In an essay on the avant-garde and postmodernism in the 1970s, Andreas Huyssen singled out a "search for tradition" as a central condition of what many were defining as a decisive break with the modern heritage.[64] West Germany's rediscovery in the 1960s of Weimar-era leftist traditions did not lead to as serious a transformation of artistic practice as did the revival of Dada in the United States. Huyssen writes, "In Europe, 1968 marks not the breakthrough then hoped for, but rather the replayed end of the traditional avant-garde."[65] Postmodernism's lack of a convincing alternative political agenda led to the danger that it would become an "affirmative culture"[66] from the beginning rather than this taking place gradually, which was the case with the historical avant-garde. The one thing sorely lacking in these otherwise highly informative and well argued texts by Huyssen is that they tend toward the summarizing account and leave out detailed discussion of specific works of art and literature. One could easily be given the false impression that the visual artists emerging in the mid-1970s were entirely ignorant of their historical dilemma. However, a close look at many of their early works makes it clear that they were often painfully aware of their predicament and that the turn to humor and jokes was every bit a conscious response, no matter how compromised the results.

In order to comprehend the production as well as the reception of the joke in their work, the five main chapters will be structured along the following lines: the generational embrace of the joke in the late 1970s; the production of art as a social, group-oriented process with that both follows and rejects gender categories; the comedic logic of the art

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[64] Andreas Huyssen, "The Search for Tradition: Avant-garde and Postmodernism in the 1970s," in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 160-177.

[65] Ibid, 166.

[66] Ibid, 170.

object; the role of a sympathetic and engaged audience in bringing the joke to fruition; critical reception as practiced by the artists' detractors. Today we are in a position to reconsider retrospective accounts of what is too often labeled the "cynicism" inherent to art of the 1980s. Donald Kuspit's summation of the problem is a case in point: "The postmodern cynical artist knows the languages of modern art, and usually has complete mastery of them, but does not know what to say with them experientially…. The postmodernist artist knows styles, but not their meanings, and has no meaning of his or her own—no authentic experiential meaning to communicate."[67] There is more than enough truth to Kuspit's words, and such a position will be addressed below. However, I want simultaneously to develop an alternate theory that still leaves room for the work of this generation to retain elements of authenticity and direct experience, as skeptical as the artists may have been toward such terms. Their disbelief, even pessimism, may have prevented authentic forms of social and cultural criticism from taking root. Yet it is worth holding out the possibility that they emerged at various moments, seemingly of their own volition and almost in spite of the artists' better judgment.

[67] Donald Kuspit, *Signs of Psyche in Modern and Postmodern Art* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 279.

Chapter 2—After Beuys: Jokes and the Generation Gap

Art is when you laugh anyway.[1]

Joseph Beuys

Beuys's Legacy

A discussion of humor in the art of the German-speaking countries after WWII must begin by acknowledging crucial role of the Fluxus movement. Tomas Schmit, Wolf Vostell, Gerhard Rühm and Joseph Beuys were the local participants in a loose-knit, international project that saw its founding festival take place in Wiesbaden in 1962. The humorous side of Fluxus has long been acknowledged and thematized in histories of the movement.[2] Yet in the case of Beuys, the most famous West German participant in Fluxus, the vast majority of critical interpretations have centered on his overriding seriousness, in terms of both subject matter (the Holocaust, German history, anthroposophy, etc.) and materials (metal, felt, fat: mostly things that evoke sober images of drab clothing, worn machinery and decomposing life forms). As a result, one of the more surprising texts to be written on Beuys was published in 1992 and attempted to position his work as inextricably tied to laughter. Published in a two-part issue of the German magazine *Kunstforum* dedicated to art and humor, Gerhard Theewen's "Joseph Beuys und der Humor" sought to move past the commonplace—and in the author's

[1] Joseph Beuys, *Kunst ist, wenn man trotzdem lacht*, 1979, postcard. This work is reproduced and briefly discussed in Gerhard Theewen, "Joseph Beuys und der Humor, oder darf ein Künstler (über sich selbst) lachen?," *Kunstforum* 120 (1992), 132.

[2] For a history of Fluxus, see Thomas Kellein, *Fluxus* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995) and Owen F. Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1998). Texts from the Fluxus group can be found in Ken Friedman, ed., *The Fluxus Reader* (New York: Academy Editions, 1998).

opinion, flawed—interpretation of Beuys as incorrigibly (self-) serious.[3] While acknowledging that most of Beuys's output did not appear to reflect a comedic sensibility, Theewen dug up several quotes and pointed out various objects (primarily relatively ephemeral things like editions and drawings) and public appearances in order to demonstrate the lighter side of the artist's practice.

Perhaps the most pointed example provided by Theewen is a postcard Beuys designed in 1979 for the Free International University For Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research, which he had notoriously founded in Düsseldorf in 1973, the year after his dismissal from the faculty of the Art Academy. Printed on the postcard (fig. 3) is a quote that the artist attributes to Dante: "Art is when you laugh anyway." That is, one can, indeed must, find the means to laugh even in the face of all the unpleasant things reality has to offer. Or, if applied directly to Beuys's work, one can read the quote as an explanation of art's role in mediating the weighty issues that the artist addressed over several decades. Laughter in this sense provides a means of access to problems of a complex nature, whether unresolved conflicts or buried traumas, which resist objective, unemotional analysis. Rather than tackle thorny subjects directly, art is equated with laughter based on its ability to approach such matters from an oblique angle. Art and laughter have shared qualities in that both offer vehicles for the opening up of new perspectives. Given the lack of overt humor in the majority of Beuys's output, one must locate the moment of laughter in the process of the work's creation, rather than in the finished product itself.

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[3] Theewen, "Joseph Beuys und der Humor," 114-132.

Theewen cautions that his selection of work should not be understood as a separate and independent group within Beuys's oeuvre; rather, humor ought to be thought of as a general component of Beuys's life and worldview.[4] Contemporaries of Beuys who witnessed his public appearances, whether in schools, performance festivals or exhibition openings, have repeatedly noted his charisma and generosity.[5] The atmosphere of collaboration that Beuys fostered in his work gave his acolytes unique insight into the motivations behind the art objects that he left behind. And given their prevalence in German and international art collections, it is the installations, vitrines and singular sculptures that have primarily shaped the public reception of Beuys since his death in 1986. As Theewen acknowledges, Beuys's audience often stood puzzled before the works even while he was alive. Fortunately for them, the artist's "liberating laugher" provided the necessary "relief."[6] One has to give Theewen the benefit of the doubt, since Beuys' nurturing of a "shaman" or "guru" image, one that has stuck in the public imagination since his death, could just as easily confuse as enlighten. Still, Theewen's positing of a Beuysian sense of humor provides a helpful counterweight to all the depictions of the artist as the stone-faced fabricator of Teutonic myths.

Yet Theewen's approach, while providing an important contribution to our understanding of how Beuys operated, has the unintended effect of demonstrating the exception that proves the rule. After considering the carefully chosen examples given in the essay, the reader is granted a new perspective on the artist's attitude toward creativity,

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[4] Ibid., 115.

[5] For an account written by a former *Meisterschüler* (master pupil), see Johannes Stüttgen, *Der ganze Riemen: 20 Jahre mit Joseph Beuys* (Frankfurt am Main: Dielmann, 2003).

[6] Ibid.

but this perspective comes more through statements Beuys made than through the objects themselves. With the newly acquired knowledge, one can indeed conceive of Beuys as a more complex person; however, it ultimately does little to mitigate the (often literal) gravity possessed by the majority of the works themselves. Beuys may have made occasional light of his more somber pieces (for instance, Theewen discusses a joking reference by Beuys in 1976 to the *Badewanne* [Bathtub; fig. 4] of 1960[7]) or infused his daily practice with laughter, but generally the broader public image he developed, the themes he treated and the works he produced would seem to weigh collectively against Theewen's interpretation, illuminating as it is.

One might argue that Beuys had to have a sense of humor in order to conceive of the idea of living with a coyote in a New York art gallery for several days and titling the performance *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me* (held at the René Block Gallery, 21-25 May 1974). But he simply did not broadcast his occasional jokes in the overt manner of the generation of the 1980s. Before leaving Beuys to explore this group's attitude toward laughter, it is worth examining comments made by Peter Bürger over a decade after his *Theory of the Avant-garde* attempted to close the chapter on art's utopian imperative. In an essay first published in 1987 and then expanded and reworked in 1996, Bürger fine-tuned his initial comments in order to explain how Beuys had attempted to keep alight the fading embers of the avant-garde.[8] This was not the first time that Bürger had acknowledged some of the many criticisms that had been leveled against his book

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[7] Ibid., 116.

[8] Peter Bürger, "Der Avantgardist nach dem Ende der Avant-garden: Joseph Beuys," in *Das Altern der Moderne: Schriften zur bildenden Kunst* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), 154-170.

since 1974.[9] In a 1980 postscript written for the second German edition of *Theorie der Avant-garde*, Bürger had already partially refined his claim that art in bourgeois society is "functionless."[10] However, his way of treating the problem was to argue that his ideas had simply been misinterpreted; he merely added a degree of nuance to his original wording of the problem. Ultimately, the postscript was short and provided more of a justification and defense of the text's first edition than a transformation of his theories.

It is in the later essay that a more substantial shift of opinion takes place, even if it does not entirely reject the validity of Bürger's initial views. Bürger writes in "Der Avantgardist" that Beuys undoubtedly operates "in the tradition of the avant-garde movements."[11] But rather than this taking place from a position of historical ignorance, Beuys is fully aware of the impossibility of his task. He understands that the avant-garde movements of the 1910s and 1920s fell far short of achieving their goals of investing everyday life with an elevated artistic consciousness, never rendering art obsolete as a distinct category of activity. And Beuys is fully aware that he will also fail in this respect. Bürger quotes a late speech given by Beuys in 1986 in which the artist speaks of "passing on the torch" of the avant-garde as being the only remaining option.[12] Certainly this image of carrying on a worthy tradition implies some lingering belief in the importance

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[9] The single most informative source for the critical discussion in response to Bürger's book is W. Martin Lüdke, ed., *"Theorie der Avant-garde": Antworten auf Peter Bürgers Bestimmung von Kunst und bürgerlicher Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976).

[10] Peter Bürger, "Postscript to the Second German Edition," *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 95-96.

[11] Bürger, "Der Avantgardist nach dem Ende der Avant-garden," 159.

[12] Ibid. The Beuys speech mentioned by Bürger was "Dank an Wilhelm Lehmbruck," printed in *die tageszeitung*, 27 January 1986, 2.

of pressing for social change through art. Bürger found later that his initial depiction of the neo-avant-garde had relied too heavily on an "either-or" split, thus ignoring the idea that perhaps failure itself was deeply embedded within the project of the historical avant-garde: "Perhaps failure is the mode by which the avantgardist secures the utopian quality of his project, which would always be something different if it were to be realized."[13] Doubt and uncertainty were inextricable components of projects like Surrealism. Why not give its originators the benefit of the doubt and assume they knew full well that their ultimate aims were perpetually beyond reach?

The scope of this dissertation does not allow for a thorough analysis of Beuys's relationship to avant-garde movements past and present. What is crucial here is Bürger's intriguing suggestion that Beuys, while fully aware of the limitations of his practice, nevertheless forged ahead under the guise of a contemporary avant-garde, convinced that this was the necessary path to take. Born in 1921, Beuys came of age in the postwar era as Germany's writers, intellectuals and artists tried to pick up the pieces of a shattered modernist legacy.[14] It was during the years immediately preceding and following the 1948 founding of the Federal Republic of Germany that Beuys studied sculpture at the Düsseldorf Art Academy (1947-51). He was thus directly exposed to the postwar debates over what aesthetic approach would be most appropriate in the aftermath of the National Socialists' 12-year interruption of modern cultural developments within Germany. Given

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[13] Bürger, "Der Avantgardist nach dem Ende der Avant-garden," 159; "Vielleicht ist das Scheitern der Modus, in dem der Avantgardist sich der utopischen Qualität seines Projekts versichert, das als verwirklichtes immer ein anderes ware."

[14] Jost Hermand, *Kultur im Wiederaufbau: Die Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1945-1965* (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1989), 145-218; Martin Damus, *Kunst in der BRD, 1945-1990: Funktionen der Kunst in einer demokratisch verfaßten Gesellschaft* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1995), 28-77.

Beuys's generational position straddling two historical moments—the endpoint of the first wave of avant-garde movements and their putative restitution after World War II—it is no wonder that his work and creative outlook often reflected stark divisions. Experimentation and tradition, laughter and seriousness were just two of the oppositions that make Beuys a figure against which succeeding artistic generations would have to measure themselves.

Two Generations of Postmodernism

Among postwar West German artists, it is arguable that Sigmar Polke, along with Gerhard Richter, most definitively expressed that the first true lapse in the tenets of modernism had occurred during the 1960s. Although Polke has come to be associated by some with a level of inventiveness that rivals that of modern masters like Picasso, in these early years of the postmodern reassessment of modernism he did not seek to break entirely new aesthetic ground. Rather, his work trod a fine line between a retrospective, affirming look at the history of art and a disruptive, humorous critique of its most recognizable and idiosyncratic moments, in particular those of the previous one hundred years.[15] Having emerged in the 1960s during the heyday of Pop art, Polke has long toyed with the forms of high and low, simultaneously drawing comic attention to the gap between them and attempting to break down the perceived opposition. Polke thus stands in for what we might consider the first phase of postmodernism, when an acceptance of the inevitability of *repetition* first led to a critically effective version of parody. While

[15] On the question of Polke's relation to modern painting, see Thomas McEvilley, "Flower Power: Trying to Say the Obvious about Sigmar Polke," in *The Exile's Return: Toward a Redefinition of Painting for the Post-Modern Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 158-166.

Klaus Staeck, for one, maintained a high level of consistency in terms of his methodology, certain aesthetic and conceptual changes can be observed within Polke's work of the 1970s. Partly as a consequence of his alternative lifestyle in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which involved the regular intake of hallucinogenic drugs,[16] Polke's imagery and subject matter grew increasingly comedic and absurdist. His role will be crucial in defining a key current of 1970s artistic practice, partly as a figure of pedagogical influence and partly as a collaborator.

Yet what happens when a subsequent generation, even a half-generation, takes up a stance similar to that of a strong predecessor, in this case Polke? Is this merely the only option after the older artist had already demonstrated the very lack of options for aesthetic renewal he himself had faced? Here we are not faced with the sort of break that Harold Bloom describes as one of the available models of influence between generations of poets: "Poetic Influence…always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation."[17] It is rather the case that the next half-generation brings Polke's initial efforts to a more extreme, or aggressive, place. The point at which Kippenberger, Trockel, Oehlen and Herold produce a deviation from, or perhaps a widening of, the path laid out by Polke occurs precisely in the realm of language. Both in terms of the word's visual circulation within pictures and objects as well as a growing reliance on the title as a key factor in the work's reception, textual language proves to be the instrument through which humor and the joke are

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[16] See Margit Rowell, "Strategems of Subversion," in Margit Rowell, ed., *Sigmar Polke: Works on Paper, 1963-1974*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 18.

[17] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 30.

communicated. This latter moment, in which the recourse to language as the primary conveyor of meaning takes firm hold amid a segment of the up-and-coming West German art scene, can be posited for our purposes as a second phase of postmodernism. Gone is the liberating impact of parodying modernism as found in Polke's work of the 1960s. In its place is a grappling with the limitedness of current conditions, recalling Peter Sloterdijk's discussion of the drive by Dada ironists and, later, Bertolt Brecht to mirror current social conditions in their work: "More important than self-composure is insight into what really confronts us. 'Matter-of-factness' functions as a form of going along, of being-in-the-times: Don't fall behind, don't let any resentments grow, don't cherish any old values, but look to see what the state of affairs is now and what is to be done. We cannot live off the *good old values*, it is better to start with the *bad new reality*."[18]

A desire to "speak" to the present moment is one motivation for the linguistic turn. Obviously, however, the growing presence of language is hardly a guarantee of clarity. While the work to be discussed is anything but abstract, one of the overriding concerns will be to come to terms with images that are often exceedingly difficult to "read," despite partaking of an undeniable realism. Readability as a factor in art historical interpretation must be of primary concern. The move by these artists in the direction of humor and the joke could at times signal a diversionary measure. A compulsion to allow the work to express itself at several removes from the object of discussion characterized an increasing amount of the art being produced from the late 1970s through the 1980s. At the same time, certain West German figures like Staeck and Immendorff retained a belief

[18] Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 441 [originally published as *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1983)].

in formulating cogent messages with clear political connotations, even if they were delivered via satire or allegory. These latter artists will occasionally appear as stylistic and conceptual counterweights to the more ironic visual offerings by the main protagonists of the dissertation.

Polke as Public Figure

For artists of the generation in West Germany immediately following that of Beuys, his international stature as well as his presence as a professor at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art (1961-1972) turned him into a model that could be emulated or rejected, but scarcely ignored. Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter, who were at the Academy in the early 1960s but did not study directly under Beuys, consciously took up painting, the very medium that Beuys had declared to be obsolete in an era when he deemed his "social sculpture" to be the appropriate mode of production.[19] Polke and Richter, but especially Polke, were influenced by the strong presence of Fluxus in Düsseldorf in 1962 and 1963, as well as by the exhibition of historical Dada that had taken place at two local venues in 1958.[20] Polke and Richter's development (with the cooperation of Konrad Lueg, later known as Konrad Fisher) of Capitalist Realism, beginning in 1963, as a West German response to American Pop art, signaled that, like Beuys, they would invest their work with a

[19] On this point, see Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979).

[20] On both topics, see Martin Hentschel, "Solve et Coagula: On Sigmar Polke's Work," trans. Fiona Elliott, in Martin Hentschel, ed., *Sigmar Polke: The Three Lies of Painting* (Bonn: Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1997), 41-91. The Dada exhibition was titled *Dada—Dokumente einer Bewegung* and was on view at the Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen and the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf.

pronounced criticality. However, under the influence of Pop art and Fluxus, their approach would lean more heavily in the direction of irony and humor.

Aside from the frequently ironic use of found images from popular culture and a general fascination with their everyday banality, there are more differences than similarities to be discovered when comparing Richter with Polke. According to Martin Hentschel, clear distinctions are apparent as early as 1962, when a "moral undertone" defining works by Richter must be distinguished from Polke's "ironic distance."[21] Indeed, while Richter has repeatedly been described as cultivating an ambivalent attitude toward the photographic images he treated in paint, numerous writers have pointed out that his chosen subjects easily lend themselves to socially critical interpretations.[22] Though this is invariably performed at several removes from the object of critique, whether via blurring of the paint or the lack of reference to an image's origin, Richter's works typically uphold a degree of "weightiness" not usually encountered in Polke's more lighthearted linguistic and pictorial gamesmanship.

This rough comparison of Richter and Polke is intended merely to begin establishing the latter as the artist who lays the aesthetic groundwork for the generation of the 1980s. Polke's play with irony and humor provided an example for artists of the next half-generation in West Germany, especially for those who studied directly with him in Hamburg (Herold and Oehlen). These younger artists elected not to follow the example set by some of Beuys's students, in particular Jörg Immendorff, who took a more direct approach to the merging of their art practices with ideas of social improvement. Oehlen

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[21] Ibid., 42.

[22] For one recent approach to this topic, see Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter: Doubt and Belief in Painting* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2003).

had encountered Immendorff in 1972 in Düsseldorf and they got to know each other through their involvement in a Communist (subsequently Maoist) group that explored art's revolutionary potential.[23] After an initial flirtation with ideas regarding art's symbiotic relationship with politics, actively promoted by Immendorff well into the 1980s, Oehlen turned in his earliest works toward a critique of the very dogmatism that so plagued the international left. As an inveterate parodist of authoritarian forms of all kinds, Polke was clearly the artist to emulate.

In 1968, Polke produced an object that would not be shown in public for two years. His *Das große Schimpftuch* (The Great Bitching Sheet; fig. 5), consisted of a roughly 4x4-meter piece of stitched-together flannel fabric on which he had written in tar a litany of everyday curse words. The epithets were applied in a loose scrawl with the words bumping up against each other, giving an impression of rapid delivery, as if the artist had laid down every nasty term he could thing of in one explosive gesture. Applied in a looping cursive script, the black tar against the beige ground gave evidence of the physicality of Polke's gesture, calling to mind a Pollock drip painting rearranged from abstraction into literalism. Then in early 1970, during the installation of the group exhibition "Jetzt: Künste in Deutschland Heute" at Cologne's Kunsthalle, Polke asked to include the *Schimpftuch* as part of his contribution to the show.[24] Before hanging the sheet on a wall, Polke had himself photographed with it draped over his shoulders, its lower edge dragging along the floor like a royal cloak. The artist is seen from behind to

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[23] Roberto Ohrt, "A Tale of the Inappropriate," in Burkhard Riemschneider, ed., *Albert Oehlen* (Cologne: Taschen, 1995), 16.

[24] See the short account of events given by Helmut R. Leppien, then Director at the Cologne Kunsthalle, in Eckhart Gillen, ed., *German Art from Beckmann to Richter: Images of a Divided Country*, (Cologne: DuMont, 1997), 228.

give a full view of the flowing sheet, his head turned toward the camera in a dramatic pose. The photograph is one of many from the still early days of Polke's career by which he playfully presented himself in close physical proximity to one of his works.

There are more examples of photographs by Polke from this period that similarly depict the artist literally immersed in his work, ensconced within an object of his own creation. An example can be found in the edition *Höhere Wesen befehlen* (Higher Powers Command; fig. 6), published by the René Block Gallery in 1968 in Berlin, which contains offset prints of photos taken by Polke and Chris Kohlhöfer. One is an image of Polke's *Peitsche* (Whip; fig. 7), a weapon-like object resembling a cat-o'-nine-tails that has small portrait photos of Polke attached to ends of the strands of thin rope. The artist's laughing, grimacing face can be used to whip whatever one chooses, as a caption explains. Another image from the series, *Polke als Palme* (Polke as Palm Tree; fig. 8), captures Polke in his underwear with a crudely fabricated set of paper palm fronds extending outward from his neck to loosely suggest a tree with branches. The image is simultaneously the record of an action, the document of a short-lived "sculpture" and a singular photograph in itself. Three additional photographs from the edition record Polke without reference to the hand-made, here using such found elements as a wall and a tree to establish a reductive performative context.[25] All works in the series portray the artist in staged, comedic situations with mock-serious captions that reinforce the humor already carried by the images themselves. In all instances, however, the site for the image's creation would seem to be either the privacy of the studio or, at their most "public," an outdoor action with few or no spectators besides the camera operator. This stands in

[25] The titles are *Der Doppelgänger*; *Polke entlaubt einen Baum* (Polke Strips a Tree of its Leaves); and *Die Weide, die nur meinetwegen hohl gewachsen ist* (The Willow that Grew Hollow Just for Me), both 1968.

marked contrast to the innumerable photographs of Beuys surrounded by supporters and detractors alike, invariably at the center of a large group.

As Anne Erfle has pointed out, the comedic effect of such images is gentle and friendly. She writes of the *Schimpftuch* picture that Polke "conveys himself again with this ambivalence of earnestness and enigmatic, 'lovable,' mischievous playfulness, which keeps him from being seriously harmful."[26] Polke is anything but the radical avantgardist of the Dada or Futurist era, offending audiences and creating public scandals. His actions function more like private, intimate performances that either center on the production of a single object, like the *Peitsche*, or were documented by a collaborator with the resulting photo serving as the final work. In any case, these kinds of images are produced for a fairly limited phase of Polke's career; few such photos appear after the early 1970s, and in the intervening years his focus has only rarely included his own likeness to such an extent. All of this early performative playfulness took place against the background of the events of 1968 and beyond, i.e., during the fraught period in which the student and activist protests rapidly made their shift from relatively restrained street demonstrations to coordinated terrorist violence. From this historical perspective, Polke's flaunting of naughty words seems tame indeed.[27]

The next chapter will be concerned with the public roles available to artists emerging in West Germany in the mid-1970s. Compared with artists like Kippenberger

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[26] Anne Erfle, "Sigmar Polke's Images of Germany," in *German Art from Beckmann to Richter: Images of a Divided Country*, 239.

[27] Helmut R. Leppien recalls that after briefly hanging the *Schimpftuch* with the words plainly visible, Polke then turned the fabric around to face the wall for the remainder of the exhibition. This forced visitors to peak around the other side in order to read the words, playing on the childish desire to experience the forbidden while making a less aggressive initial impact on the audience (see footnote 24).

and Oehlen, Polke's own artistic persona has primarily been associated with the objects he has produced rather than through a Beuysian construction of the public self. Though long a highly respected figure in the Cologne art scene, Polke has become known more as a somewhat reclusive, idiosyncratic character, happier working in his studio than socializing at an exhibition opening. Little writing has appeared that explicitly treats Polke from a biographical perspective; in contrast to a biography-obsessed artist like Beuys, the focus with Polke is typically placed on the individual paintings, drawings, photographs, etc. Yet in subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle ways, Polke inserted himself as a recognizable person into the consciousness of the West German art world, despite avoiding the more aggressive efforts by the subsequent generation to capture attention and launch a career. Whereas Polke usually allowed the works to speak for themselves, these younger artists would take a page from Beuys in order to nurture a highly visible public profile.

Polke's Visual Puns

Before moving on to the generation in question, I want to continue my discussion of Sigmar Polke and attempt to distinguish the particular brand of humor he developed during the 1960s. I will argue that, in contrast to the more typically hostile joking of Kippenberger and his cohort, Polke was less apt to provoke an angry response in the viewer. In my opinion, his practice has consistently been geared toward a dismantling and reshuffling of historical modes of picture-making that appeal to an educated eye. Rather than confront the spectator with muddled semantics or self-consciously tasteless gags, Polke has always presupposed an informed audience, one with which he is in an

evolving conversation about both contemporary popular culture and the history of art. Though his cultural and historical references can be oblique, subtle and far from transparent, his images tend to be inviting rather than repellent, charming rather than provocative. This is not to deny the element of subversion at the heart of his long-running and thorough dismantling of a wide array of visual traditions, yet the tenor of his humor is less harsh than that of the West German artists who came to prominence in the 1980s, most of whom either studied with Polke directly or knew and were influenced by him.

Critics and art historians have often pondered Polke's work in light of its numerous contradictory motivations and messages, frequently with an aim to place him within the early developments of postmodernism in the visual arts.[28] His highly experimental and agile working through of the ways that pictures tell stories and communicate centers typically on the reliability of pictorial construction. To explore his images with the goal of locating their "truth content" is to open up a host of problems and irreconcilable oppositions. A typical example of Polke's investigation into the uncertainties of vision is a work like *Die Dinge sehen wie sie sind*, which first appeared in a sketchbook (*Skizzenbuch, rot-orange*) in 1972/73 (fig. 9) and was later reworked as a painting in 1992 (fig. 10). The curator and seasoned Polke interpreter Martin Hentschel translated the title into English as *Seeing Things as They Are*, implying that the artist or spectator's state of perception, or ability to comprehend, is intact and consistent.[29] Yet besides describing a balanced correspondence between sight and cognition, another

[28] For a series of such analyses, see David Thistlewood, ed., *Sigmar Polke: Back to Postmodernity* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press and Tate Gallery Liverpool, 1996).

[29] Martin Hentschel, "Solve et Coagula: On Sigmar Polke's Work," in Martin Hentschel and Sigmar Polke, ed., *Sigmar Polke: The Three Lies of Painting*, exh. cat. (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Cantz, 1997), 59.

understanding might indicate a kind of wishful thinking: *if only* one were able to see things as they are.

Both versions of *Die Dinge sehen wie sie sind* illustrate that the latter interpretation of the title is more apt; they also show to what extent Polke's aesthetic gets more complicated the further one delves into a single picture. The earlier drawing, on lined notebook paper, incorporates the found newspaper clipping from which the title is derived. Above the pasted-on newsprint strip, Polke has drawn four overlapping rectangular boxes that fail to coalesce into a coherent image. As Hentschel explains, "each angle relativizes the other, thwarting the healthily plain language of [sic] picture's textual premise."[30] The actual impression is that one is "seeing double," since the boxes are drawn to suggest that there are two primary shapes (rendered in a thicker line) with their ghostly counterparts floating slightly off to the side. But whose blurry vision is Polke referring to? On the one hand, it might relate to the difficulty of "reading" works of art for their various viewers, each of which brings a unique set of assumptions to the act of reception. A second way of posing the problem would be to consider the artist's own inability to see straight. In delineating the jumble of boxes, drawn with attention to the age-old rules of one-point perspective, Polke playfully undermines the edifice of pictorial illusion. The implication is that he is incapable of maintaining his own belief in the process of representing reality.

He is certainly not the only artist of his generation to question the process by which he conveys a message to an audience. To cite a roughly contemporary example, Bruce Nauman's 1967 neon sign, *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths* (fig. 11), with its circular reasoning and fuzzy cursive lettering (it requires an

[30] Ibid.

effort to read through the neon haze), presents the artist as the possessor of secret knowledge. The viewer is forced to visually unravel the tangle of the neon spiral in order to find out the "truth" of the artist's role in society. Like Polke's drawing, Nauman's sign functions equally well on a visual and a conceptual level. In both cases, the image itself is unfixed and resistant to easy comprehension, while the text only opens up a number of unanswerable questions. If there is a thematic core issue around which Polke's work revolves it might be his critique of the artist as mystic, the conveyor of higher "truths" who has access to divine inspiration. Giving the lie to painting's historical associations with transcendence and spirituality has long been one of the artist's key objectives. Polke's 1969 *Höhere Wesen befahlen: rechte obere Ecke schwarz malen!* (Higher Powers Commanded: Paint the Right Upper Corner Black!; fig. 12), one of his best-known images, drew a similar link between divine inspiration and creativity.

Hans Belting has used the example of Polke's work to make the (widely accepted) argument that the very nature of painting is based on mutually agreed upon fictions: "Painting makes truths easier for us by clothing them in 'transparent' lies."[31] The assumption is that we have learned about the visual "tricks" used in the production of paintings and are therefore able to accept artists' truths through a medium that revolves around deception. The earliest versions of illusionistic space suggested by a 15th-century Italian cityscape is motivated by a desire to communicate in the most direct manner possible. The viewer may be aware that this space is constructed through the application of painstakingly acquired technical skills, but the "window onto the world" offered by such works is meant to promote clarity and legibility. That this concept itself had long

[31] Hans Belting, "On Lies and Other Truths in Painting: Several Thoughts for S.P.," in Hentschel and Polke, ed., *Sigmar Polke: The Three Lies of Painting*, 129.

been a truism by the 1960s is shown by Polke's ability to play a multi-faceted game with the construction of artistic myths in his early work.

In testimony to the success of Polke's strategy, Friedrich W. Heubach, founder of the West German art journal *Interfunktionen*, wrote an entire catalogue essay for a 1976 exhibition as if in the voice of Polke himself, who, it was suggested, was attempting to explain his earliest epiphanies and motivations as an artist. In particular, the text describes a series of life-changing childhood encounters with advertising imagery that leads to Polke's later obsession with the palm-tree and potato motifs, both found in great number of images from the 1960s and early 1970s.[32] Heubach's argument makes tacit reference to the insights first published in 1930s Vienna by Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz regarding the construction of artists' biographies in which the young creative genius experiences one or more formative events that tell of his future talent.[33] Heubach turns this narrative structure around by having Polke discover his life's path due to a physical deficiency: "The fact of my birth would have had little effect on my later work, had I not been born with a vision impairment."[34] Polke's near-sightedness allegedly turned him into a close observer of printed images and granted him visual comprehension of the raster dot pattern used to build up printed reproductions, a photo-mechanical technique

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[32] Friedrich W. Heubach, "Sigmar Polke—frühe Einflüsse, späte Folgen, oder: Wie kamen die Affen in mein Schaffen? und andere ikono-biographische Fragen," in *Sigmar Polke—Bilder, Tücher, Objekte: Werkauswahl 1962-1971* (Kunsthalle Tübingen, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, Stedelijk van Abbe-Museum Eindhoven, 1976), 127-34. Heubach's essay was translated into English as "Early Influences, Later Consequences or: How Did the Monkeys Get into My Work? And other icono-biographical questions" in Hentschel and Polke, ed., *Sigmar Polke: The Three Lies of Painting*, 285-294.

[33] Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: An Historical Experiment* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979).

[34] Heubach, "Early Influences, Later Consequences," 285.

that he would manipulate at length beginning around 1965. The emphasis on the body's place in the artist's biography is of course also reminiscent of Beuys's self-constructed rescue narrative involving the healing powers of local Tartar tribesmen. His own special talents first developed in the aftermath of major, life-threatening injuries.

Heubach's fictitious discussion of the artist's uniquely enhanced visual perception had a real-world corollary in Polke's lifestyle in the late 1960s. Like countless others of his generation, Polke became interested in pushing the limits of what his own mind and body processed on a daily basis. His work at the time gave overt visual evidence of his experiments with hallucinogenic drugs. He has stated, "When you take drugs, your awareness of the physical experience of your body is infinitely heightened."[35] Two drawings from the period should be adequate to make the point. A watercolor from around 1968, *Polke als Droge* (Polke as Drug; fig. 13), portrays a small vial lying on its side, its contents spilling out of the open end. The line below the title says, "Powdered Polke in Glass Tube," a clear reference to the sensory transformations that take place under the influence of recreational drugs; here Polke begins to physically identify with the illicit substance. Another watercolor from a year later, *Ohne Titel (Physiognomische Veränderung* (Untitled [Physiognomical Changes]; fig. 14), offers a classic rendition of psychedelic culture with a series of interlocking linear profiles, each progressively more abstract as the figure presumably enters into an "altered state" and his features morph to reflect his new relationship with reality.

The kind of experimentation that Polke was carrying out on an internal, physical level was being methodically pursued in his work. There are many examples from this

[35] Quoted in Margit Rowell, "Strategems of Subversion," in Margit Rowell, ed., *Sigmar Polke: Works on Paper, 1963-1974*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 19.

period, but a painting like *Alice im Wunderland* of 1971 (fig. 15) represents Polke at the peak of his creative powers and demonstrates that his practice was based on mutually reinforcing notions of play. On the one hand, Polke's playfulness is easily identified on the surface of the image, which is constructed out of three different patterned fabrics. These contrasting images are juxtaposed in a highly inventive manner, with bold colors and busy, clashing designs that lend the work a charged opticality. One of the patterns shows repeated motifs of soccer players, possibly from a set of children's bed covers. The theme of sport is further indicated through a figure of a volleyball player superimposed on the right over one section of the fabric, suspended in the act of leaping to strike the ball. To the left and taking up a larger portion of the composition is a scene taken from John Tenniel's illustrations of *Alice in Wonderland*,[36] which depict play in terms of fantasy and children's fairytales. Of course the hookah-smoking caterpillar sitting on a giant mushroom carries its own set of hallucinatory connotations. Polke thematizes visual play in the sense of both working method and subject matter, giving expression to a developed sensuality.

After the heyday of hippie culture gradually waned in the 1970s, Polke's work took a different turn. While he has never let up in his formal inventiveness and still continues to explore new avenues in his working methods, his subject matter began to take on more sober and, at times, political dimensions. In what can be considered a transitional work, *Dr. Bonn* of 1978 (fig. 16) reflects Polke's familiar incorporation of materials from popular culture; the ground of the work is a plaid fabric and the painted

[36] See Hentschel, "Solve et Coagula," 61.

image seems to be based on a magazine cartoon.[37] Caught in the middle of a harsh white light and sitting next to an overflowing wastepaper basket, a faceless office worker or bureaucrat aims a slingshot at his blank features. Above him on the wall are portraits of RAF members Andreas Baader and Jan-Carl Raspe. As Hentschel interprets the image, "in the end [the worker] places a taut catapult on his forehead to help him to do justice to the search for truth."[38] This is about as explicitly political as Polke gets in his work. Even in the case of a relatively pointed commentary, Polke still filters the message through the vehicles of humor and popular imagery.

Several works from the 1980s and 1990s operate in similar ways, yet they have entirely left behind the drive to inspire laughter in the viewer. The paintings he produced in 1988, as the French prepared to commemorate the 200-year anniversary of the Revolution, make overt references to the blood spilled in the name of freedom. In *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* (fig. 17), three decapitated heads skewered on pikes are suggested to embody the three founding principles of the revolutionary government. That Enlightenment goals can lead to new forms of repression and violence is the presumed message of the work. A few years later he treated the plight of political refugees, a particularly controversial topic in post-reunification Germany. In *Flüchtende* (Refugees), 1992, and *Flüchtlingslager* (Refugee Camp; fig. 18), 1994, Polke again invested his painting practice with more "serious" content, forcing a discussion of his work to go beyond his well-known abilities to effortlessly manipulate styles and materials. Yet in the end I find it impossible to "see" past the lush surfaces, gorgeous colors and clever

[37] Hentschel claims that Polke painted this image, though he does not name its source. Whether he conceived of the image or copied it from a magazine, the drawing style is clearly derived from comics. See "Solve et Coagula," 78.

[38] Ibid.

deployment of found imagery. Polke is clearly in touch with current and historical events, and he can turn them into a valuable part of his production, but the critical aspect of his work almost always takes a back seat to his aesthetic preoccupations, even when he has downplayed the humor.

However, the point here is not to write Polke off as a mere recorder of cultural ephemera who has the ultimate goal of "mere" visual experimentation. A few of his early drawings, though they do not number very many, deal more explicitly with political subject matter. A work like *Wir wollen frei sein wie die Väter waren* (We Want to Be Free Like the Fathers Were, 1964; fig. 19) can be read as referring to the desire for creative freedom that manifested itself in Weimar-era Germany, or one might more accurately interpret "the fathers" as the very generation responsible for the rise of Hitler and against whom the protest movement of the late 1960s was later directed. Still, I find it difficult to attribute overtly "political" intentions to the work. The crudeness of its rendering, the disproportionately small lettering and the appearance of an amateurish attempt at dynamic graphic layout place it firmly in the realm of the topical joke. Of course an artist's intentions can be political without making use of a propagandistic style like the one so forcefully taken up in the work of John Heartfield, or in that of Polke's contemporary Klaus Staeck.[39]

One might, for example, compare Polke's 1963 ballpoint-pen-and-gouache-on-paper *Die Erscheinung des Hakenkreuzes* (The Apparition of the Swastika; fig. 20) with Staeck's 1975 series *Der Wind hat sich gedreht* (The Wind Has Changed Direction; fig.

[39] Long based in Heidelberg and a frequent collaborator of Joseph Beuys, Klaus Staeck received his law degree in 1962. He started producing his first art works in 1964, and his subsequent career as an artist-activist has relied on his understanding of the (West) German legal system. See in Ludwig Seyfarth, ed., *Nichts ist erledigt: Klaus Staeck, eine Retrospektive*, exh. cat. (Hamburg: Phoenix Kulturstiftung, 2004).

21). Staeck made use of an advertisement for the newspaper *Die Zeit* in which its readers were presented with a series of statements that sought to define their needs. Staeck took these lines and appended a photograph from the National Socialist era to each one in order to highlight the reactionary tone that the advertisement appeared to support.[40] Phrases such as "You expect protection from radical violence" and "You demand a return to work" did not look out of place next to old photographs of Nazi soldiers and bare-chested German workers.[41] In this juxtaposition, Polke and Staeck are relatively close in terms of their use of the text to get a specific point across—in this case, a direct reference to Nazism. Yet even here Polke's critique is neither blatant nor especially potent. In contrast to Staeck, who leaves no doubt as to the vitriolic intent of his caption, Polke seems to prod the viewer toward laughter more than outrage.

The graphic aggression of the average image by Staeck is simply never matched by Polke's work, which more often than not tends to retain a charm and lightness of touch that keeps it operating solely in the comic mode. Polke's politics of the 1960s were filtered more regularly through parody than his treatment of similar subject matter in the 1980s, but in neither phase did he seek to broadcast a message of great ideological conviction. This avoidance of committing to a "cause" would be passed on to the next generation of West German artists who shared Polke's interest in the banalities of everyday life. In the same exhibition catalogue containing Heubach's mock-autobiographical essay, Benjamin Buchloh wrote on the presence of the trivial in art of the late 1950s and 1960s, claiming, "[t]he aesthetic trend toward triviality followed the

[40] On this series, see Ludwig Seyfarth, "Die Macht der Bilder und Worte: Klaus Staeck und die zeitgenössische Kunst," in Seyfarth, ed., *Nichts ist erledigt*, 147-153.

[41] The original texts are "Sie verlangen nach Sicherheit vor radikaler Gewalt"; "Sie fordern die Rückkehr zur Leistung."

classic pattern of mastering through repetition what has already once been suffered."[42] The suffering Buchloh refers to stems from the "sunken fragments of collective media dreams and the world of merchandise" that had already found their response in the work of the *Nouveaux Réalistes* in France shortly before Polke, Richter and Konrad Lueg ushered Pop art into West Germany.[43] It is perhaps this prioritization of the trivial that stood in the way of more concerted political statements in Polke's work, and subsequently in the work of his students. But what might be described as Polke's lighthearted pun would be given a nastier, sharper edge by these younger figures as they came to rely more heavily on insertions of language into and next to their objects and images as a means to heighten the impact of their jokes.

The Arrival of the Joke

As stated above, Polke's participation in the first phase of postmodernism's putative departure from modern art's foregrounding of the new—as it pertained to the artist's stylistic subjectivity—took place largely on the level of the pictorial. While he occasionally appended clever, ironic titles to his paintings, his primary interest lay in the ability of visual language to "perform liberation with subversive vigor."[44] Polke entered the art world at a moment when a belief in real transgression still persisted, even though he never claimed that art could operate on a legitimately political scale. His transgression,

[42] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Polke und das Große Triviale (mythisch oder pythisch?)," in *Sigmar Polke—Bilder, Tücher, Objekte*, 136; "Die aesthetische Neigung zur Trivialität folgte somit wohl eher dem klassischen Schema, einmal bereits Erlittenes in der Wiederholung zu meistern."

[43] Ibid.

[44] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Parody and Appropriation in Francis Picabia and Sigmar Polke," *Artforum* (March 1982), 34.

different from that of Beuys or Immendorff with their attempts to affect the greater socio-political sphere, was carried out almost entirely within the pictorial boundaries determined by the canvas or sheet of paper.

With the work of Herold, Kippenberger, Oehlen and Trockel, language itself becomes the means by which to express humor and inspire laughter. This does not always come about at the expense of the image's central role; however, humor in their work moves more in the direction of the narrative structure of the joke. The joke's reliance on a background story or narrative set-up, followed by a shock or twist in "plot" that delivers the punch line, easily lent itself to works on paper or other printed matter. The countless books, posters, editions, musical recordings and other publications that became the lingua franca of this moment shared affinities with punk rock and new wave, which had maintained the power of political slogans—despite, or perhaps because of, reversals of meaning—while casting doubt on the very reliability of the words themselves. Humor could be "hot" or "cold": either loud and aggressive or quiet and subtle, or somewhere in between. One of the key aims of this dissertation is to explore the modes by which artists enabled their work to communicate humor, to convince the viewer that laughter was an appropriate, if not the only available, response to the present moment.

Humor takes on myriad forms, some of which are easy to recognize and understand for a diverse audience (especially those following formulas, such as gags in television-based situation comedies) while others are more heavily coded and geared toward an in-group. The artists under discussion employed both versions at various moments. For this group of artists, the question of being burdened (or perhaps even relieved) by a "second-order" status, of having missed the party of the 1960s, laughter

becomes the only obvious route by which to keep making art. Their work reflects a self-conscious awareness of their own late arrival. As the philosopher Ted Cohen has written on the function of certain jokes, "there is a normal practice of joke-telling that may itself be assumed for purposes of making 'second level' jokes, just as normal practices of art-making and art-appreciating make possible a kind of second level art."[45] When the possibility of inventing radically new forms and concepts becomes untenable, the recourse to second-level humor seemed to some to be the only viable option.

It is at the moment when humor is recognized as a mode of secondary communication that it crosses paths with its close relative, irony. Candace D. Lang wrote in 1988 of the link between humor and a certain type of irony, one that she claimed was associated with the negative, "undialecticizable" side of Socrates.[46] This take on humor as little more than wordplay with "no subsequent moment of convergence"[47] to reconcile signifier and signified is partly flawed. It equates humor with only the negative version of irony and does not leave room for the notion that humor can truly support a critical, dialectical position.

One of the aims of this dissertation is to locate the brand or instance of humor in which a *positive* critical statement or action can be communicated. These artists often failed to achieve such a goal, but the instances in which they were successful are worth examining as appropriate responses to the dangers of cynicism. The idea is to rescue at least part of their output from its frequent, and quite often justified, denigration by critics

[45] Ted Cohen, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 4.

[46] Candace D. Lang, *Irony/Humor: Critical Paradigms* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 42.

[47] Ibid.

as being entirely complicit with what Buchloh calls the "paternal law."[48] Buchloh claims that this is a risk run "by all discursive practices that attempt to resolve the conflict of domination by disguising their actual oppositional historical identity through mockery of the ruling order."[49] In a more recent analysis of humor per se, Simon Critchley points out that "most of the best jokes are fairly reactionary or, at best, simply serve to reinforce social consensus."[50] But for him, a version of humor exists that is positive and critical, offering a "dissensus communis" that demonstrates how social and political "practices might be transformed or perfected, how things might be otherwise."[51] Such a constructive version of humor may be rare, but when it occurs, it is instantly recognizable as straying from the conservatism of conventional gags.

The Cynic Versus the Kynic

In the midst of this early-1980s phase of depleted energies, a book appeared that served to capture for many the mood of the period and, in its own way, offer a certain corrective. Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason*, first published in West Germany in two volumes in 1983,[52] met with astonishing commercial success for a work of cultural history and philosophy, selling over 40,000 copies within the first weeks of its appearance. As Leslie A. Adelson wrote in a 1984 review, Sloterdijk's work is "[m]ore a

[48] Buchloh, "Parody and Appropriation in Francis Picabia and Sigmar Polke," 34.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), 11.

[51] Ibid, 90.

[52] Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

cultural phenomenon than a rigorous scholarly treatise."[53] Perhaps this explains its great popularity outside of the academic world, since the book is indeed written in a lively and accessible style and is full of compelling and unexpected illustrations. Yet Sloterdijk did not compromise in setting himself an enormous set of goals: a brief history of the concept of cynicism, an analysis of the failures of the Enlightenment and an attempt to reconstitute a critical and self-reflexive subjectivity for the present.[54]

Adelson points out that, despite the desire to address a wide readership, Sloterdijk (born in 1947) largely targets an audience consisting of members of his own generation who had experienced first-hand the social upheavals of the late 1960s: "Sloterdijk seeks to breathe new life into an entire dormant generation, previously characterized by political activism, hope for the future, and desire for radical social change."[55] After many people involved in the student revolts of 1967 and 1968 had moved into academia, politics and the corporate world in the 1970s, intellectuals like Sloterdijk began to look back to their formative years in an effort to understand where plans for a better future had gone astray.[56] His book takes part in the historicization of the unrest in the 1960s and 1970s by taking a two-pronged approach: looking back to classical Greece and the legacy

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[53] See Leslie A. Adelson, "Against the Enlightenment: A Theory with Teeth for the 1980s," *The German Quarterly* (Fall 1984), 625.

[54] Roughly one quarter of the book is also devoted to Sloterdijk's "Historical Main Text" on cynicism in the Weimar Republic; see *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 384-533.

[55] Ibid., 626.

[56] For a good summary of these debates, see Hauke Brunkhorst, "The Tenacity of Utopia: The Role of Intellectuals in Cultural Shifts within the Federal Republic of Germany," trans. Jamie Owen Daniel, *New German Critique* 55 (Winter 1992), 127-138.

of rational thought in the West, as well as offering a reading of contemporary socio-cultural conditions in the early 1980s.

One of Sloterdijk's key areas of interest involves the ways in which the legitimate struggle for rationality and equality that was carried out by the intellectuals of the Enlightenment was opposed from the beginning by counter-Enlightenment forces. He writes, "Enlightenment was never able to ally itself effectively with the mass media, and individual self-determination was never an ideal for industrial monopolies and their organizations."[57] In his assessment of the dangers that accompany a rationalist enterprise, Sloterdijk is clearly informed by the work of the Frankfurt School (which he only mentions in passing), especially Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* of 1944. However, what distinguishes Sloterdijk's project is his quasi-journalistic, down-to-earth prose, which can be read as an attempt to reach a larger audience than that capable of, or even interested in, parsing the more theoretical language of Horkheimer and Adorno. While his primary readership might be made up of educated men (he has been criticized for not adequately addressing the concerns of women and the feminist movement[58]) from his own generation, his ideas are presented in a style that seems to be geared toward a more diverse group of readers.

The gap between intended audience and actual reception points to fundamental ambiguities within *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Sloterdijk is not simply trying to put forward new, or at least revised, notions of truth in order to revive the Enlightenment project. As Andreas Huyssen points out, "[Sloterdijk's] position remains crucially

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[57] Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 11.

[58] See Andreas Huyssen's "The Return of Diogenes as Postmodern Intellectual," printed as the foreword to *Critique of Cynical Reason*, xx.

ambivalent in that he has as much trouble with the 'truth' of Critical Theory as with the total dissolution of truth, reason, and subjectivity in certain radical forms of poststructuralism."[59] It is this very ambivalence that gives the book its intellectual charge and makes it relevant to so many questions being posed in the art world in the same time period. The position of ambivalence so central to theories of the postmodern is not always, or necessarily, the result of an unwelcome inability to decide on one particular set of options or the other. Willful ambivalence can reflect a coming-to-terms with reality, a (perhaps only temporary) reassessment of a given situation.

Yet according to Sloterdijk, cynicism has been unfairly maligned as simply representing the world-weary, opportunistic attitude that it describes in common speech. He explains that among the Cynics of ancient Greece it actually originated as a philosophy of resistance to restrictive social norms, instead promoting the value of self-control and individual liberation. Although Antisthenes, a student of Socrates, is considered to be its earliest practitioner, it is in the figure of Diogenes of Sinope (c. 400-c. 325 B.C.) that Sloterdijk locates his model cynic (or kynic, the spelling he uses to distinguish ancient cynicism from its modern variation). Diogenes had studied under Antisthenes and took his ideas regarding morality to their most extreme form. Bertrand Russell has summed up the key principle of this philosophy: Diogenes "sought virtue and moral freedom in liberation from desire."[60] Legend has it that this policy led Diogenes to live in a barrel and beg for his food, as well as to behave outrageously in public in order

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[59] Ibid., xiv.

[60] Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), 231.

to flout social customs. In other words, the kynic has affinities with the traditional image of the avant-garde artist as a renegade and breaker of taboos.

Diogenes represents for Sloterdijk the ideal emancipated individual who should be emulated (though perhaps not in a literal sense) in what the latter perceived as the prevalent climate of passivity and resignation after the political projects of the late 1960s and 1970s had faltered. For West German artists of the 1980s generation, the option as laid out by Sloterdijk was either to give in to cynicism and false consciousness or take the prevailing pessimism and employ it to constructive ends. Strategies of joking could lead in either direction, but also allow one to oscillate between them. An analysis of their public appearances, works of art and critical reception will demonstrate that the artists often occupied both positions at the same time. The split self as described by de Man could only be embraced and performed, not reconstituted as a whole. Sloterdijk framed the dilemma as the choice between escapism and collaboration: "Escapists are justified, because they do not want to be entangled with open eyes in the intolerable cynicisms of a society in which the distinction between producing and destroying is becoming blurred. Collaboration is justified because individuals are also permitted to orient themselves toward survival in the short run."[61] In the aftermath of the *Tendenzwende*, these artists clarified that the line between affirmation and critique was often impossible to distinguish.

[61] Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 119.

Chapter 3—Careers and Contexts: Hamburg, Berlin and Cologne

The political horror of consensus—mistaken for a dread of "totalization"—is then simply the justified reluctance of groups that have conquered a certain pride in their own identity to be dictated to by what turn out to be simply other groups, since now everything in our social reality is a badge of group membership and connotes a specific bunch of people.[1]

Fredric Jameson

The "Self-Portrayer"

Writing in an anniversary issue of *Artforum* dedicated to the 1980s, the German critic Tom Holert described the decade as "tribal" in nature.[2] This feature was particularly pronounced in "villagelike" Cologne, where "the city's art world in itself has the character of a tribe that moves on its own social and economic tracks."[3] The transition from the 1970s to the 1980s within the West German art world was heavily marked by Cologne's emergence as the primary site for the display and consumption of contemporary art from around the world. With strong links to galleries in New York, Cologne became a key destination for American artists showing in Europe, which in turn opened doors for German artists to introduce their work to the United States. What German artists and dealers achieved in Cologne was the establishment of a context, a site for both the production and reception of art within a developed social network that quickly gained a reputation well beyond its borders. As Daniel Birnbaum put it in the

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[1] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 347.

[2] Tom Holert, "Blood of the Poets: The Tribal '80s," *Artforum* (March 2003), 234-37, 275-76, 280-81.

[3] Ibid., 276.

same issue of *Artforum*, "As Cologne became the Continental meeting place of choice for the international art world, the local scene developed its own social codes."[4]

For the artists under discussion here, the construction of codes and working strategies was of paramount importance. Albert Oehlen recently explained the attraction of collaborative work: "With a group you have a seriousness, a reason to feel strong and to find your own place in the hierarchy."[5] This group context did not begin for Oehlen and his peers in Cologne; they had already developed such working relationships in their student days in Hamburg and in the charged atmosphere of late-70s West Berlin. Yet Cologne was the city in which these young artists could locate the art-world infrastructure that was necessary for their brand of hit-and-run exhibiting and catalogue publishing. Walther König, the founder of Cologne's preeminent art bookstore, recalls publishing seventeen books with Martin Kippenberger alone[6]—that kind of technical and financial support was not available in any other German city. The aim of this chapter is to explore the ways in which these artists balanced the need to establish themselves as individuals while operating within clearly defined social realms. Their sense of selfhood could be equally supported and hindered by the milieu in which they lived and worked. Leading off this chapter, Fredric Jameson's remark gives an initial sense of the ambiguities involved in forming group identities when political and social consensus were on the decline in the 1980s.

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[4] Daniel Birnbaum, "Ripening on the Rhine: The Cologne Art World of the '80s," *Artforum* (March 2003), 218.

[5] Quoted in Holert, "Blood of the Poets," 276.

[6] See Birnbaum, "Ripening on the Rhine," 220.

In an essay for one of the many recent retrospective exhibitions that followed Kippenberger's untimely death in 1997 at the age of 43, Diedrich Diederichsen employed the term *Selbstdarsteller* to describe "the relationship of performance and an empty or, at best, delegating command centre, if one wanted to find a form of working and producing that could be understood and bear fruit within the art world."[7] A literal English translation of the word would lead to "self-portrayer"; perhaps the closest equivalent would be "self-promoter," though this does not adequately convey the overtly performative nature of the term *Selbstdarsteller*. The word *Darsteller* means "actor" in German, so that a *Selbstdarsteller* acts out the role of him- or herself. The label is used commonly in Germany to describe public figures of all stripes, especially politicians and popular entertainers. However, Diederichsen could think of no one before Kippenberger to whom it was applied on a consistent basis beginning already in the late 1970s.[8]

In Kippenberger's case, regular public exposure via a steady barrage of images (in invitation cards, exhibition posters, press material, etc.) was only the first step in assuring his notoriety. Like Beuys, he made sure that his physical presence in any given location could not be overlooked. The critic Joshua Decter, writing in *Artforum* in the late 1980s, described the artist's approach as "frame yourself before you yourself are framed."[9] The process of self-framing went far beyond the boundaries of the picture itself to encompass

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[7] Diedrich Diederichsen, "'Selbstdarsteller': Martin Kippenberger between 1977 and 1983," in Eva Meyer-Hermann and Susanne Neuburger, ed., *After Kippenberger*, exh. cat. (Vienna and Eindhoven: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien and Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, 2003), 43-61.

[8] Ibid., 43.

[9] Joshua Decter, exhibition review, Metro Pictures, New York, *Artforum* (April 1994), 94.

virtually every decision and gesture related to the artist's everyday existence. Indeed, it is the active and deliberate creation of *context* that enabled Kippenberger to keep his work and his likeness within the public eye. Although Kippenberger was exceptional in his ability to spread his own notoriety, Herold, Oehlen and Trockel were certainly adept at building social and professional networks. The remainder of the chapter will consider the three primary cities in which they formed alliances and mounted their first exhibitions, taking as examples specific venues and organizations that gave the artists the space and freedom to launch their early projects.

A note of caution should be struck here, since today one can only try to reconstruct the multiple layers of activity in Hamburg, Berlin and Cologne with the aid of often purely anecdotal sources. I try in this chapter, as far as possible, to rely only on well-known published accounts of these artists' early years. Yet this is a shaky enterprise, given that the anecdote itself has become one of the most favored, and often unquestioned, routes into interpreting the work of these artists, especially that of Kippenberger. Surely there are historical inaccuracies printed within source material that, in the first instance, was often assembled from conversations and recollections that took place after the original events, sometimes several years later. While this is a problem faced to some extent by all art historians, oral histories typically hover so close to the objects produced by these artists that rumor and anecdote can almost be considered a part of their physical makeup.

Hamburg and the Bookstore "Scandal"

Looking back on the year 1977 a quarter-century later, Werner Büttner summed it up as follows: "1977 was about the cul-de-sacs of the RAF and the Bewegung 2. Juni [Movement of June 2, a terrorist group], the Parkinson's disease of the communist groups, the cockiness of the police and the rise of punk with its unmusical-theatrical worldview. Put simply: cultural revolution in miniature."[10] And Albert Oehlen's retrospective analysis of the historical moment in which he and his colleagues emerged on the West German art scene was more pessimistic: "One has to imagine the inconceivable hopelessness of this time, the late seventies. Political art was assigned to critical spirits who specialized in a specific form of critique. Like, for example, [Klaus] Staeck or [Alfred] Hrdlicka or people who basically just had a big mouth."[11] 1977 was the year in which both artists moved from Berlin to Hamburg, where Oehlen entered the Hochschule für bildende Künste in the class of Sigmar Polke in 1978 (Büttner worked independently of the art school, but frequented the same bars and meeting places of its students). They arrived with an ingrained skepticism toward art's ability to foster effective political critique, yet the notion of eschewing all political content in their work

[10] Quoted in Claudia Banz, "Triumphgeschrei: Werner Büttner und Albert Oehlen," in Eugen Blume, et al, ed., *Klopfzeichen: Kunst und Kultur der 80er Jahre in Deutschland—Wahnzimmer*, exh. cat. (Leipzig: Faber & Faber, 2002), 143; "1977 waren das die Sackgassen der RAF und der Bewegung 2. Juni, die Schüttellähmung der k-Gruppen, der Übermut der Polizei und das Aufkommen des Punk mit seinem unmusikalisch-theatralischen Weltbild. Kurz gesagt: Kulturrevolution in Liliputformat."

[11] Quoted in Wilfried Dickhoff, ed., *Albert Oehlen im Gespräch mit Wilfried Dickhoff und Martin Prinzhorn* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1991), 60; "Man muß sich die unvorstellbare Trostlosigkeit dieser Zeit, also der späten siebziger Jahre vorstellen. Die politische Kunst.war kritischen Geistern zugeteilt, die auf bestimmte Form von Kritik spezialisiert waren. Also wie zum Beispiel Staeck oder Hrdlicka oder Leute, die im Grunde genommen nur eine große Klappe hatten."

was equally untenable. The next several years were spent trying to seek out the appropriate aesthetic response to their deeply rooted doubts.

In the years leading up to their studies in Hamburg, both artists had received some first-hand experience of left-wing politics. For Büttner this occurred indirectly while he studied law in Berlin from 1973 to 1977, before breaking off his studies prior to completion. Writing for a book that accompanied a retrospective of Büttner's work two years ago, Harald Falckenberg, a friend and collector of the artist's work, mentioned a "study on the perversion of justice in the case of Horst Mahler"[12] that Büttner had written while still a law student. Mahler was the lawyer for Andreas Baader in the latter's arson trial in Frankfurt in the fall of 1968, after which Mahler himself became increasingly involved in the activities of the Red Army Faction.[13] Büttner's initial interest in the highly public struggle of a Baader-Meinhof sympathizer would find a comedic repetition in the late 1970s when he and Oehlen referred to their "League for the Prevention of Contradictory Behavior" as a "propaganda office for the RAF."[14] The flirtation with the politicized left had taken place from a distance, but clearly Büttner felt at least peripherally invested in its project. The distance he maintained later reappeared in his ironic visual and verbal treatment of the forms of dogmatic address.

In Oehlen's case, the contact with the left was more personal and started at a relatively early age. Oehlen, born in 1954, claims to have already affiliated himself at the

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[12] Harald Falckenberg, "Medium-Range Theories: Some Details," in Uta Grosenick, ed., *Werner Büttner* (Cologne: Taschen, 2003), 18.

[13] For a brief summary of the 1968 trial, see Stefan Aust, *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex* (Munich: Knauer, 1989), 68-72.

[14] See Büttner's short biography in Eckhart Gillen, ed., *German Art from Beckmann to Richter: Images of a Divided Country* (Cologen: DuMont, 1997), 506.

age of sixteen with the *Mietersolidarität* (Tenant Solidarity) movement in Düsseldorf, a city close to his native Krefeld: "We collected signatures, we met at least twice a week and discussed what kinds of actions can be carried out."[15] Jörg Immendorff was a key member of the group, which became known through occupying houses, producing fliers and posters that railed against profiteering through high rents, and conducting public actions. Like countless protest groups of the time, the movement quickly dissolved into factionalism. Oehlen described the growing dissatisfaction over the impression that "nothing happened": "One of the central theses of Marxism is that something must happen, a real transformation. But that was in crass contradiction to what we were pursuing."[16] He gradually parted ways with the group as the infighting accelerated. Oehlen's initial experiences with political activism thus ended rather abruptly, but he had been engaged long enough to absorb much of the language, symbolism and general rhetorical strategies associated with protest culture. In 1992, Diederichsen looked back to the years between 1977 and 1984 and located the lingering traces of political consciousness within his generation of the cultural left in terms of a "virtual Maoism."[17] The collectivist dynamics of communist groupings in 1970s West Germany segued in the

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[15] Quoted in Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen, "Alles in allem—Panorama 'wilder' Malerei," in Verein der Freunde und Förderer des Hessischen Landesmuseums in Darmstadt, *Tiefe Blicke: Kunst der achtziger Jahre aus der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, der DDR, Österreich und der Schweiz*, (Cologne: DuMont, 1985), 18.

[16] Dickhoff, ed., *Albert Oehlen im Gespräch mit Wilfried Dickhoff und Martin Prinzhorn*, 54-55; "Eine der Hauptthesen des Marxismus ist ja, daß tatsächlich etwas passieren muß, eine reale Veränderung. Das widersprach aber ganz krass dem, was wir betrieben haben."

[17] Diedrich Diederichsen, "Virtueller Maoismus: Das Wissen von 1984," in Werner Büttner, Martin Kippenberger, Albert Oehlen, *Malen ist Wahlen*, exh. cat. (Munich: Kunstverein München, 1992), 31-38.

1980s into what Diederichsen called a "false consciousness" that took itself to be the appropriate attitude for the time.[18]

Oehlen had moved to West Berlin in 1974, where he soon met up with Büttner. Though little detailed information is to be found about the intervening years that lead up to their relocation to Hamburg in 1977, it seems that this was a period of drifting, of spending a lot of time in pubs and tolerating various day jobs, what Oehlen described as "a happy, but actually horrible time, since nothing was achieved."[19] The mid-seventies appear to represent for these artists, as for others seeking a sense of direction amid the fallout of the sixties, a prolonged phase of stagnation, or at least of unfocused activity. Various comedic ideas and schemes were batted around—such as throwing slices of bread smeared with *Schmalz* over the Berlin Wall to feed the unfortunate East Berliners[20]—but nothing concrete took hold. Painting was still considered to be reactionary, though by the time the artists moved to Hamburg numerous West German artists were beginning to reassess the "prohibition."

Compared to the divided, isolated, grungy Berlin of the 1980s, Hamburg was an orderly city that benefited from a long and stable tradition of prosperity through its shipping industry. Its inhabitants were largely protestant, known within Germany for their reserved, cautious manner. At the same time, there was a seedy red-light district along the Reeperbahn (the long street where shipping rope had once been twisted) and a

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[18] Ibid., 33; "…eine eben erst entdeckte Qualität von falschem Bewusstsein, das sich für richtiges hält…."

[19] Dickhoff, ed., *Albert Oehlen im Gespräch mit Wilfried Dickhoff und Martin Prinzhorn*, 54; "Eine lustige, aber eigentlich schreckliche Zeit, weil nichts zustande kam."

[20] Ibid. Büttner was born in 1954 in Jena and had left the GDR with his family at the age of seven.

politically active working class that tempered the patrician culture of the coffee and spice barons.[21] Büttner and Oehlen would encounter an engaged student body at the Hochschule für bildende Kunst, the art academy that could trace its roots back to 1767. As opposed to the do-it-yourself atmosphere of Berlin, Hamburg offered the artists a more structured cultural environment in which to begin establishing themselves amid already extant social groupings.

Once in Hamburg, Büttner and Oehlen gradually established a working context for themselves that revolved partly around the art school but more specifically around the "Gans," a pub frequented by both students and professors. This is where Oehlen first met Polke and quickly found his way into the latter's class, which at the time included Achim Duchow, Michael Deistler and Georg Herold.[22] The collaborative nature of much of the work produced by Oehlen, Büttner and Herold over the next several years—the group paintings, the musical recordings, and especially the artist books and exhibition catalogues—grew out of these evening encounters. Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen described the first collaboration between Herold and Oehlen as taking place in late 1978 during one of the Hochschule's regular open-studio events. A multi-part installation, hung with Polke's assistance, was produced in response to the previous year's test-launch of the first space shuttle (Enterprise), which had "provoked the artists to make ironic, political commentaries."[23] Chairs and stools hung from the ceiling were called *Flugmüll* (Flight

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[21] For a history of Hamburg as a city of trade, see Hans Leip, *Hamburg: Das Bild einer Stadt* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1974) and Werner Jochmann and Hans-Dieter Loose, ed., *Hamburg: Geschichte der Stadt und ihrer Bewohner* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1982).

[22] See Schmidt-Wulffen, "Alles in allem," 54-55.

[23] Ibid., 55; "…provozierte die Künstler zu ironisch politischen Kommentaren."

Trash; fig. 22), newspaper clippings and found objects were displayed in a vitrine—*Survival Set Vitrine* (fig. 23)—to reference the slightly earlier Skylab (the first space station put into orbit in 1973 by the United States), and comedic titles were appended to all the objects. The long-running strategy of rapidly, and somewhat arbitrarily, locating material in the media's coverage of current events was already firmly established.

The lighthearted mockery at the heart of such a project could hardly have offended the artists' public. However, earlier in the year Büttner and Oehlen had engineered their first "scandal" after being invited to produce a wall mural for the interior of the bookstore Welt in the bohemian neighborhood known as the Karolinenviertel. Run by Hilke Nordhausen, the Welt was a key meeting place for left-oriented artists, writers and activists from its opening in 1976. Nordhausen was an artist herself, having studied at the Hamburg Hochschule from 1970 to 1975 under Franz Erhard Walther and Gerhard Rühm.[24] She considered the space an "artistic concept," recalling in 1990: "I definitely understood myself to be a conceptual artist"; the bookstore would constitute her "attack on reality."[25] The combination of providing access to books and periodicals that were otherwise hard to come by, the frequent readings and performances she hosted, and the regular use of the wall opposite the entrance for artists' murals turned the store into a center of gravity within Hamburg's literary/artistic cultural milieu.

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[24] Dörte Zbikowski, "Wandbilder in der Buch Handlung Welt," in Hans-Christian Dany, et al, ed., *dagegen-dabei: Texte, Gespräche und Dokumente zu Strategien der Selbstorganisation seit 1969* (Hamburg: Edition Michael Kellner, 1998), 63.

[25] Hilke Nordhausen, "Buch Handlung Welt: Mein Anschlag auf die Wirklichkeit," in *dagegen-dabei*, 11; "Ich verstand mich ja selbst durchaus als Konzept Künstlerin...."; "…Anschlag auf die Wirklichkeit."

Though it may seem a somewhat paradoxical move for a "Konzept Künstlerin," Nordhausen's decision to make her wall available for painterly projects helped to open the door for the medium to once again become relevant. The first half of the seventies had been dominated by the rigors of conceptualism, which had been promoted at the art school during Nordhausen's years of study. As she acknowledged, "in 1976 painting was frowned upon. But now the artists wanted to happily paint away… *Buch Handlung Welt*, with its wall, was a real bridgehead in this process."[26] The timing of her decision to open her bookstore to the projects of emerging painters turned out to be fortuitous, as it was one of several events that signaled a "return to painting" in the late 1970s, though it would be an overstatement to claim that this was her intention.[27] She appears to have been more generally interested in creating a space in which a wide range of activities could thrive, all of which would take place amid piles of cheaply produced, photocopied 'zines lying on tables next to high-end exhibition catalogues. A deliberate heterogeneity of ideas and influences characterized the program at the Welt.

As Büttner and Oehlen were in the early stages of determining what aesthetic strategies might be productively employed in their new environment, the offer by Nordhausen to create a temporary mural gave them a chance to experiment with a process over which neither artist had yet developed a technical command. Their mode of execution, the choice of motifs and the reaction of the public could in retrospect be seen as a trial run for numerous projects to come. A black-and-white photograph shows the

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[26] Ibid., 14; "1976 war Malerei verpönt. Nun wollten die Künstler aber fröhlich tuschen…*Buch Handlung Welt* mit ihrer Wand war ein richtiger Brückenkopf in diesem Geschehen."

[27] On the "hunger for pictures" of the late 1970s and early 1980s, see Wolfgang Max Faust and Gerd de Vries, *Hunger nach Bildern* (Cologne: Du Mont, 1982).

two artists standing in front of the completed painting (fig. 24),[28] Büttner drinking beer from a bottle while Oehlen leans against the wall and grins at the camera, bottle in hand. The image behind them depicts five figures positioned against a backdrop of loosely painted stripes that suggest both Daniel Buren and cheap wallpaper. Flanking the central image on the left is a crudely rendered head with open mouth, its hand drawn to its lips, depicting either an expression of horror or the licking of fingers. On the right is the head of a Native American chieftain wearing a headdress, his mouth drawn into a disapproving frown. Between them is the offending passage, a close-up view of a naked woman's spread legs and groin with a male head perched above, busily tending to his erotic duties. The above scene is watched over by a miniature crocodile positioned left of and below the figures. Büttner joked afterward that the "women all thought the crocodile was sweet; they overlooked the cunnilingus."[29] The absurdist title selected for the work was *Eines Tages werden wir ihnen die Fenster zunageln und dann kommt 'Das Licht von der anderen Seite'* (One of These Days We're Going to Board Up Your Windows and Then the Light Will Come from the Other Side), a suggestive phrase that might lead the viewer in several interpretive directions simultaneously without arriving anywhere in particular. The high degree of semantic ambiguity projected by the work's title—a theme to be explored in depth in the next chapter—was to become a hallmark of their work, and that of Herold, Kippenberger and Trockel, throughout the 1980s.

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[28] Printed in Zbikowski, "Wandbilder in der Buch Handlung Welt," 65. I have not come across any color photographs of the work.

[29] Quoted in Schmidt-Wulffen, "Alles in allem," 55-56; "Das Krokodil fanden die Weiber alle süß, den Cunnilingus haben sie übersehen."

From the available published accounts of the incident, it is not clear who pressed charges in response to its "pornographic" content, but soon after the painting was complete it became the center of a minor controversy.[30] According to Roberto Ohrt, members of the Hochschule were quick to defend the artists, yet Büttner and Oehlen expressed their contrition in a seemingly sincere apology, resulting in a scandal within the art academy.[31] Happily backing down to the authorities in conservative Hamburg was hardly the expected response to censorship from two would-be provocateurs. In any case, their contrition seems to have been adequate, as the charge was subsequently dropped. Büttner predictably laughed afterward about the events, claiming that they had written in their letter, "…that's not cunnilingus; that's a fire-eater."[32] Nordhausen is supposed to have commented on her first encounter with Büttner and Oehlen soon after their move from Berlin: "Right, they didn't respect anything; I wanted them for the job."[33] Their initial gesture of offending public sensibility was repeated numerous times in the coming years, yet they always made sure to keep out of serious trouble. Like many adherents of the compromised political left, they opted for a tempered radicalism. Hamburg has been identified as a stolid North German city known for its inhabitants' reserved, conservative outlook, yet it has long supported pockets of more experimental cultural practice. The

[30] Büttner told me in an interview (Hamburg, 14 April 2005) that it was a neighbor of the bookstore who called the police after happening by the shop and peeking in at the mural.

[31] Roberto Ohrt, "A Tale of the Inappropriate," in Burkhard Riemenschneider, ed., *Albert Oehlen* (Cologne: Taschen, 1995), 15; I have found no information indicating whether they actually altered or painted over the mural.

[32] Quoted in Schmidt-Wulffen, "Alles in allem," 56; "…das ist kein Cunnilingus, das ist ein Feuerschlucker."

[33] Zbikowski, "Wandbilder in der Buch Handlung Welt," 65; "Alles klar, die hatten vor nichts Respekt, die wollte ich für die Sache haben."

seedy red-light district of the Reeperbahn looks out over the harbor where high-end goods and merchandise are unloaded, filling the coffers of the city's many wealthy families and companies. It provided the ideal urban context in which to test limits easily without pushing them too far.

Berlin: Dialogue with the Youth

Martin Kippenberger had also had a strong presence in Hamburg well before the arrival of Büttner and Oehlen. He had been enrolled in the class of Rudolf Hausner at the Hochschule since 1972, though by all accounts he was not a particularly serious student.[34] He never completed his degree in Hamburg, breaking off his studies in 1976, the same year in which he received a substantial inheritance upon his mother's death. It is perhaps no coincidence that critical accounts of his career have essentially ignored his work before 1976. Kippenberger had yet to locate himself firmly in any given art scene and, it would appear, lacked the context in which to launch a more thorough project. His newfound financial independence gave him the means to develop a mobile, flexible lifestyle suited to the strategies of a *Selbstdarsteller*.

In December of 1976 he moved to Florence, where he lived during the next several months while producing his first complete series of paintings, *Uno di voi, un Tedesco in Firenze* (One of You, a German in Florence; fig. 25). It is the first example of a work by Kippenberger that resulted from sustained reflection on what it meant to fully immerse oneself within an untested place and culture. The series originally consisted of up to 83 canvases—the exact number of extant works is unclear; some were discarded

[34] See Schmidt-Wulffen, "Alles in allem," 52.

and others made their way singly into private collections[35]—each measuring 50 x 60 centimeters, painted in black and white and encompassing a variety of images related to his new environs: postcards, newspaper clippings, album covers and his own snapshots. Black and white was selected as the palette since he had no experience mixing oil paints, and he set himself the task of producing two pictures per day. There is an obvious visual connection here to Gerhard Richter's black-and-white paintings of the 1960s and 1970s, especially his *48 Portraits* of "great men" from 1971-72 (fig. 26), which has been remarked upon by several writers. The key difference is that Kippenberger "does not immortalize those who have achieved greatness, but ordinary people."[36] In this respect, the more apt comparison and likely source for the series is the typical Italian restaurant with its salon-style hanging of portraits of movie stars and other notables.[37] Reinforcing the more plebian view is the fact that Kippenberger used his own body to determine the material scope of the series. The idea was to produce enough single canvases so that when stacked they would reach his height of 1.89 meters. True to form, he intentionally gave up the project 10 centimeters short of its target.

Kippenberger's journey to Florence took place after he found that Hamburg did not offer adequate maneuvering room in which he could test out his artistic skills.[38] The trip marks the beginning of a life-long devotion to trying on new roles and seeking out

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[35] For a brief history of the installation and distribution of the series, see Kathleen Bühler, "Uno di voi, un Tedesco in Firenze, 1977," in Meyer-Hermann and Neuburger, ed., *After Kippenberger*, 30-33.

[36] Ibid., 31-33.

[37] On artists' interpretations of Italian culinary culture, see Romy Golan, "Anti-Pasta," *Cabinet* 10 (Spring 2003), 12-15.

[38] See Schmidt-Wulffen, "Alles in allem," 53.

environments in which he might temporarily set up shop. A restless mobility, in terms of both physical movement and aesthetic experimentation, marked Kippenberger's career ever since he traveled to Florence. After Kippenberger had been given a first glimpse of the kind of artist's life he wanted to lead, his most professionally formative years were spent in the politically charged atmosphere of West Berlin in the late 1970s, where he, Büttner and Oehlen first came into contact with each other. His work in this period must be considered in light of the newly emerging counter-cultural movements of punk rock and new wave, which he had direct exposure to through the bands that played in S.O.36 (for example, Devo, Adam and the Ants, DAF [Deutsch Amerikanische Freundschaft], Iggy Pop, Wire, and a regular cast of lesser-known local groups), the club in an abandoned supermarket that he co-managed after its opening in 1978.[39] Kippenberger once said that the "business (S.O.36), which was housed in what used to be a supermarket of no special architectural value, is now a historic building. For me, that is success. That's what I was working towards."[40] He made his presence indispensable for a time by using his inheritance to pay bands whose concerts were often attended only by a small audience that had paid minimal ticket fees.[41] In its isolated geographic location, the West Berlin of the late 1970s represented a relatively hermetic zone of cultural activity;

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[39] S.O.36 was the postal code of the club's location in West Berlin. Kippenberger was co-manager along with two of the club's other founders, Achim Schächtele and Andreas Rohe; see Kippenberger's biography in Meyer-Hermann and Neuburger, ed., *After Kippenberger*, 37.

[40] Martin Kippenberger, in Angelika Muthesius, ed., *Martin Kippenberger: Ten Years After* (Cologne: Benedikt Taschen, 1991), 31.

[41] For a well-researched history of the club and Kippenberger's role as manager, see Christoph Bannat, "Süd-Ost 36: 'Zu welchem Zeitpunkt und an welchem Ort haben sie vom Tod Roland Barthes erfahren?,'" in Petra Reichensperger, ed., *Lieber zu viel als zu wenig: Kunst, Musik, Aktionen zwischen Hedonismus und Nihilismus (1976-1985)*, exh. cat. (Berlin: Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, 2003), 82-94.

Kippenberger could quickly become a familiar figure through his "philanthropic" gestures.

The do-it-yourself mentality and raw energy that characterized contemporary developments in music served as an impetus to Kippenberger's early creations. He set the tone at this stage for the type of passion and tireless devotion he would dedicate to not only producing his own work, but in serving as a catalyst for bringing like-minded individuals together. The arrival of punk at the same moment in which direct political action had lost its appeal opened up a great deal of maneuvering room for an artist/organizer like Kippenberger. As Christoph Bannat, a chronicler of the events in S.O.36, wrote, "Punk was also a gesture in slogans, which also meant: *think today—done tomorrow*."[42] Kippenberger thrived in an environment where he could exercise his talents for the speedy realization of ideas and for bringing together diverse strands of widely dispersed music, literature and art scenes.[43] In 1978, together with his future Cologne gallerist Gisela Capitain, he founded Kippenberger's Büro (Office), located at a short remove from S.O.36. Between the two venues, Kippenberger was able to establish himself as a successful promoter of people and ideas, orchestrating an ongoing series of informal exhibitions and events that placed equal importance on showing the work of artists as constructing a social context.[44] A poster Kippenberger designed in 1978 summarized his position as master-of-ceremonies and general cultural attaché. Titled

[42] Ibid., 86; "Punk war auch eine Geste in (Schlag-)Worten und das hieß auch: *heute denken—morgen fertig*." *Think today—done tomorrow* is the title of a 1983 painting by Kippenberger.

[43] Bannat claims that Kippenberger was responsible for organizing visits of bands and filmmakers from New York to S.O.36 in the spring of 1979; ibid., 88-90.

[44] See Schmidt-Wulffen, "Alles in allem," 58-60.

Kippenbürgers Büro: Nutzen Sie die ganze Palette unserer Dienstleistungen (Kippenberger's Office: Use the Entire Palette of Our Services; fig. 27), he listed "mediation, consultation and pictures" as three of his primary offerings for the prospective "client." A crude image of a painter's palette with brushes sticking through it partially obscures bank notes, coins and deposit slips, symbols of professional success only superficially in conflict with the anti-commercial attitude of punk-dominated Kreuzberg in the late 1970s.

S.O.36 lasted in its first phase for a little under a year, after which it initially closed down in June of 1979.[45] It had been a volatile place from the beginning, as competing subcultures (punks, rockers, bikers) attempted to shape the neighborhood to their liking. During its first months, a gang of punks had, after cutting the phone lines, destroyed the interior with baseball bats. Bannat has attributed the violence partly to childhood hierarchy formation: "An old schoolyard ritual appeared to repeat itself here, in which the intellectual teacher's pet is beaten up in a physical, that is, unconscious, recognition by the attackers that he has already announced the coming age, the adult age, that of language."[46] Only months after S.O.36 shut its doors, Kippenberger was savagely beaten and hospitalized by young former patrons allegedly complaining of the high prices once charged at the club. There are numerous accounts of the 1980 assault and of the motivations of his attackers, but there is no doubt that the artist quickly realized that it could be used as fodder for his work. A Polaroid photograph taken of Kippenberger at the

[45] See Bannat, "Süd-Ost 36," 90.

[46] Ibid., 88; "Es schien hier ein altes Schulhofritual zu wiederholen, in welchem der intellektuelle Streber verhauen wird, in körperlicher, also unbewusster Erkenntnis der Schläger, dass dieser bereits das kommende Alter, das Erwachsenen-Alter, das der Sprache, ankündigte.

hospital where he was recovering from severe head injuries is painful to look at. From behind bloody bandages and gauze, Kippenberger stares back at the viewer through swollen eyes, his head wrapped in a cotton dressing. This picture turned up the following year in an invitation card for a 1981 exhibition in Stuttgart at Galerie Achim Kubinski entitled *Dialog mit der Jugend* (Dialogue with the Youth[47]; fig. 28). By then Kippenberger was 28 years old and had already made the transition from youth to adulthood, especially in the eyes of the highly youth-oriented punk scene. Clearly, his tenure as club promoter and art consultant did not signal someone merely suffering from youthful indecision or inexperience. He may have retained the spontaneous energy of adolescence, but the punks recognized in Kippenberger a figure of authority that inspired their act of "resistance."

Kippenberger become known early on for mining his own adventurous daily existence in the constant search for new material that might lend itself to single works and exhibition-related ephemera. The most notorious reworking of the *Dialog* photograph is his 1982 untitled self-portrait (fig. 29). The painted self-portrait brings his damaged visage to the front of the picture plane. Floating in the air are cocktail and beer glasses, musical notes, bright spots of paint and other indicators of a life of excess. In a few key places Kippenberger has thickly applied putty directly onto the surface of the canvas to give the image a kind of scab-like texture that makes it all the more tangible and repulsive, in the manner of a Francis Bacon painting. A rather perverse kind of *Selbst-Darstellung*, it neatly captures the character of a great deal of Kippenberger's work: confrontational, dramatic, humorous, pathetic. Like a good stand-up comic, Kippenberger

[47] A more nuanced English translation of the title might read *Dialogue with the Youth of Today*, since *Jugend* in German has a stronger sense of temporal immediacy than its English counterpart.

knew how to take advantage of a seemingly desperate situation and turn it into productive material.

In contrast to Beuys, who preceded Kippenberger as *Selbstdarsteller* before the term had entered into the common vocabulary, the "dialogue" instigated by the younger artist is only with an imaginary public. Beuys's consistent attempts, over a period of many years, to constitute an engaged and active public go back at least to his founding of the *Deutsche Studentenpartei* (German Student Party) in 1967 at the Düsseldorf Academy and continue through the remainder of his career, notably via his role in founding the German Green Party in 1979.[48] The great number of Beuys students and acolytes testify to his enduring pedagogical impact, and numerous accounts have been written of his charismatic public presence: "Beuys's creativity worked from a source of true inner perception that was often hidden from his audience, yet they intuitively grasped how profoundly he had developed the particular within the context of the whole."[49] For Beuys, the nurturing of an audience was brought about through direct action and regular face-to-face contact; he claimed in an interview that it "is simply impossible for human beings to bring their creative intention into the world any way other than through action."[50] Kippenberger did have a limited role as a teacher, developed during his stints as a visiting professor at the Städelschule in Frankfurt and at the Gesamthochschule in

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[48] On both events, see Lukas Beckmann, "The Causes Lie in the Future," in Gene Ray, ed., *Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy* (Sarasota, FL: The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 2001), 91-111.

[49] Ibid., 97.

[50] Georg Jappe, "Interview with Beuys about Key Experiences, September 27, 1976," in Ray, ed., *Joseph Beuys*, 198.

Kassel between 1990 and 1992.[51] He was also well received during occasional visits to art departments as a visiting artist.[52] Yet his public image was hardly that of a pedagogical icon along the lines of Beuys.

From what form of action might Kippenberger's self-portrait derive? "Youth," in Kippenberger's formulation, is as much about his own aging process as it is about any potential conversation with a new generation biting at his heels. The self-portrait represents a taking leave of his own formative years, given that it was painted a year after his first solo show with Max Hetzler in Stuttgart as more widespread public recognition began to develop. The "action" behind the image, in this case the receiving of a beating, came about indirectly, i.e., not through the artist's specific intentions or planning. By the same token, Kippenberger quite deliberately inserted himself into the Kreuzberg context in which spontaneous violence was part of the daily program.[53] Discussing the role of shame in the history of human self-consciousness, Peter Sloterdijk's words are well suited to describe Kippenberger's own portrayal of ironic self-martyrdom: "Those who

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[51] According to Kippenberger's former studio assistant Merlin Carpenter, a number of other assistants in the early 1990s first met the artist during their studies in Frankfurt and Kassel. Merlin Carpenter, "Back Seat Driver," in Thomas Groetz, ed., *Gitarren, die nicht Gudrun heißen: Hommage à Martin Kippenberger*, exh. cat. (Berlin: Galerie Max Hetzler, 2002), 27-30.

[52] For a vivid account of one of Kippenberger's visting-artist experiences (written as part of the artist's obituary), see Ronald Jones, "Swizzle Shtick," *Artforum* (October 1997), 9-10.

[53] See Kippenberger's own description of the rough-and-tumble atmosphere of S.O.36 in Schmidt-Wulffen, "Alles in allem," 62.

never wanted to sink below the earth's surface are lacking one of the essential experiences of subjectivity."[54]

Kippenberger's recasting of his life's mishaps into moments of stubborn glory suggests that the question of artistic success in the 1980s was not as straightforward as the general hype around the decade's rampant careerism might seem to indicate. Artists from Kippenberger's generation, who were obviously far from shy when it came to self-promotion, were at the same time critical of the art industry and all of its trappings. Part of the emphasis they placed on the testing out of ideas and methods was directed toward allowing room for false decisions and bad planning. It would be an overstatement to say that they strategically worked toward failure, an impossible task by definition—to reiterate, one cannot intend to fail successfully. Yet they seized on blunders, building them into their practice as one highly productive source for new ideas and topics. This active cultivation of a type of failure takes the artists one step beyond Beuys's awareness of his mission's impossibility as exemplified by his pursuance of a neo-avant-garde practice.[55] Recalling the activities of Kippenberger's Büro, the younger artist later spoke proudly of the title of a review he once received in the *Berliner Zeitung*: "Kippenberger—das besondere Nichts" (Kippenberger—the exceptional nothing). He exclaimed, "such a headline, for that I worked for a long time; I was happy about it."[56]

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[54] Peter Sloterdijk, *Weltfremdheit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), 26; "Wer nie unter den Erdboden versinken wollte, dem fehlt eine der wesentlichen Erfahrungen der Subjektivität."

[55] See the discussion of Beuys in the previous chapter.

[56] Kippenberger quoted in Schmidt-Wulffen, "Alles in allem," 60.

Success was not forsaken altogether, yet its terms had been altered in an age when traditional conceptions of professionalism were viewed with great skepticism.

Cologne: Toying with Professionalism

In marked contrast to the Kreuzberg milieu's deliberate rejection of standard career paths, the Rhineland city of Cologne offered a fertile environment for Kippenberger and others of his generation to establish themselves professionally. Cologne had long been known as a city that supports the arts, going back at least as far as the generous collecting and donating habits of Josef Haubrich (1889-1961).[57] His major collection of German Expressionism is found today in the Museum Ludwig, itself a relatively recent product of the philanthropy of Rhineland residents Peter and Irene Ludwig.[58] Located in the heart of industrial West Germany, the Cologne of the 1970s and 1980s benefited from the disposable income of wealthy collectors from the region. But perhaps equally important for the acceptance of artists like Kippenberger is the temperament of the *Kölner*. As one city historian points out, the carnival tradition, which dates back to Roman times, combines with a historically liberal political climate to nurture a culture based on *Witz*.[59]

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[57] See Peter Fuchs, ed., *Josef Haubrich—Sammler und Stifter: Kunst des XX. Jahrhunderts in Köln* (Cologne: Greven, 1959).

[58] The Museum Ludwig was founded in 1976 and the building was first opened to the public in 1986.

[59] Peter Fuchs, *Kölner Themen: Eine Auswahl von Beiträgen in Presse und Buch* (Cologne: Greven, 1996), 194-195. On Cologne as a *Witz*-oriented city, see also Herbert Schöffler, *Kleine Geographie des deutschen Witzes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1955), 17-21.

This was fertile ground upon which Kippenberger could strike a balance between professionalism and amateurism.

Along the spectrum of what constituted artistic expertise in the 1980s, Kippenberger would likely be located somewhere between the figure of the professional and that of the dilettante. On the one hand, it cannot be denied that Kippenberger's strategy for acquiring an art-world name was extremely effective in the long term. The combination of constant physical presence in numerous cities in West Germany and around the world and his non-stop output of material meant that he would be a player alone by virtue of his sheer stubbornness. Yet his general lack of technical training, his willingness to try out whatever medium suited a given idea, and his projection of the image of an amateur in much of his work collectively drew on the long tradition of dilettantism.[60] Surely a combination of both traits helped to solidify Kippenberger's place in the art world, though he leaned more heavily in one direction or the other at different times. Gert Mattenklott has argued that the classic figure of the dilettante, which reached its peak of popularity in the late 18th century, no longer exists today when the older role has been taken over by the "schemer" (*Intrigant*).[61] In place of the dilettante, the "self-maker" (*Selbstmacher*) has staked out his own terrain: "With new pathos, even the *Selbstmacher* eventually moved into the old house of the dilettante based on his

[60] For a well-written overview of the term's history, see Simone Leistner, "Dilettantismus," in Karlheinz Barck, et al, ed., *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart and Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 2001), 63-87.

[61] Gerd Mattenklott, "Das Ende des Dilettantismus," *Merkur* 9/10 (Sept./Oct. 1987), 761.

skepticism toward knowledge."[62] Knowledge, in the guise of expertise, did not fit with the new model of art-world success,[63] which is not the same as claiming that success was thereby completely forsaken. Rather, the rules of engagement changed.

Diederichsen has singled out the years 1982-84 as marking a shift in Kippenberger's adoption of a proper career as an artist, "when the sphere of influence had become larger."[64] In this period following the Berlin experience, Kippenberger, like Büttner and Oehlen, had his first major solo gallery exhibitions and began working with the dealer Max Hetzler, who moved his operations from Stuttgart to Cologne in 1983.[65] The transition to full-fledged professionals culminates, according to Diederichsen, with the 1984 exhibition *Wahrheit ist Arbeit* at the Museum Folkwang in Essen that featured work by all three artists.[66] At this point, Büttner, Oehlen and Kippenberger were first referred to as the "Hetzler-Gruppe" by art-world insiders who saw them linked by their gallery affiliation, but not necessarily by any formal, self-determined collective identity.[67] They never wrote a manifesto, nor did they take on a name like the *Mülheimer Freiheit*,

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[62] Ibid., 760; "Mit neuem Pathos ist schließlich in das alte Haus des Dilettanten auch der Selbermacher aus Skepsis gegen das Wissen eingezogen."

[63] It is well known, for example, that Kippenberger never, or rarely, read books, preferring to have them summarized by friends. See his own comments on the subject in Schmidt-Wulffen, "Alles in allem," 67.

[64] Diederichsen, "Virtueller Maoismus," 32; "…wo der Einflußraum größer geworden war."

[65] All three artists first showed individually with Hetzler in 1981 in Stuttgart, with exhibitions later in the Cologne gallery. On Hetzler's move to Cologne, see Birnbaum, "Ripening on the Rhine," 218.

[66] Diederichsen, "Virtueller Maoismus," 32.

[67] Ibid.

the moniker taken on by the Cologne-based artists associated with the Paul Maenz gallery. Yet the professional status of artist had been automatically conferred upon them once they started working with a known art dealer and appearing in reputable institutions.

It was especially in printed form, where the speed and rhythm of the verbally delivered joke is reduced to the uniformity of words on a page, that the artists were able to highlight the contrasts between differing notions of professionalism and expertise. One of the most illuminating examples of this process is the exhibition catalogue jointly produced by Büttner, Kippenberger and Oehlen for their collaborative exhibition *Wahrheit ist Arbeit* (Truth Is Work), held in 1984 at the Museum Folkwang in Essen.[68] The main text that runs through the catalogue, accompanied by reproductions of works by the artists and other related and semi-related illustrations, was co-authored by the three of them. The reader is confronted by a rambling and disjointed series of stories, art "theory," biographical sketches and other narratives, interspersed with slogans and aphorisms—for example, "Improve Knowledge through Failure." It is in such collaborative projects that one recognizes the centrality of language itself in forming these artists' collective critical voice.

The rapid shifts among the differing tones of voice and the jump cuts from one seemingly random topic to another in *Wahrheit ist Arbeit* are typical for the high degree of conceptual mobility maintained by the group. During these early years of regular collaboration, the artists constantly kept their audience off guard by making it difficult to follow their working process. They moved back and forth between media, never settling on one theme for more than a short series, and purposefully dealing in politically and

[68] Werner Büttner, Martin Kippenberger, Albert Oehlen, *Wahrheit ist Arbeit*, exh. cat. (Essen: Museum Volkwang, 1984).

socially loaded subject matter without committing to an identifiable position. They managed to keep people, and themselves, interested in their work by never subscribing to any signature style or approach. One might read their eschewal of consistency as an attempt to avoid self-parody, as if by continually playing the role of protean inventors they would never run out of material or repeat an idea.

However, the very lack of a coherent material style, while upholding a firm commitment to steady production (i.e., the style of an anti-style), would become recognizable and marketable in itself, especially as the artists acquired international reputations in the latter half of the 1980s. To be sure, certain aesthetic tendencies, in particular the employment of collage and layering processes, made it possible to identify the "look" of, say, a Kippenberger painting. But to describe this look succinctly presents the critic with a challenging task. In order to adequately unpack the heterogeneous stylistic references, one would have to return repeatedly to their numerous sources, whether Russian Constructivism or French Cubism. Fredric Jameson describes the process by which communicative codes operate under postmodernism. He writes, "Modernist styles thereby become postmodernist codes: and that the stupendous proliferation of social codes today into professional and disciplinary jargons, but also into the badges of affirmation of ethnic, gender, race, religious, and class-fraction adhesion, is also a political phenomenon, the problem of micropolitics sufficiently demonstrates."[69] The high degree of sophistication, even nonchalance, with which Kippenberger's generation could manipulate aesthetic codes demonstrate just how accurate Jameson's assessment was for a segment of art produced in the 1980s.

[69] Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July-August 1984), 65.

Having dedicated themselves to this postmodern stylistic heterogeneity, the artists followed a subversive practice of limitless quotation and appropriation through the mid-1980s.[70] Martin Prinzhorn, one of Kippenberger's regular interpreters, describes the artist's use of visual quotations as being fundamentally postmodern. He separates the modern from the postmodern in the following manner: "The difference between modernity and postmodernity is often described as being the modern quotation of reality outside of art as opposed to the postmodern incorporation of it. Kippenberger curates the artistic reality of postmodernity."[71] Kippenberger's attempt to co-opt both modern and postmodern strategies leads to his embrace of widely divergent positions and problems for the short-term gain of creating a work of art, a performance, a catalogue, even a poster or invitation card. The medium itself becomes far less important that the comedic message conveyed. Kippenberger's own body is just one form among many that can be engaged, or "curated"; his founding of the Museum of Modern Art Syros in 1993 on a remote Greek island, to which he invited friends for summer exhibitions, is just one instance of his try-all-options approach. An untitled drawing from that year presents Kippenberger as a multi-armed "director" merging with his "museum" (fig. 30), his exaggerated musculature contrasting with the building's right angles. To function

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[70] The strong presence of quotation in Kippenberger's work could be further explored in terms of its connection to his generally performative practice. Recently, German art historians and anthropologists have looked back to J. L. Austin's theories of performativity of the 1950s as a route toward understanding a shift from performance to performativity, or from the singular act to the repetitive, quotation-based act, during the transition to postmodernism in the 1970s. See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962); and Dorothea von Hantelmann, "Inszenierung des Performativen in der zeitgenössischen Kunst," *Paragrana: Internationale Zeitschrift für Historische Anthropologie*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2001), 255-270.

[71] Martin Prinzhorn, "Beyond Discourse Analysis: Kippenberger as Curator," in Martin Kippenberger, *T.K. (D.T.)*, exh. cat. (Vienna: Wiener Festwochen, 1991), 44.

temporarily as both artist and curator could give the tongue-in-cheek illusion of total control over one's career, even if it occurred in a location well beyond the recognized boundaries of the legitimate gallery context.

For his part, Oehlen was mostly content to locate himself within the four walls of the artist's studio. Between 1983 and 1986, he produced a number of unflattering painted self-portraits, in which the role of artist is carried out in front of the easel or at least in the presence of studio props (palettes, skulls, pottery wheel, etc.). In most of these canvases the frail contours of the figure emerge from a murky backdrop of loose swirls and streaks of paint. The works appear to have been whimsically composed and hastily produced, conjuring an image of the young painter tippling at his easel. Whether the artist is depicted hugging a white horse (*Selbstportrait mit Pferd*, 1985) or posing as a Dutch woman amid industrial machinery (*Selbstportrait als Holländerin*, 1983), an awkward mix of the heroic and the pathetic is invariably achieved. In *Selbstportrait mit verschissener Unterhose und blauer Mauritius* (Self-Portrait with Shitty Underpants and Blue Mauritius; fig. 31), 1984, Oehlen stands facing away from the viewer, his head turned in profile as he gazes at a stamp he holds up with a pair of tweezers. The abjection of the soiled underwear, painted in a hue that also defines the painting's ground, marks a comedic contrast with the rarity of the beautiful stamp, a valuable collector's item. It says a lot about the art world of the 1980s that such a deliberate gesture of ironic self-presentation could be understood as part of a recipe for success. The figures cut by Oehlen and Kippenberger in the early-to-mid 1980s had little in common with the shamanic-healer function promoted by Beuys.

The typically postmodern condition of the inauthentic that adhered to their practice did not prevent these artists from seeking isolated moments in which an authentic gesture might be made. But the possibilities were certainly seen to be limited. Similar to the conscious embrace of failure as a preemptive maneuver, one solution to the problem of authenticity was to inhabit it and openly perform its very illegitimacy. Paradoxically, or perhaps predictably, to flirt with inauthenticity was perhaps the greatest gesture of authenticity available to an artist of the 1980s. Commenting on this very state of dividedness, Diederichsen recently wrote the following about Kippenberger: "Thus, for Kippenberger, secondarity was in the first instance not a post-modern position, enlightened about its own status, which had to take into account the real impossibility of primary expression—be it critical or cynical—but…a new form of authentic handle on the world that befitted the time…."[72] The "time" in Cologne was particularly fast-paced, and artists who wanted to have a visible role in the galleries often banded together in order to leave behind those who did not possess the necessarily ruthless constitution. Turning again to Diederichsen as the most attentive recorder of then-current events, we find him writing in 1990: "Where there are absolutely no victims, where relationships and hierarchies are excluded from the very start, where the social question has been banned from creativity—there is the zero hour of art."[73] Diederichsen was responding here to what had transpired in Cologne during the previous decade; by 1990, the "zero hour" had long since passed. Fighting for space within the relatively limited constraints of the city's network of galleries and exhibition spaces—not to mention within the bars and nightclubs

[72] Diederichsen, "'Selbstdarsteller': Martin Kippenberger between 1977 and 1983," 49.

[73] Diedrich Diederichsen, "Oh Lambada!: The Cost of Refinement," in Isabelle Graw, ed., *Nachschub: The Köln Show* (Cologne: SPEX, 1990), 144.

where so many important decisions were made—artists had rapidly established alliances and territorial demarcations that, while occasionally fluid, stayed largely intact until the art market declined during the first Gulf War.[74] Contrary to notions of authenticity associated with the sixties and early seventies—the directness of experience sought in performances and happenings, the link between art and politics, the merging of art with everyday life—the Cologne of the eighties acknowledged the authentic as it emerged in the aggressive pursuit of careers.

Kippenberger, whose art-world antics quickly became legendary, happily took on the role of art clown in an attempt to throw a wrench into the industry's mechanisms while carving out a space where genuine, measurable success could be had. The art/life reconciliation sought by the historic and neo-avant-garde had long since lost its utopian moorings by the time Kippenberger arrived on the Berlin, and later Cologne, art scenes. The operative term was now compromise, in which an artist could continue to be fully invested in the business of exhibiting and selling work while simultaneously acknowledging the narrowing of his goals. Art production for Kippenberger and his peers was to some extent merely a vehicle by which they could structure a stimulating life for themselves. Gone was the drive toward a Beuysian Social Sculpture or a Fluxus-driven collective practice that downplayed the importance of the individual. By contrast, Kippenberger and Oehlen demanded instant recognition as individuals linked by a common drive to succeed on their own terms.

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[74] See Holert, "Blood of the Poets," 275.

The Physical Joke

Given the highly performative working methods that Kippenberger and Oehlen developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, one must invariably read their pictures and objects via the varieties of selfhood manifested. Their buffoonish behavior and drunken appearances at openings and bars demonstrated the extent to which they conceived of the Cologne art world as a kind of extended stage, albeit one that was relatively limited in scope, even provincial. Individual actions only held meaning when carried out in the group setting. As explained above, the recourse to the verbal, even when it was carried out in the pages of an exhibition catalogue, typically reads more like words exchanged in conversation than thoughts written directly as printed text. The next chapter will be concerned with the various modes of discourse that emerge out of the group conversation conducted by these artists in the early stages of their respective careers, but here I want to draw attention to the inherently physical aspect of their construction of the comedic, especially in the work of Kippenberger. In several works, and increasingly in the second half of the 1980s, the artist employed well-known strategies of the grotesque in order to expose the cliché at the heart of many images of the successful and productive modern artist, as well as to offer his own counter-model of the fecund body.

Historically, the rational, productive body is represented by the self-contained entity that Leonardo da Vinci depicted in the late fifteenth century as the geometrically inscribed, Vitruvian man. This figure, with his proportions perfectly in line with the pure forms of the circle and square, maintains his integrity and singularity in relation to other living creatures and inanimate objects. He is the model of Renaissance symmetry, separate from the rest of nature and thus able to exert his influence upon it. The Vitruvian

man's antithesis is the grotesque body, which is full of holes and exposed to the world. Leonardo's near-contemporary Rabelais looked back to the late Middle Ages for a depiction of the body that is porous and in danger of fragmentation. As Mikhail Bakhtin explains, "the artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depths."[75]

Half a millennium later, in the final decades of the twentieth century, we find similar dichotomies still active in the art world. Whether the line is drawn between the austerity of Minimalism's "specific objects" and the scattered forms of Land Art, or between Conceptualism's reduction to text on paper and the heightened physicality of Performance art, we continue to rely on well-worn divisions of closure and openness to categorize artistic production. In the spirit of the times, Kippenberger consistently treated his own figure as a physically penetrable entity in the countless self-portraits he produced as part of his project of *Selbst-Darstellung*.[76] Peter Sloterdijk suggested that the contemporary drive to comprehend our closeness to, and dependence on, the physical world is part of the "psychosomatics of the Zeitgeist."[77] Revealing the body's fragility,

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[75] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 317-318.

[76] For lucid and informative histories of the grotesque in contemporary art, see the essays by Harald Falckenberg ("Auf Wiedersehen: Zur Rolle des Grotesken in der Gegenwartskunst") and Robert Storr ("Traum oder Albtraum der Vernunft") in Pamela Kort, ed., *Grotesk!: 130 Jahre Kunst der Frechheit*, exh. cat. (Munich: Prestel, 2003), 183-192 and 255-265, respectively.

[77] Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 139-154.

notably that of his own figure, Kippenberger produced numerous self-portraits throughout his career that appear to confirm Sloterdijk's theory.

The German literary theorist Hans Robert Jauss has written the following about what he terms the "comic hero": "Invested with the positive quality of the affirmation of the pleasure principle, the *grotesque hero* who triumphs over his fear can do his part to make the unofficial truth of laughter prevail, and thus create a laughing rapport with his public."[78] The laughter that Kippenberger inspired was not solely derisive; his success was due partly to the fact that he had the ability to mock tradition while upholding many of its values. As a West German artist, Kippenberger was able to exploit and comment on the long tradition of self-portraiture within German art from Dürer to the present.[79] At the same time, he drew on numerous other precursors from the history of modern art with its emphasis on stylistic idiosyncrasy.

One of the key elements in Kippenberger's maintenance of standards involves the notion of creativity itself. If great artists of the past have often been singled out partly due to their abundant output and fertile imagination, Kippenberger's project has been to simultaneously rival and parody these qualities. Many of his satirical projects have taken aim at the piousness and self-importance with which Modernism has been promoted and received. And as one of the most obvious targets of such a critique, Kippenberger often used the public persona of Pablo Picasso as a foil for his commentary on artistic genius. He concentrated specifically on the Picasso of the postwar period, when the latter had

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[78] Hans Robert Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 195 [his emphasis].

[79] The best historical account of the roots of German self-portraiture is Joseph Leo Koerner's *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993). See also Frank Whitford, *Expressionist Portraits* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987).

already been lionized for decades and was spending much of his time on the Riviera. However, Kippenberger was less interested in Picasso as an individual; rather, it was the image of the aging, but still macho, member of the avant-garde projected by the art world and the media that captivated Kippenberger, who could merge with a recognizable figure from the past in order to highlight the shortcomings of the present. Considering the grotesque nature of Picasso's own late self-portraits (fig. 32), Kippenberger did not have to stray too far from the source.[80]

Beginning in 1985 with an exhibition invitation card (fig. 33),[81] Kippenberger made repeated use of a famous photograph of Picasso wearing a tight bathing suit—while out walking his dog in the sun—that prominently displays both his protruding stomach and the outline of his genitals. With its clear display of the primary sites of consumption and procreation, Kippenberger latched onto this image as the perfect signifier of artistic fecundity. At the same time Kippenberger had begun to develop his own sizable belly through years of heavy drinking. He was thus able to cast himself in two series of paintings from 1988 and 1992 in the role of the failed Picasso, the painter who possesses the appropriate virility and manhood but nevertheless produces hackneyed works full of overwrought symbolism. Many of these paintings heighten the grotesque nature of the artist's body through Kippenberger's distortion of the hands and arms to make them appear more ineffective. An untitled oil-on-canvas of 1988 portrays a rotund figure with claw-like appendages whose level of productivity can only be compromised by his

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[80] See Gert Schiff, *Picasso: The Last Years, 1963-1973* (New York: George Braziller, 1983).

[81] The 1985 exhibition, *Ich könnte Euch was leihen, aber damit würde ich Euch keinen Gefallen tun* (I Could Lend You Something, But That Wouldn't Be Doing You a Favor), was held at the Leyendecker Gallery, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Spain.

clumsy, un-heroic features (fig. 34). The emphasis on the tensed and twisted fingers of the artist recalls Joseph Leo Koerner's illuminating discussion of Albrecht Dürer's central placement of his rather awkwardly rendered hand in his famous self-portrait of 1500.[82]

Kippenberger also worked with an anti-idealizing presentation of the body that looks back to a long tradition of utilizing the overfed belly for satirical purposes. This is particularly true of the Weimar period in Germany, as artists like Hannah Höch altered already unflattering images of politicians to further undercut their authority. Maud Lavin has described how Höch's 1919 photomontage *Dada-Rundschau* (Dada Panorama; fig. 35) is based on a photograph of President Friedrich Ebert and Reichswehrminister Gustav Noske that "was already a joke."[83] Pictured wading in a lake in their bathing suits, the officials' flabby bodies are adorned with flowers by Höch to drive home the message of compromised virility.[84] As Brigid Doherty has more recently explained, a swollen stomach was often referenced in Germany after World War I in order to mock the newly formed government: "Left-wing caricaturists consistently opted for that mocking embodiment to tell the story of undignified middle-class rule, believing and wanting to show that there was something new, something especially petty and grotesque, about the Weimar Republic's body politic."[85] Perhaps the equivalent of state power in the art world might be the reverence with which certain artists like Picasso have been treated during

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[82] Koerner, "The Hairy, Bearded Painter," in *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*, 160-186.

[83] Maud Lavin, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photographs of Hannah Höch* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 35.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Brigid Doherty, "Figures of the Pseudorevolution," *October* 84 (Spring 1998), 68.

their lifetime. Kippenberger evidently saw in Picasso the embodiment of the artist as a larger-than-life figure, his body scarcely able to contain the creative ferment that wells up from within. As the younger artist took on similar proportions with age, he was able to align himself with a history that he could engage through the vehicles of both parody and sympathetic emulation.

For in Kippenberger's work, the grotesque belly was not merely understood as an object of scorn; it held positive significance as an emblem of productivity. Unlike writers on the political left in West Germany of the early 1980s, Kippenberger had no problem with the turn to gross corporeality that was implied in the abandonment of theoretical discourse in the wake of the 1977 German Autumn. Tilman Spengler, co-editor of *Kursbuch*, wrote an article in 1981 bemoaning the ideological uncertainties that accompany an "avant-garde of the belly": "Though the belly has predictable passions, what will now become the object of desire, what the rumbling concretely signals, must remain a surprise."[86] Indeed, Kippenberger would benefit from the newfound interest in people's lower passions as the belly afforded a plurality of symbolic options. This metaphor could be extended to encompass several other forms he frequently made reference to that were directly or indirectly associated with fertility: for example, eggs (both raw and cooked), life preservers and breasts. Kippenberger took great delight in finding intriguing correspondences between base matter and human physicality.

In 1988 Kippenberger produced a kind of abject pin-up calendar, *Elite 88*, that contained numerous views of him posing in a pair of white, standard-issue men's briefs

[86] Tilman Spengler, "Der Bauch als Avantgarde—über den aufrechten Niedergang der Theorie," *Kursbuch* 65 (October 1981), 183; "Der Bauch hat zwar prognostizierbare Leidenschaften, aber was nun zum Objekt der Begierde wird, was das Knurren konkret signalisiert, muß Überraschung bleiben."

(fig. 36). For the July scene, the artist is depicted standing in front of a mirror with his hands clasped behind his back, gazing admiringly at the girth of his beer belly. He had already thematized his penchant for addiction and reckless behavior in a 1981 oil-on-canvas titled *Alkoholfolter* (Alcohol Torture; fig. 37). With a frightened look on his face, he is pictured holding up his hands, which are caught in two plastic rings on either side of a beer can suspended from the same three-pack holder.[87] In a move that would become typical for his practice in general, he incorporated the beer-can handcuffs into various later works, using it for a magazine cover illustration in 1984 and turning the sculptural object itself into a multiple in 1989 (fig. 38). Once he latched on to a form of source material, whether self-produced or appropriated from mass-circulated imagery, Kippenberger ingested and repeatedly processed it until he exhausted its use value.

Bakhtin wrote that the grotesque body "is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body."[88] Kippenberger's body alters its proportions from image to image, acting out Bakhtin's description of an aspect of the grotesque. Like many artists who parody tradition, however, Kippenberger's method of positioning himself in reference to cliché-ridden conceptions of the artist betray a level of respect for the object of his criticism. The desire to dismantle the image of the heroic creator does not necessarily indicate an outright rejection of this role in society. Yet if failure does find its way into an analysis of Kippenberger's work, to what extent did he actually conceive of it as part of his artistic practice? There is an undercurrent of the pathetic running throughout his career as he

[87] Markus Oehlen describes the work's genesis in a drunken evening, with Kippenberger looking for the distinctive three-pack of Schlösser Alt beer, in Schmidt-Wulffen, "Alles in allem," 65.

[88] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317.

fashioned himself into a kind of anti-hero. What is crucial in Kippenberger's work is that he literally embodied the condition of failure; it could be seen in the images and objects he produced, but it relied on the visibility of his own physical presence.

This distinguishes him somewhat from other international artists of the 1980s who ostensibly rejected traditional expressions of power and authenticity in a more detached, analytical style. In an essay entitled "The Art of Cynical Reason," Hal Foster has described the neo-geo artists working in New York (Ashley Bickerton, Peter Halley and Ross Bleckner, among others) as being particularly informed by a sense of defeat. They deliberately took op art, a largely forgotten and thoroughly discredited moment within modernism, as their point of departure: "In op art, then, abstraction was *already* reduced to design, and these neo-geo artists only reiterated this failure. But they reiterated it not in order to redeem it critically (this Benjaminian model was not considered possible, or not considered at all) but to compound it cynically."[89] Furthermore, according to Foster, their work was doubly defeatist: by moving from appropriation art's effective critique of originality back to producing singular paintings under neo-geo, they had negated the impact of their initial critical act. For Foster, their return to an approach that they had once denounced revealed the cynical reasoning behind their work.

Foster's views were heavily informed by the work of Sloterdijk, against whose *Critique of Cynical Reason* Foster qualified his use of the theory of cynicism by explaining, "I do not mean to suggest a zeitgeist of cynicism, but a specific cynical reason has developed within contemporary art, especially in the crisis of criticism that

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[89] Hal Foster, "The Art of Cynical Reason," in *Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 100-101.

followed appropriation art."[90] Foster located this crisis specifically within a New York context, as the representatives of what might have been considered a viable neo-avant-garde suddenly gave up their attack on originality and authorship to enter into complicity with the market and its maintenance of the status quo. Kippenberger can serve as an interesting point of contrast within this discussion of lapsed criticality. One might question whether his work ever gave the pretense of trying to undermine tradition through a pointed attack on its most visible features, as was the case with appropriation art's rejection of the principle of authorial property. For as much as Kippenberger parodied the tenets of modernism—and he could occasionally be fairly vicious—one can find an equal number of examples in which his actions propped up the very values he seemed to be trying to overturn. In other words, his practice was self-consciously pendular from the beginning, constantly shifting between critique and embrace, rarely allowing the viewer to settle on a single interpretation of a given work or public appearance.

Trockel's Alternative

In an art world dominated by the macho sparring of Kippenberger's "The Boys in the Bande,"[91] Rosemarie Trockel carved out a semi-autonomous niche for herself in the early 1980s that she has occupied to this day. The traversing of wide spaces that was typical for

[90] Ibid., 118. Foster ignores Sloterdijk's figure of the *kynic*, which taps into the critical heritage of ancient cynicism. In doing so, Foster overlooks the fact that Sloterdijk suggested an alternative to what he described as a zeitgeist of destructive cynicism.

[91] This is the title of an article on the group written by Stephen Ellis and published in *Art in America* in December 1988. Ellis's title made joking reference to William Friedkin's gay-liberation-era film *The Boys in the Band* (1970), a marked contrast to the pronounced heterosexuality of the German artists.

the male group was closed off initially to Trockel, who claims to have suffered in her early career from agoraphobia.[92] She thus led a more secluded existence, even if her strong presence within the Cologne art world was impossible to overlook as the decade progressed. Her attitude toward self-promotion was likewise different: "In my opinion, you should never try to control or direct your own career. Control is possible only with respect to one's self, and then only to a certain extent."[93] Though she was on generally friendly terms with Kippenberger and they cooperated on several occasions, her affiliation with the gallerist Monika Sprüth allowed her to chart a separate course through the treacherous waters of Cologne's art scene. Critics writing about Trockel have frequently attempted to describe a feminist impulse at the heart of her project,[94] though Trockel herself has typically maintained a distance from defining her own practice as feminist in nature. For Trockel, as she put it in the late 1980s, "Art works on the continuation of politics by other means. But direct change through art is probably more like a fairytale worth believing in."[95]

The ambivalent attitude toward political subject matter suggested by Trockel's statement crops up in other responses she gave to questions in the relatively few

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[92] See "Rosemarie Trockel Talks to Isabelle Graw," *Artforum* (March 2003), 224-225, 273.

[93] Ibid., 273.

[94] For one such interpretation see Elisabeth Sussman, "The Body Inventory—the Exotic and Mundane in Rosemarie Trockel's Art," in Sidra Stich, ed., *Rosemarie Trockel*, exh. cat. (Munich: Prestel, 1991), 27-36.

[95] Rosemarie Trockel, "Endlich ahnen, nicht nur wissen. Ein Gespräch mit Doris von Drateln," *Kunstforum International* 93 (February/March 1988), 212; "Die Kunst arbeitet an der Fortsetzung der Politik mit anderen Mitteln. Aber direkte Veränderung durch Kunst ist wohl eher ein Märchen, an das es sich zu glauben lohnt."

published interviews she has granted over the years. Speaking two years ago with Isabelle Graw in an issue of *Artforum* dedicated to the 1980s, Trockel described her early agoraphobia and the impact it had on her years as an emerging artist unable to be fully physically present in the rapidly growing art scene of Cologne.[96] To be absent from the politics of self-promotion in Cologne at this time could be a major hindrance to an artist's career. This biographical account has circulated for a long time, operating as a kind of counter-narrative to the noisy antics of Cologne's predominantly male art world as defined by the Mülheimer Freiheit group and, beginning in 1983, Martin Kippenberger and his colleagues. While not wanting to cast Trockel's portrayal of early professional obstacles into doubt, it is worth examining the possible strategy behind this narrative of initial avoidance and distance being gradually overcome by Trockel's ability to adapt in her own way, "like a sponge slowly soaking it all up."[97] Whether or not the result of a deliberate or accidental action, Trockel has been highly adept at keeping herself and her work at some distance from the immediate center of activity while still remaining inseparable from it.

Trockel's dialectical movement between avoidance and attraction provides a common thread that defines both her career in the art world and the work for which she has become known. And what appears to be steady ambivalence perhaps offers a route toward better explaining what aspects of her practice might participate in the discourse of feminism. When discussing Trockel's maintenance of a cautious distance from self-contained groupings with strong agendas, whether ideological or professional, writers

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[96] "Rosemarie Trockel Talks to Isabelle Graw," 224.

[97] Ibid., 225.

have often contemplated her relationship to feminist theory and politics. In the early 1990s Anne Wagner wrote of Trockel's distaste for "the terms in which her art has sometimes been claimed to be feminist."[98] Clearly, essentialisms of all kinds were to be strictly rejected by an artist wary of taking on narrowly defined positions. At the same time that Trockel was beginning to chart an individualistic course in the early 1980s, feminist writers were reassessing the impact and strategies of their movement as it had unfolded during the previous decade. In the foreword to the second, expanded edition of her 1975 book *Selbsterfahrung und Fremdbestimmung* (Self-Awareness and Heteronomy), the poet Ursula Krechel discussed how she had tried to describe the "narrow line" between inside and outside, or private and public, that defined the women's movement. Writing in 1983, Krechel characterized the situation in the mid-1970s: "Inside and outside, the process of self-awareness…and the battle against heteronomy…have since reached an unprecedented lack of simultaneity."[99] The feeling of progress of the 1970s had given way to a sense that things had stalled as it became obvious how massive was the task of addressing external hierarchical structures while promoting internal empowerment.

In the midst of such re-evaluations by members of the women's movement, Trockel's own contribution can be seen as developing alongside, rather than within, the more public debates around feminism. Trockel's gallerist and early collaborator, Monika Sprüth, claimed in a conversation with the artist that they had wanted to avoid the "male

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[98] Anne M. Wagner, "How Feminist Are Rosemarie Trockel's Objects?", *Parkett* 33 (September 1992), 61.

[99] Ursula Krechel, *Selbsterfahrung und Fremdbestimmung: Bericht aus der Neuen Frauenbewegung*, rev. ed. (Darmstadt and Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1983), 12.

structures of success" that she felt New York women artists had adapted, as well as the "retreat into '*Selbsterfahrung*'" that Krechel discussed.[100] The pair has been described as a forming a "third pole" to the male-dominated galleries of Paul Maenz and Max Hetzler, yet they did include men in the exhibitions they organized and the gallery itself was not the center of singularly feminist-oriented activities.[101] Rather, I want to propose Trockel's (and Sprüth's) strategy—if this is the right word—as one that acknowledges the private/public split within feminism that Krechel had diagnosed and simultaneously turns this situation of uncertainty into a productive basis for the making of art. Such an interpretation of Trockel's practice, which opens up avenues for thinking about her paintings, drawings and sculptures that I pursue in the next two chapters, can ultimately allow a return of the simultaneity (or the constructive merging of private and public activities) that Krechel found to be so conspicuously absent from the *Frauenfrage* at the beginning of the 1980s. Trockel's method of working comes close to what Paul Smith argued in 1988 would be the benefit of bringing together two main strands of feminism (the more experiential, awareness-based feminism generally associated with Anglo-American theories, and French feminism with its embrace of psychoanalysis) into a whole that often operates from opposed standpoints. This doubling of perspectives "not only remarks and exploits the contradictions inherent to dominant social structures, but also treats of its own contradictions and exploits them too."[102] This version of feminism

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[100] Monika Sprüth and Rosemarie Trockel, "Wollen Frauen und Männer eigentlich das gleiche?", *Eau de Cologne* 1 (1985), not paginated.

[101] See "Rosemarie Trockel Talks to Isabelle Graw," 224.

[102] Paul Smith, *Discerning the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 149.

would, in principle, avoid the traps of essentialism by establishing self-criticism and multiplicity as core elements of its workings.

The Production of Context

The conversations initiated by this generation of artists throughout the 1980s moved frequently between public and private realms and, when taking place within specifically public settings, often crossed the boundaries associated with distinct social groupings. This can be observed most vividly in the crossover activities of Kippenberger in late-70s West Berlin, where his as-yet-unformed art career was still easily capable of merging seamlessly with the local punk music scene. On the other hand, *Dialog mit der Jugend* testifies to the inherent difficulties that arise when one's audience begins to feel alienated or inadequately represented. The German critic Jörg Heiser has employed the term *Kontextwechsel* (change of context) in an essay about connections between art and pop music from the mid-1960s to the present.[103] Heiser argues that when it is allowed to function most efficiently, the *Kontextwechsel* can have a truly liberating effect: "The longer the spectrum between refusal, alliances and punctual cooperation with institutions can be kept open, the longer the *Kontextwechsel* is also able to expand the scope of action for emancipatory policies."[104] In Kippenberger's case, the spectrum was left comfortably

[103] Jörg Heiser, "Tripping at the Gates of Öffentlichkeit: Produzieren zwischen Kunst und Popmusik—die Motive des Kontextwechsels," in Ulrike Groos and Markus Müller, ed., *Make it Funky: Crossover zwischen Musik, Pop, Avantgarde und Kunst* (Cologne: Oktagon, 1998), 259-276.

[104] Ibid., 264; "Je nachhältiger sich das Spektrum zwischen Verweigerung, Bündnissen und punktueller Kooperation mit Institutionen offenhalten läßt, um so nachhältiger hat der Kontextwechsel auch etwas von Erweiterung des Handlungsspielraums für emanzipative Politiken."

open as long as he was still deciding which type of career he would embark upon. Having decided definitively by 1984 to seek his fame as an artist,[105] the range of his actions was somewhat reduced (though not entirely restricted) to meet the requirements of the increasingly professionalized art world. Kippenberger and Oehlen did uphold aspects of a crossover practice throughout the 1980s, especially in their collaborative and solo musical recordings, but these projects operated more on the sidelines of their production of works to be shown at exhibition.

The composition of the audiences that develop around these types of peripheral activities is difficult to define. Kippenberger's crossover activities in West Berlin were partly accidental, in that the city's art world was not so clearly demarcated as it was in the gallery network of Cologne. The *Kontextwechsel* was less a matter of deliberate boundary crossings than a fluid interaction between parties with short-term common interests. On the other hand, as Diedrich Diederichsen has recently argued in relation to the work of Mike Kelley (a friend of Kippenberger's) in Los Angeles, the incorporation of pop music into the artist's practice opened up "another social environment, another contemporary space of reception, but also another tradition."[106] In addition to the expansion of social space, music and sound could be tapped in terms of their distinct materiality.[107] To some

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[105] Kippenberger had early on also contemplated pursuing careers as an actor and novelist; see Diederichsen, "'Selbstdarsteller': Martin Kippenberger between 1977 and 1983," 45.

[106] Diedrich Diederichsen, "Echos von Spiegelsounds in Headphones: Wie Kunst und Musik einander als Mangelwesen lieben," *Texte zur Kunst* 60 (December 2005), 54-55.

[107] Ibid. On the relations between art and music in the twentieth century, see Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

extent, Kippenberger and others in Kreuzberg specifically entered the scene due to its wide-open options for diverse and undefined activities.

It should be mentioned that the flip side to their group activities was a consciously acknowledged competitiveness that often contradicted the spirit of cooperation suggested by the regularity of their common projects. The collaborative dynamics included much ridiculing of each other's works when they were not considered to meet the tight community's high expectations.[108] The staking of positions was aggressively carried out within the group, as well as being directed toward other artists, especially those of an older generation. In the third issue of *Dum Dum*, Büttner and Oehlen printed the following line on one of the pages: "Polke ist dumm und lügt" (Polke is dumb and lies).[109] Though it might be written off as a lightly provocative gesture toward a mentor figure, Büttner claims today that Polke did not find it the least bit funny at the time, leading to a souring of relations with their putative teacher.[110]

In 1985, as if to formalize the cutthroat arrangement, Kippenberger and Oehlen, along with friends and fellow artists Jörg Schlick and Wolfgang Bauer, founded the Lord Jim Loge in Graz, Austria. Having created their own men's drinking club, they gave it the motto "Keiner hilft keinem" (Nobody Helps Nobody). As both of these examples demonstrate, the route to professional success might have been lonely, but at least everyone shared equally in this knowledge. One is reminded of the exclusivity and

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[108] In an interview with the author (Hamburg, 14 April 2005), Büttner described how he and his colleagues frequently "heaped scorn upon each other" ("…haben Spott aufeinander gehäuft").

[109] Werner Büttner and Albert Oehlen, *Dum Dum* 3 (1979), not paginated.

[110] Büttner in conversation with the author, Hamburg, 14 April 2005.

frequent expulsions from political groupings of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as historical Dada's rejection of the concept of membership. Tristan Tzara explained their attitude in his 1922 "Lecture on Dada": "Another characteristic of Dada is the continuous breaking off of our friends. They are always breaking off and resigning. The first to tender his resignation from the Dada movement *was myself*."[111] Through this historical lens, the Lord Jim Loge can be partly understood as a parody of avant-garde factionalism and secret societies in general rather than an elitist group with an identifiable agenda. Yet, in line with the imitative powers of parody, Kippenberger, Oehlen and their friends did practice an exclusionary policy with concrete results.

The question of context in parts of the 1980s West German art world was heavily dependent upon the establishment and maintenance of social ties that functioned as long as they enabled individuals to achieve their own separate goals. Though the resulting works did occasionally draw attention to the highly social nature of their creation (Kippenberger's *Dialog mit der Jugend* speaks directly to its moment of inspiration in a public setting), by and large they did not offer a *self-reflexive* commentary on the place or milieu out of which they emerged. Responses to the immediate social and cultural environment were more intuitive and undigested, targeting aspects of reality as it was encountered in everyday life through other art works, the media or advertising. Writing about the inherent difficulties of explicating an artist's working context, Boris Groys has argued, "In the process questions arise as to what extent such an external context can be described, to what extent its description represents another text that demands a new

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[111] Tristan Tzara, "Lecture on Dada," in Robert Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1989), 246 [his emphasis].

context in order to be understood, and how far one should and may go in creating a greater context that would adequately stabilize the site of a single text or a single work of art."[112] It was only in the early 1990s that the term *Kontext-Kunst* (context art) would become widely used in the German-speaking countries in order to describe a great variety of practices that took the "social construction of art" to be their primary subject.[113] By constructing their local working context without directly acknowledging the process in the works themselves, Kippenberger, Trockel and their peers avoided many of the difficulties associated with *Kontext-Kunst*.[114] As I will discuss in what follows, context might be implicit in the objects, yet it is only rarely revealed as part of the work's visible structure.

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[112] Boris Groys, "Der ein-gebildete Kontext," in Peter Weibel, ed., *Kontext Kunst: The Art of the 90's*, exh. cat. (Cologne: DuMont, 1994), 257; "Dabei stellen sich allerdings die Fragen, inwieweit ein solcher äußerer Kontext überhaupt beschreibar sein kann, inwieweit seine Beschreibung ihrerseits einen Text darstellt, der nach einem neuen Kontext verlangt, um verstanden zu werden, und wie weit man gehen soll und darf, um einen Grosskontext herzustellen, der den Platz eines einzelnen Textes oder eines einzelnen Kunstwerks ausreichend stabilisieren würde."

[113] The Austrian artist and theorist Peter Weibel contributed significantly to the process with *Kontext Kunst: The Art of the 90's*, the exhibition and accompanying catalogue he organized. For more on the subject and a critique of Weibel's exhibition, see Stefan Germer, "Unter Geiern: Kontext-Kunst im Kontext," *Texte zur Kunst* 19 (August 1995), 82-95. There is no single English term that encompasses all of the practices brought together under the umbrella of *Kontext-Kunst*, though site-specificity and institutional critique are terms used to describe the work of many of the artists included in Weibel's exhibition (among them, Clegg & Guttmann, Andrea Fraser, Renée Green, Ronald Jones and Christian Philipp Müller).

[114] It is significant that Kippenberger, Oehlen, et al, did not make an appearance in Weibel's extensive history of the trend.

Chapter 4—The Work of Art as *Witz*

Only when the joke goes inward and one's own consciousness, admittedly from on high but not too ungraciously, inspects itself, does there arise a serenity that reveals not a kynical laughter, nor a cynical smile, but a humor that has ceased to struggle.[1]

Peter Sloterdijk

Aggressive Joking

When asked recently what books had influenced his work in the late 1970s, Georg Herold pointed immediately to Victor Klemperer's 1947 *LTI: A Philologist's Notebook*, which Herold and Albert Oehlen had read and discussed while students in Hamburg.[2] Klemperer, a German-Jewish professor of Romance languages and literature removed from his position by the National Socialists, published his book, which was based on journal entries written during World War II, after he had been readmitted into the German academy in 1945.[3] *Lingua Tertii Imperii* critically examines the language of the Nazi propaganda machine as well as everyday speech in Hitler's Germany, exposing the brute simplicity of its appeals to fanaticism and nationalism as well as highlighting the horrors experienced by Jews in hiding during the Third Reich. Klemperer wrote of the often unconscious impact of a shifting vocabulary: "Words can be like tiny doses of arsenic: they are swallowed unnoticed, they appear to have no impact, and then after a

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[1] Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 305.

[2] Herold in conversation with the author, Cologne, 29 April 2005. See Victor Klemperer, *LTI: A Philologist's Notebook*, trans. Martin Brady (London and New Brunswick, NJ: Athlone Press, 2000); originally published as *LTI: Notizbuch eines Philologen* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1947).

[3] Klemperer had initially been given a professorship in 1920 at the Technical University in Dresden, a post he held until 1935. See Peter Jacobs, *Victor Klemperer: Im Kern ein deutsches Gewächs* (Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 2000).

while the poison takes effect."[4] For Herold, the study offered a model critique of ideology and demagogy in general and provided him and Oehlen with ideas for their own work, especially given that Klemperer had invested his project with a marked element of humor. The interest in *LTI* demonstrates that early in their careers, these artists were exploring the efforts of previous generations to come to terms with the corruptibility of public discourse.

Today Werner Büttner employs his own neologism—typical for its challenging pronunciation—to define their methods of the time as having been directed toward a "Popanzdepotenzierung durch Lachenmachen" (*Popanz* is a bogeyman, or superficially powerful figure; *Depotenzierung* translates into "disempowerment," or rendering impotent; *durch Lachenmachen* means "to induce through laughter").[5] The intent is clear: reveal the inner weaknesses that lie behind assertions of strength and domination. In the case of Büttner and his colleagues, high modes of discourse were brought down to the level of everyday speech. While this is anything but a new tactic given the history of Dada and, more recently, the work of Sigmar Polke, Büttner and his peers took it to an extreme. The tongue-twisting playfulness of the name he gave to their tactic is itself characteristic of the work they produced during the 1980s; the critique is almost invariably packaged in comedic language that is either dwelling at the visual center of the work itself or hovering at the margins in the title. And, as if testifying to the lingering

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[4] Victor Klemperer, *LTI: Notizbuch eines Philologen*, 6th ed. (Leipzig: Reclam, 1980), 21; "Worte können sein wie winzige Arsendosen: sie werden unbemerkt verschluckt, sie scheinen keine Wirkung zu tun, und nach einiger Zeit ist die Giftwirkung doch da."

[5] See "Das Kleine, das Schäbige, das Vernachlässigste untersuchen: Werner Büttner im Gespräch mit Thomas Groetz," in Thomas Groetz, ed., *Werner Büttner: Gemälde und Skulpturen aus den 80er Jahren*, exh. cat. (Berlin: Galerie Max Hetzler, 2003), 22.

relevance of protest culture, the route to laughter was more often than not tinged with a note of aggression.

As this generation of the 1980s generally viewed dogmatic rhetoric with deep suspicion in the aftermath of sixties' and seventies' radicalism, they began to set their sights on authoritarian language, both verbal and visual, as an appropriate target for their work. One must of course keep in mind the fact that these were not artists who paused to develop self-conscious strategies aimed at sustained critique. The hollow dialects they aped—from leftist dogma to official legalese, from the quips of advertising to the rhetoric of the Cold War—were shuffled together almost interchangeably, and typically selected on the spot. The primary concern was that the verbal languages referenced could adequately reinforce the comedic impact of the visual material.

One of the aims of this chapter will be to locate the residue of genuine political protest that still adheres to works of art that often flirt with cynicism. The reliance on jokes and laughter to cope with feelings of hopelessness led artists to create objects with the surface appearance of dismissive, ambivalent comedy. However, the simplicity and directness of their jokes is at times merely a light dressing that covers more complex layers of aesthetic and semantic experimentation. Of course, sometimes their production indeed represents little more than blunt, sophomoric attacks on the status quo. It can take time and committed looking and reading to get past what might initially seem to be an utter lack of a serious message. Yet this impression of simplicity, even simplemindedness, can often be understood as a sort of test in which the viewer is challenged to puzzle out the separate layers of meaning that are built up out of the object-title relationship. In the introduction to a study of *diskursive Dummheit* (discursive

stupidity), Uwe Wirth explains that "stupidity is not only a universal phenomenon, but also implies a fundamental philosophical problem: it concerns the power of cognition and judgment."[6] As is generally the case with jokes, even those possessing the most banal and transparent structure, an audience must exist that is willing to meet them halfway, to engage them in their moments of both philosophical complexity and outright inanity.

The questions surrounding the artists' reception and the development of a committed and sympathetic public will be taken up in the next chapter. Here I will concentrate on the visual and textual mechanisms by which works of art were capable of conveying humor, even if the topics addressed were frequently far from funny. This was partly the result of the artists' attraction to controversial and sensitive subject matter. In addition, the objects produced by this generation could sometimes prompt laughter without the precise source of the humor being easily located. The comedic targets varied enormously, ranging from historical periods and figures to subjects with the greatest degree of topicality, from images in media and advertising to more localized material taken from the art context. Further, the jokes could be told in a manner that requires a firm command of the German language, even of a regional turn of phrase, but the artists also often communicated in a kind of aesthetic Esperanto, referencing forms or ideas of a more universal character. While the notion of translatability will be dealt with in chapters 5 and 6, the following will attempt to delineate the specific comedic methods employed by the individual artists and, in the process, determine what each of them contributed to the culture of laughter in the West German art world of the 1980s.

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[6] Uwe Wirth, *Diskursive Dummheit: Abduktion und Komik als Grenzphänomene des Verstehens* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1999), 1; "Die Dummheit ist nicht nur ein universales Phänomen, sondern impliziert auch ein grundlegendes philosophisches Problem: Sie betrifft das Erkenntnis- und Urteilsvermögen."

Martin Kippenberger: In Search of the Missing Punch Line

The move toward textuality and joking in the work of Kippenberger's generation had both positive and negative consequences, with the verbal occasionally clarifying the visual but more often than not rendering its meaning opaque. The question of arbitrariness in the work of Kippenberger and his peers takes on central importance the more one investigates the varied modes of communication they employed. In the most straightforward cases, a clear gap opens up between the image and the work's title, with many of the titles reading like punch lines. More complicated are those works in which words find their way into the space of the picture, with both components often competing with the title for the viewer/reader's attention. Without settling on a singular medium by which to stake a position, they offered their audience a seemingly infinite variety of interpretive routes; collisions of meaning take place that leave the work's semantic structure on shaky ground. A wide spectrum thus opens up within which the works oscillate between excessive legibility (pictures lifted from porn magazines, for example) and the aesthetic of the in-joke.

Kippenberger is the member of the group who most thoroughly pursued the alienating effects of a work of art that provides an abundance of clues but no clear answers. This is most forcefully expressed in the many painting series he produced during the 1980s. A representative example is *Schade, dass Wols das nicht mehr miterleben darf* (A Pity that Wols Isn't Alive to See It, 1982/83; fig. 39), which features six individual works—each with its own longish title—that hang in a block. One can read the group in any direction, allowing for various narratives or points of connection to unfold. The two most consistent formal motifs are walls and orifices, opening up linkages

among the images, but in general narrative transparency is denied. Looking to the titles for clarification does not necessarily provide any help. The upper-left painting, for instance, is called *Zurück vom Meer ist das Scheckbuch leer, am Samstag hat der Arbeitslose Ruh, da hat das Arbeitsamt zu* (Back from the Sea and the Checkbook's Empty, On Saturday the Unemployed Have Their Repose, Since the Job Center's Closed). We do see two ship silhouettes in one painting, as if through a porthole, but otherwise the relationship between picture and title is tenuous. Similarly, the upper-right painting is titled *Zelle von Andreas Baader* (Andreas Baader's Cell), making reference to charged political events of five years before. A brush sweeping dust from the rim of a hole in what looks like a concrete wall that may or may not be a prison cell, but no clear explanation of the orange and yellow monochrome fields making up the remainder of the picture is readily available. And finally, while the agitated surface treatment of the lower-middle painting (*11.11 elf Uhr*) might vaguely bring Wols's painting style to mind, little else serves to link the single picture to the series, nor to the older German artist. After establishing some of these connections, or possibly making others, the average viewer will not likely feel encouraged to spend much more time puzzling out the messages contained in the series.

Kippenberger's polysemy can run wild, engendering one possible reading just as quickly as another one cancels it out. To briefly continue following this theme, he also produced a great number of drawings in series that were usually exhibited as tightly hung blocks. A late series of drawings on hotel stationary,[7] titled *Über das Über* (About the About, 1994/95; fig. 40), presents crass sexual images paired with representations of the

[7] The hundreds of drawings Kippenberger produced on hotel stationary have helped to satisfy and enhance the market demand for his work after his death.

everyday, such as a can of cat food, a glass of beer, bowls of pasta. In one drawing a plate of fried eggs and bacon is bracketed by the words *eine Witzigmann Kippenberger Creation* (A Funnyman Kippenberger Creation; fig. 41). Printed in an old-fashioned typeface, it is one of the few instances where Kippenberger deliberately spelled out his self-appointed role as jokemeister.[8] Instead of telegraphing his jokes, he usually had them enter through the back door. We may recognize that we have encountered something amusing, but often the exact source of the humor is tough to locate. This is partly a result of how Kippenberger favored a comedic mode that hid its provincial inspiration behind the transparent banality of foodstuffs, celebrity, the media and popular culture in general, i.e., from the wide world of consumption. In this instance, he draws on the story of the Austrian Eckart Witzigmann, star chef and founder of Aubergine, a Munich restaurant that in 1979 received the first 3-star designation given by the Michelin guide to a German establishment. Witzigmann's well-publicized fall from grace in a 1993 cocaine scandal was too good for Kippenberger to resist; the word *witzig* begged to be appropriated. Typical of Kippenberger's approach, the *Witzigmann* drawing relies on current events to imply that there is enough in the local press to laugh about without having to come up with too many new ideas.

In thinking about Kippenberger's strategy, we can again profit from the postmodern discourse around allegory of the 1970s and 1980s. In the late 1950s, several years prior to the theories of deconstruction that emerged during the following three decades, critics like Northrop Frye still viewed allegory as a basically stable mechanism. Writing about allegory in poetry, Frye argued that we encounter "actual allegory when a

[8] On Kippenberger's jokes, see my "Jokes Interrupted: Martin Kippenberger's Receding Punch Line," in Doris Krystof and Jessica Morgan, ed., *Martin Kippenberger*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), 39-47.

poet explicitly indicates the relationship of his images to examples and precepts, and so tries to indicate how a commentary on him should proceed."[9] In other words, allegory in its "pure" form seeks to avoid rather than encourage misinterpretation. Commenting seven years later on Frye's theory, Angus Fletcher points out that Frye had clarified how allegory limits the interpreter: "Since allegorical works present an aesthetic surface which implies an authoritative, thematic, 'correct' reading, and which attempts to eliminate other possible readings, they deliberately restrict the freedom of the reader."[10]

A distinct break in the theorizing of allegory occurs in the late 1960s and early 1970s, one that draws on Walter Benjamin's Weimar-era analyses. In Paul de Man's well-known essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality," he draws a clear division between the symbol as an indicator of unity and allegory as a trope that disrupts the process of identification: "Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference."[11] Taking de Man's definition into consideration, Kippenberger's use of the language of both art history and popular culture might be intended to demonstrate the difference between, as de Man puts it, "the way in which the

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[9] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 90 [orig. published 1957].

[10] Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1964), 305.

[11] Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 207.

world appears in reality and the way it appears in language."[12] Certainly, some of Kippenberger's works, especially the serial pieces, are more likely to conjure this experience for his audience than others; the disjointed encounter with Kippenberger's numerous blocks of paintings and drawings recalls de Man's allegory in their pronounced refusal to synthesize the different components. One might locate the surface appearance of a totalizing narrative, but the reception of it is fragmentary, chaotic and disjointed; it promotes the exact opposite of the cohesiveness associated with the symbol.

Bainard Cowan, writing on Benjamin's theory of allegory, has pointed to the direct connection between allegory and experience: "The form such an experience of the world takes is fragmentary and enigmatic; in it the world ceases to be purely physical and becomes an aggregation of signs."[13] Through his pursuit of allegory run amok, Kippenberger promotes a fundamental conception of the world consistent with the postmodern era, namely, that truth itself cannot be grasped through the inadequacies of language, whether visual or verbal. The experiential side of Kippenberger's series is marked by a dawning awareness of temporality, of the time spent standing before the block of images and puzzling out their relations while referring repeatedly to the absurdist titles. Kippenberger throws into question the way in which meaning is produced and received by deliberately constructing a visual environment that lures one into its superficial system only to deny a singular reading. The negativity at the heart of much of Kippenberger's work is partially mitigated by the initial sense of freedom granted by the open narrative. But this freedom is short-lived; Kippenberger's observer is subsequently

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[12] Ibid., 191.

[13] Bainard Cowan, "Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory," *New German Critique* 22 (Winter 1981), 110.

made aware of the lack of a coherent conceptual framework, like a joke without a punch line. While his serial works suggest the *experience* of reading allegories, with meaning being constructed as one recognizes the specific things and ideas referred to by the images and texts, the attempt to tie them together is typically resisted.

One can enjoy getting lost in Kippenberger's cross-references or coming up with possible thematic threads. Yet for many members of his general audience, especially those not privy to his particular sense of humor or even fluent in German, the groups of paintings can represent an excess of freedom, a total lack of guidance that can finally seem overwhelming. One might recognize that something funny is being presented, but easily miss the actual gag, which often takes on a regional inflection. In 1981, Kippenberger painted the series *Bekannt durch Film, Funk, Fernsehen und Polizeirufsäulen* (A Celebrity in Film, Radio, Television and Police Stations), 21 small pictures hung in a block (fig. 42). A curious mixture of the local and the global is found among images that derive primarily from media photographs of "celebrities." Here the spectrum of recognition extends from Yasser Arafat and Richard Nixon as the most identifiable, to the Berlin actor Harald Juhnke as one of the least (for a non-German audience), with the West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt somewhere in the middle. Juhnke was notorious within Germany as an alcoholic, but his face and the title of his book (*Die Kunst ein Mensch zu sein* [The Art of Being a Human]) were hardly known to a non-German audience. It is not always difficult to track down the specific references, but the first encounters with the series are nevertheless perplexing.

Just what ultimately defined the core of Kippenberger's comedic project is difficult to pin down today, despite its having taken place in the recent past. It was clearly

not his priority to develop methodological coherence; he was far more interested in exploring how a picture could convey a quickly hatched concept, how specific forms are required in order to, as Roland Schappert has put it, "rescue the quick joke."[14] Since Kippenberger was in constant conversation with his friends and other members of the art world, their discussions often taking place while drinking in bars and restaurants, he processed a steady stream of snappy, comedic ideas that received prompt translation into an image or object. For him and his colleagues, spontaneity and speed were more highly valued skills than deliberation and thoroughness. To come to an understanding of the effects of such a practice, to locate the critical value of individual projects, I find Fredric Jameson's oft-cited discussion of the difference between parody and pastiche in his essay, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," to provide a useful framework.[15] I see the development of Kippenberger's work throughout the 1980s as hovering constantly between these two realms, which Jameson uses to distinguish between the aims of the modern and the postmodern eras. Jameson's analysis sheds light on the lack at the heart of much of Kippenberger's humor, as well as on the significant number of works that do indeed cohere on both conceptual and pictorial levels.

To paraphrase Jameson, parody found a great deal of ripe material to draw on during the rise of individual, idiosyncratic styles (literary, artistic, musical, etc.) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of the essential aspects of modernism has always been the promotion of the individual genius, the possessor of originality, and

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[14] Roland Schappert, *Martin Kippenberger: Die Organisationen des Scheiterns* (Cologne: Walther König, 1998), 33.

[15] Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 111-125.

the highly recognizable styles that this has produced have often been subject to derisive imitation. According to Jameson, "the general effect of parody is—whether in sympathy or with malice—to cast ridicule on the private nature of these stylistic mannerisms and their excessiveness and eccentricity with respect to the way people normally speak or write."[16] Pastiche functions in much the same way as parody, yet it does not display the satiric edge; it is mimicry without mockery, or "blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor."[17] For Jameson, pastiche is a specifically postmodern phenomenon and it partly manifests itself in our present-day attachment to the past. We are constantly looking back to tradition to try to define a present that no longer provides a coherent aesthetic or stylistic foundation. Imitation and quoting become ends in themselves, losing the critical effect that true parody can achieve.

Like Polke, Kippenberger pillages the world of advertising and popular culture for his subject matter; both artists also appropriate "high" and "low" styles. Yet, whereas Polke generally upholds a degree of technical expertise even in his most kitsch-based constructions (for example, images with palm trees and flamingos or the use of printed textiles), Kippenberger's works habitually call to mind amateur paintings or thrift-store bargains. For instance, in his 1983 series *8 Bilder zum Nachdenken, ob's so weitergeht* (8 Pictures to Think about Whether We Can Keep This Up; fig. 43), the single painting *Gebirgslandschaft* (Mountain Landscape; fig. 44) is a sketchy, expressionistic representation of mountain peaks. Reinforcing the apparent deskilling in the application of paint is the "signature" in the lower-right corner: "Adolf." As a likely reference to amateur painter Adolf Hitler, the allusion to "decadent" painting styles adds to the joke.

[16] Ibid., 113.

[17] Ibid., 114.

Other series include paintings taken from cartoons and photographs in pornographic magazines (fig. 45), perhaps the "lowest" source material from which Kippenberger drew.

Kippenberger's series of the early 1980s rarely fail to include obvious allusions to established traditions of modernism, demonstrating his skill at conjuring styles that can be easily recognized. As the critic Ronald Jones has written, "Kippenberger 'pictures' modernism rather than painting modern pictures."[18] In the moments where Kippenberger seems to be erring on the side of pastiche, Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation applies. Baudrillard writes: "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself…."[19] The notion of the simulacrum was in the air in the 1980s, so the question becomes to what extent Kippenberger's substitution of signs was a conscious strategy or an accidental product of his working method. Kippenberger was capable of virtually embodying the condition of simulation. In a photograph printed on a poster that advertised a 1987 exhibition at the Galerie Grässlin-Erhardt in Frankfurt, an out-of-shape and exhausted-looking Kippenberger stands trapped in a forest of signs (fig. 46). Words, mostly single, are written on pieces of cardboard cut into the shapes of arrows pointing to the right or left, all of which hang from lengths of string that dangle in front of a sheet-covered wall. It is difficult to discern a pattern or set of connections among the words; several varieties of fish, people's names (Oehlen, Ernst Junger), and other fairly random

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[18] Ronald Jones, "Martin Kippenberger: Domination of the Universal," *Arts Magazine* (September 1985), 115.

[19] Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," trans. Paul Foss and Paul Patton, in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 254.

verbs and nouns compete for one's attention. The title of the exhibition, printed below the photo, is *Einfach geht der Applaus zugrunde* (The Applause Simply Dies), a play-on-words since the signs themselves move from the wall onto the floor (*zugrunde gehen* literally means "to go to ground"). Floating signifiers with no obvious correlation to one another, they recall Jean Baudrillard's labeling of simulation as "descriptive machine"; any potential contact with the "real" is left to the viewer's imagination. Here Kippenberger takes on the role of "poster boy" for an aspect of the postmodern condition.

With other works of this period, such as the painting *Kaputtes Kind* (Broken Child; fig. 47) from 1985, language invades the image, plastering its surface with snippets that call to mind the product placement of advertising. In this painting, an assortment of self-made bumper stickers in the then-ubiquitous "I Love…" format (they appear in many works by Kippenberger, sometimes in collaboration with Oehlen, beginning in the mid-1980s) covers the face of crudely grimacing child. Placed over the eyes, the phrase "I Love Eternety [sic]" threatens to blind this member of a younger generation, her vision obscured by an explosion of empty catchphrases that recall the slogans of advertising. Looking back on these early collaborations, Oehlen referred to his and Kippenberger's "strategy to create vehicles for orgies of interpretation."[20] A blurry line was drawn between putting forward some semblance of specificity while opening up readings that go far beyond the original impulse behind the work.

Reinforcing the confused layering of unlike messages is a plurality of painting styles that Kippenberger employed beginning in the early 1980s. In the same way that he

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[20] Thomas Groetz, "Pop, Irony and Seriousness: Albert Oehlen in Conversation with Thomas Groetz about Martin Kippenberger," in Petra Franz, ed., *Kippenberger: Paintings*, exh. cat. (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2004), 72.

was comfortable working in a variety of artistic media, his painterly approach borrows from a wide array of established modern techniques. This may come across as a truism for anyone familiar with his work, but it is worth briefly locating the specific styles he quotes in a single series of paintings, *Null Bock auf Ideen* (Buggered for Ideas; fig. 48) of 1982-83.[21] Both the title and the emphasis on dated approaches to painting indicate that Kippenberger was mocking the "idea artists" of the previous conceptualist generation, such as Hans Haacke or Klaus Staeck. Stylistically, these paintings quote several traditions and individuals, including Color Field (e.g., Morris Louis' stripes), Magic Realism (Giorgio de Chirico), Abstract Expressionism (evidence of Pollock's drips), Suprematism (Malevich's geometric forms) and the tradition of collage. There is no properly critical dismantling of these art-historical references, which again function as mere simulacra of their models. Considering the lack of a fixed target, it is difficult to categorize these paintings as true parodies of entrenched modernist styles. Rather, his fast-and-loose appropriation of his predecessors' trademark moves has an equalizing effect: everything tends to get reduced to the same level as that occupied by the visual and textual indicators of advertising and media culture. As one critic put it in the 1980s, Kippenberger "brings the junk that society churns out to our attention with the pride of a cat dragging the carcass of a mouse into the living room."[22]

Kippenberger's self-defined role as a peddler of ideas gradually took on more literal form as he began to find that he simply did not have enough time to personally

[21] "Buggered for ideas" is the English translation of the title given in Angelika Taschen and Burkhard Riemschneider, ed., *Kippenberger* (Cologne: Taschen, 1997), 78. *Null Bock* is a slang expression that can be roughly translated as "no desire," thus a fairly literal, but less colorful, English rendering might be "Not into Ideas."

[22] Stephen Ellis, "The Boys in the Bande," *Art in America* (December 1988), 116.

carry out all of his artistic whims. In one of his more infamous claims, he said, "I am a traveling salesman. I deal in ideas."[23] True to the tradition of Pop, and very much in line with the art of the 1980s (consider Jeff Koons and Mark Kostabi), Kippenberger employed outside help in creating his paintings from the beginning of his career, which he occasionally made the work's theme. For example, in the late 1970s, Kippenberger had already hired a sign painter named Werner to produce a series of 12 paintings that were exhibited in 1981 under the collective title *Lieber Maler, male mir*... (Dear Painter, Paint for Me…).[24] Yet in the second half of the eighties Kippenberger began to delegate a more significant portion of his production to students, assistants and other artists. The artist Merlin Carpenter has described how Kippenberger's eclectic bag of stylistic tricks gained a new dimension when he started to more regularly entrust others with the task of giving shape to his ideas.[25] Carpenter gives a fairly harsh assessment of Kippenberger's working relationship with his assistants, especially in the case of Michael Krebber, the first to be hired in this new phase. Commenting on the 1987 exhibition *Peter* at the Hetzler gallery in Cologne, Carpenter writes that "Kippenberger had somehow delegated both the conceptualizing and making of this work to Krebber, all he retained for himself was the name, the controller standing in the background, laughing."[26] As a former

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[23] Quoted in Taschen and Riemschneider, ed., *Kippenberger*, 49.

[24] See Anke Kempkes, "Dear Painter, Paint for Me…" in Eva Meyer-Hermann and Susanne Neuburger, ed., *After Kippenberger*, exh. cat. (Vienna and Eindhoven: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien and Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, 2003), 36-39.

[25] See Merlin Carpenter, "Back Seat Driver," in Thomas Groetz, ed., *Gitarren, die nicht Gudrun heißen: Hommage à Martin Kippenberger*, exh. cat. (Berlin: Galerie Max Hetzler, 2002), 27-30.

[26] Ibid., 27.

assistant himself, Carpenter's critical remarks on this subject are not based on an entirely objective analysis. Still, it is a fact that Kippenberger did not give credit to the producers of many of his paintings and sculptures from the latter half of the 1980s to the early 1990s.

Kippenberger was anything but secretive about his reliance on assistants and friends. He preferred to describe his own conception of authorship in more positive terms: "I actually have nothing to do with painted pictures. That's why one of my solutions for this problem has been to let others paint for me, but only in the way I need it, the way I see it."[27] Regardless of which version of events one subscribes to, Kippenberger's "hand" is perceived in the final picture through something other than the brushstroke or the composition. His emphasis on the concept, its elaboration in image and title, its jokiness, even when its various parts do not line up into a straight joke, is consistent enough to be recognizable as his own. Kippenberger's aphorisms, those strange little phrases that attach themselves to the painting, whether directly on the canvas or on an adjacent wall label, possess a comedic character that belongs to him, even if it is exceedingly difficult to capture this character in words. Having established his brand of humor in the early years of his career, it is as if the artist pays or orders someone else to quote him. His work thus has the effect of self-simulation. The artist's assistant takes on the crucial role of facilitator, a creator of signs that appear to refer back to the very person who is taking credit for the work itself.

Ultimately, the joke machine that churned relentlessly in Kippenberger's studio produced a great deal of illegible or only partly legible gags. However, this did not prevent him from occasionally offering a picture composed of a more traditional set-

[27] Quoted in Taschen and Riemschneider, ed., *Kippenberger*, 54.

up/punch line structure. Perhaps the best example of such a work is the 1984 painting *Ich kann beim besten Willen kein Hakenkreuz entdecken* (Try as I Might, I Cannot Find a Swastika; fig. 49). A medium-size (160 x 133 cm) canvas painted in oil and silicon, it forms a clear separation between the picture itself, which stands in for the narrative background, and the title that provides the punch line. Consisting of a jumble of intersecting and overlapping cubic rectangles in gray, white, yellow and red against a dark gray/black ground, it suggests Cubist spatial deconstruction as well as the outward-directed motion of a Suprematist composition. The nods to modernist abstraction are tempered by a slightly cartoon-like linearity, with some of the forms more drawn than painted, and the loose swirling lines of clear silicon gel that overlay the whole image seem to mock the rigidity of the geometry. Without a title to provide context, this picture would likely remain stranded in the realm of pastiche, one more example of Kippenberger's talent for comedic quotation. Yet the text, with its reference to West Germany's strained attempts at *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) in the 1980s, lends the picture a strong element of topicality and critical focus. A clear sense of timing is conveyed, assuming one examines the image first before turning to read the label.

There are certainly other examples of works by Kippenberger that so unambiguously telegraph their humor. Where Kippenberger leans heavily on the title, one must be aware of the dangers of reading too much into the image/title relationships that he constructed. An untitled collage from 1985 (fig. 50) comes perhaps closest to encapsulating Kippenberger's incorporation of language. A fragment of a man's head, likely a self-portrait, is drawn roughly and placed in front of what looks like an

architectural structure. The face is not articulated, its empty center covered by a torn piece of paper with the following English-language aphorism typed or printed onto its surface: "We don't have problems with language, because we write it down first and go immediately." Below this line he spells out the word "primero," or "first," in children's stick-on letters and writes by hand "ensaio," or "essay." One is tempted to interpret the phrase above as a kind of first principle, as an important methodological structure behind Kippenberger's work. Language is consumed, quickly digested and then left behind, not taken more seriously than is warranted by the demands of the moment. Again, one would be applying too much pressure to the image by attempting to look there for fixed principles within Kippenberger's practice, but the lure to do so is certainly present. Writing in the late 1980s about the joke's lack of relevance in an era when so many taboos had already been broken, Otto F. Best wrote, "In a world without faces, the joke also has no face."[28] This reads almost like a literal description of Kippenberger's untitled collage. Aside from a few moments of renewed faith in its powers of persuasion, Kippenberger took pleasure in re-enacting the death of the joke as a fait accompli. At the same time, he *needed* the joke in order to work through his issues of failure, compromised authenticity, second-order status, etc. Paradoxically, Kippenberger relied on the joke's lifelessness to keep moving, to "go immediately," as he put it. Like a good comedian, he recognised the necessity of constantly offering new material. It was not his job to determine whether it held up under semantic scrutiny—that could be left for others to decide.

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[28] Otto F. Best, *Der Witz als Erkenntniskraft und Formenprinzip* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989), 141; "In einer Welt ohne Gesichter hat auch der Witz kein Gesicht."

Georg Herold's Upholding of the Joke

Among the generation of West German artists who came to prominence in the 1980s, Georg Herold (born 1947) has yet to achieve the international notoriety of his peers Kippenberger and Oehlen. His biography follows a pattern established by numerous contemporary German artists of the previous generation who were born in the former East and made their reputations in the West. Like Gerhard Richter, he studied art on both sides of the Iron Curtain, completing a degree in Hamburg while a student of Sigmar Polke in the late 1970s.[29] This double-sided, even schizophrenic, background has always informed Herold's mature work, which sets its critical sights on the reigning symbols of both the socialist and capitalist systems. It would seem that in order for him to move toward a reconciliation of the two clashing political and cultural frameworks he had been exposed to, Herold needed to develop more direct modes of communication than those associated with Kippenberger. For as his work attests, Herold's methodology presents perhaps the most cogent use of the joke as a narrative and conceptual strategy within his circle of artists without ignoring the doubts expressed by his peers regarding its critical effectiveness.

Herold's first move toward semantic clarity already took place during his student years in Hamburg, when he reduced his sculptural vocabulary to relatively modest means. Since then, his signature building elements have consisted primarily of bricks and roofing lath (called *Latten* in German). Herold's aesthetic is thus characterized by a kind of

[29] Herold studied at Burg Giebichenstein in Halle from 1969 to 1973, the year in which he was "bought free" by the Federal Republic of Germany after spending several months in prison for an attempted escape from East Germany. He then resumed studies at the Akademie der bildenden Künste in Munich from 1974 to 1976, after which he relocated to Polke's class at the Hochschule für bildende Künste in Hamburg. See his brief biography in Eckhart Gillen, ed., *German Art from Beckmann to Richter: Images of a Divided Country* (Cologne: DuMont, 1997), 517.

lowered-expectations approach to materials. Like a comic honing his lines to reach the linguistic essence of a gag, he sought out simple components that would be universally legible as signifiers for the practice of sculpture. A typical example is the 1985 *Interessante Kunst aus Westdeutschland* (Interesting Art from West Germany; fig. 51), in which four bricks cemented together at their ends hang awkwardly from a canvas covered in a light-brown wash. The earthy browns call Beuys to mind while the protrusion visually puns on the clichéd machismo of certain German artists exported abroad. Yet such clearly telegraphed jokes and clumsy-looking craftsmanship are deceptive, as there lurks a subtle thought process behind Herold's superficial simplemindedness. His is a considered, philosophical humor that relies on tautologies and clashing contrasts, inspired equally by Duchamp and Wittgenstein. This places Herold in a different category than the one carved out by Kippenberger with his frenetic and heterogeneous explosion of language.

Working with immediately identifiable incongruities, Herold's humor comes through loud and clear. In one of his early lath pieces, *Goethe-Latte* (1982; fig. 52), a roughly two-meter length of wood leans vertically against a wall next to another one less than half its size. "Goethe" is written on the taller one; the phrase *im Vergleich dazu irgendein Scheißer* (approximately translated into current American slang, "by comparison, some loser") appears on the other. There are different ways in which the joke can function. One might focus on the linguistic chasm that is opened up between the glorious prose and poetry associated with the name of Goethe and the vulgar, everyday parlance of his less noble neighbor. Another reading might center on the notion that in the postmodern era, when the very possibility of greatness and the value of the canon are met

with skepticism and derision, the attempt to rise to the level of the Romantic genius will invariably fail. There is also something strangely comical in the simple encounter with a cheap, ordinary, untreated strip of wood with the word "Goethe" written on it. The comparison with the shorter piece suddenly loses its impact when the longer piece itself is far from adequate as a monument.

In the same year that he produced the *Goethe-Latte*, Herold explained in an exhibition catalogue why the lath is indeed a worthy object for the veneration of cultural giants: "In art its simplicity and cheapness are appreciated for serving great ideals."[30] The wry, deadpan humor of Herold's prose forms the perfect counterpart to his workmanlike choice of materials. Yet there is also a set of more formal references at play in Herold's *Latte* works, such as *Gefundenes Fressen* (Feeding Frenzy; fig. 53) of 1988. For one thing, they look back to the staffs made by Blinky Palermo (fig. 54) while he was a student of Joseph Beuys at the art academy in Düsseldorf (1964-67) and afterward. Palermo's own forms had been produced in direct response to the staffs that Beuys had used in his performances.[31] The shift from the objects Beuys covered in felt to the more Minimalist-oriented canvas-on-wood versions that Palermo created marked a transition from the teacher's associations of magic and ritual to the student's more formal preoccupations. Herold, in tapping into this history, positions himself within a long lineage of well-known German cultural figures while he acknowledges that, in comparison with Goethe (or even Beuys), he is merely "irgendein Scheisser."

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[30] Georg Herold, *Unschärferelation*, exh. cat. (Berlin: NGBK [Realismus Studio 31], 1985), 10.

[31] See Christine Mehring, "Four of a Kind: The Art of Blinky Palermo," *Artforum* (October 2002), 143.

Taking a cue from Marcel Duchamp, Herold grasped that commonly found objects were best suited to the art-historical gamesmanship he was beginning to practice. Conceptual specificity would be more easily conveyed if he were to rely on a limited material vocabulary. In an essay that largely focuses on Thierry du Duve's book on Duchamp, *Pictorial Nominalism*,[32] John Rajchman highlighted the ability to be precise as one of the defining features of Duchamp's brand of humor: "It is a sort of humor that requires what Duchamp called 'precision'—just the right amount of 'vulgarity.' It must expose the incongruities in those practices through which identity is secured."[33] Herold's own knack for infusing his work with a tempered, carefully balanced vulgarity places his work at a remove from the sophomoric, intentionally crass picture-making of Kippenberger. Herold, for instance, did not appropriate images from pornography in his paintings or sculptures. Vulgarity in his case could certainly derive from sexual connotations, but, aligning him more with Duchamp, these references were never as literal as with Kippenberger.

For example, the brick phallus in Herold's *Interessante Kunst aus Westdeutschland* (fig. 51) can scarcely be interpreted anything else other than genitalia, its solid material humorously contradicting its downward-oriented trajectory. Rather than the anatomical realism of Kippenberger's porno pictures or his use of clippings from nudist magazines in numerous collages, Herold describes biological facts at one remove from the original. Other works, like the 1984 *Hose runter (Mythologisch V)* (Pants Down [Mythological V]; fig. 55), are downright innocent in their evocation of indecent

[32] Thierry du Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

[33] John Rajchman, "Duchamp's Joke," in *Philosophical Events: Essays of the '80s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 146.

exposure. Almost three meters high, slats of wood are roughly joined to form two column-like legs and a groin, the figure's sexual parts having been omitted, left to the imagination. Bricks attached to canvas appear to weigh down a pair of pants that are bunched up around the "ankles." The sculpture is anything but offensive, more an exercise in physical clumsiness and, by extension, sculptural amateurism, than a suggestion of overt, but compromised, eroticism. Furthermore, the awkwardness of the figures suggests a parody of the rough-hewn figurative sculptures produced by Georg Baselitz since the late 1970s, as well as a glancing reference to the physical clumsiness of Eva Hesse's work of the late 1960s.

The comic banality in Herold's work, as in Duchamp's readymades, is most directly communicated by way of common, ordinary materials that "speak" in a relatively straightforward language. Like Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* of 1913, Herold's 1984 *Laokoon* (fig. 56) involves the construction of a pedestal out of found objects and the mounting of a more-or-less untransformed piece of industrially produced equipment on top of a small platform made from a segment of steel. Four steel beams, each about two meters long, stand vertically to support a worn-out vacuum cleaner with its tubes arranged in a tight snaking formation to recall the antique original. Resting on this high pedestal, the machine projects the same kind of mute objectness that Duchamp's wheel and other readymades first accomplished. Yet as it no longer had the capacity to radically question the status of the art object, Herold's sculpture required a further move in order to reach the precise degree of vulgarity. The artist recorded himself and a friend reciting the speech Hitler gave at the 1937 *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) exhibition in Munich and placed a tape recorder and speaker within the vacuum. As the spectator approaches

the pedestal, the sounds are audible only in relatively close proximity; one is inclined to place an ear against the end of the vacuum tube to catch the address. To heighten the comedic impact, they pronounced Hitler's words in the accent of their native Saxony in a kind of ventriloquist's dialect.

Herold's decision to endow his object with a voice, to rescue the average appliance from its muteness, can certainly be read as a response to Duchamp and the original radical gesture associated with the readymade. While no longer signaling a serious break with tradition, it does manage to upset the initial sense of recognition that the employment of a cast-off industrial product inspires. The surface appearance of avant-garde transgression is held in opposition to Hitler's anti-modern diatribe, not to mention the tradition of classical sculpture evoked in the work's form (note the snaking vacuum tubes) and title. In a 1988 conversation with Jeff Koons and the critic Isabelle Graw, Herold distanced himself from claims toward radicality without giving up the attempt to create disjunctions: "An open, radical stance can indeed be very serious, but dumb. Subversion already sounds much better."[34] Subverting the viewer's expectations as well as singular readings of the work was perhaps enough to expect from an artist in the mid-1980s. Herold's addition of the spoken word generally lends the work a set of narrative possibilities missing from Duchamp's readymades as well as from the work of the American colleague Koons. The latter's vacuum cleaners sealed in transparent boxes (fig. 57), which he first displayed in 1980, retain all the brute *thereness* of their early-twentieth-century predecessors. By contrast, as repulsive as the words themselves may

[34] Isabella Graw, "Atlantisches Bündnis: Eine Gesprächsrunde mit Georg Herold, Jeff Koons und Isabelle Graw," *Wolkenkratzer Art Journal* 1 (January/February 1988), 38; "Eine offene, radikale Haltung kann zwar sehr seriös, aber dumm sein. Subversion klingt da schon viel besser."

be, the recording emanating from Herold's machine draws the viewer into a laughter-inducing interaction in which the found object ultimately takes on a new and unexpected sense of familiarity through the mediation of the artist's voice.

Herold's introduction of sound also places the sculpture within the unstable realm of the political. As skeptical as he was toward the notion of the postmodern artist as capable of radicality, he also held out little hope that art could do anything more than flirt with politics. Direct, effective political action was not within its purview. In the same conversation with Koons and Graw, he dismissed the incorporation of the political if it were to be used as a "moral justification" for the work.[35] Still, he admitted to not being able to completely isolate himself from this risk: "Naturally, I do the same thing to a certain extent, but I consciously flirt with the political by making jokes."[36] The dogmatic language of Hitler's speech is turned into something clownish and fairly harmless when subjected to Herold's locally inflected accent; furthermore, fascist rule is implicitly compared with the artist's own first home in Saxony, which at the time of the work's production was still part of the authoritarian state of the German Democratic Republic. Like a comedian impersonating the Führer (Charley Chaplin and Mel Brooks come to mind), Herold replaces Hitler's own highly affected mode of communication with another equally contrived variation, meanwhile forcing the vacuum to function as an active vehicle of parody rather than a passive, silent thing.

A few years later Herold would finally turn toward more elevated materials in his effort to think, as Otto F. Best has described joke-telling, "*in* the language *against* the

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[35] Ibid., 40.

[36] Ibid.

language."[37] In an extensive series of works from 1989 and 1990 using caviar as a painter's medium, the artist set up the joke's internal conflict by pairing the expensive, exclusive commodity with images that receive unrestricted circulation in the popular culture. For instance, *J. C. Raspe* (1990; fig. 58) is a portrait of the Baader-Meinhof member done in caviar affixed to the canvas using an acrylic gel, one of several such images from 1990 employing the high-end foodstuff to reproduce low-end media photographs (the small dark eggs actually resemble Polke's trademark raster dots) of internationally famous characters like Arafat and Trump, Castro and Tyson. With Raspe, the visage of a dedicated critic of capitalism is rendered via luxury goods, the value of the painting itself appearing to ironically appreciate through its enhanced production standards.[38] Strong symbols representing two systems of thought are compelled to merge so seamlessly with one another that they awkwardly coexist while simultaneously canceling each other out. This is the classic terrain of the traditional joke, the technique that Freud called *Verdichtung*, or "compression."[39]

In Herold's work, humor prompts an engagement with the object that goes beyond the quick gag of many Kippenberger products. The jokes in his work tend to lead to contemplation rather than expire in a limited burst of laughter. Consider his 1987 *Ohne Titel (Escher-Würfel)* [Untitled (Escher Cube; fig. 59)], in which several short lengths of

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[37] Best, *Der Witz als Erkenntniskraft und Formenprinzip*, 140 [his emphasis]; "…*in* der Sprache *gegen* die Sprache.

[38] On the question of value that is raised by the use of caviar, see Boris Groys, "Kunst als Wertgebung des Wertlosen," in Georg Herold, *Geld spielt keine Rolle*, exh. cat. (Cologne: Kölnischer Kunstverein, 1990), 12-16.

[39] Sigmund Freud, *Der Witz und Seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1992).

lath are crudely hammered together to approximate one of M. C. Escher's visual conundrums. On one level, it is surprising to see how well Escher's two-dimensional "impossible structures" translate into three-dimensional form, despite the crude construction of the sculpture. However, on a broader level, it is just one of many works in which Herold displays an awareness of problems of a general art-historical nature, using clichéd formal language to pose an aesthetic problem. For instance, one is reminded here also of Aleksandr Rodchenko's precisely fabricated *Spatial Constructions* (fig. 60) from around 1920. The democratic visual trickery of Escher is paired with the socialist constructivism of Rodchenko to mirror Herold's own dual background. Kippenberger and Herold were of course responsible for producing different kinds of jokes at different moments. Overall, however, I would argue that Herold was the member of the group who most firmly upheld the joke's structural validity as an inspiration for analytical thought.

Matthias Winzen, who organized the traveling Herold retrospective in 2005, points out correctly that what keeps his jokes from being read as unified and stable is that "there is never a synthesis in Herold's wild dialectics of appearance and designation."[40] The visual and semantic contradictions do not easily condense into the artwork's equivalent of a punch line. Humor encountered in his work is more apt to send the viewer along several different interpretive routes all at once. One might initially identify the most obvious way in which the object or image inspires a laugh, but the irreconcilable parts are so carefully selected and arranged that they quickly open onto fertile conceptual terrain. In his best works, Herold strikes a balance between continuing to maintain faith in the joke and recognizing the need to complicate its workings. In contrast to the speed

[40] Matthias Winzen, "What One Perceives but Does Not Know," in Matthias Winzen, ed., *Gerold Herold: What a Life*, exh. cat. (Cologne: Snoeck, 2005), 342.

of delivery and execution maintained by Kippenberger, Herold's practice comes across as more deliberate, considered and less frenetic. Themes and concepts are worked through over longer periods of time and subtle variations amid the repetition help to tease out the finer points he addresses across a body of work.

Albert Oehlen: Painting as Historical Contradiction

The layers of conflicting messages that appear to dwell within Herold's sculptures and paintings can only hold their ground as long as the artist himself takes a consistent approach to their creation. If we can consider the work of Kippenberger in terms of its eclecticism and that of Herold in terms of its consistency, then Albert Oehlen would fall in between these two poles. Setting him apart from his peers is that fact that his practice underwent a marked shift in the late 1980s, as he gradually began to take his painting more "seriously." This is neither to claim that everything he had produced up to this point was now irrelevant, nor that the comic side of his work was suddenly absent; rather, a higher degree of painterly conviction became more visible in the pictures themselves and in the way that Oehlen discussed them in public. This later work stands in contrast to the sophomoric jokiness of the early output, to its apparent "discursive stupidity," which eschewed gravitas. However, a current of seriousness had already emerged in particular subjects Oehlen treated during the initial years of his development as a painter. Here I want to concentrate specifically on the paintings Oehlen made in the early-to-mid 1980s that suggest a humorous treatment of Germany's Nazi past. It is perhaps significant that when he left this phase behind, he began to turn to abstraction in what would come to look almost like an exit strategy.

The group of works to be considered here occupies an awkward place next to the output of other artists, such as Anselm Kiefer, Georg Baselitz and Markus Lüpertz, who have been more frequently discussed in terms of their grappling with German history. For Oehlen's introduction of humor into a normally painful process of reckoning with the past occurs while his methods generally work against the notion that painting might somehow represent a viable mode for historical reflection. One of the leitmotifs that developed under postmodernism in the late 1970s and 1980s, the years in which Oehlen studied and began working, revolves around claims for various historical endings whether art, art history, or simply history itself. This was, of course, anything but a new proposition. As others have before her, Eva Geulen demonstrates in her recent book that such ideas can be traced back to Hegel, and extend up to the present, in varying forms, via Nietzsche, Benjamin, Adorno and Heidegger.[41] Ultimately, however, anyone positing an end to art seemed to be ignoring a thoroughly unconvinced segment of the art world, given the surge in production throughout the 1980s as the market exploded. There were certainly enough people for whom the debate itself was strictly philosophical and thus irrelevant. Yet Oehlen seems to have been aware of the question, and he consciously chose to take up the medium that had been repeatedly written off since the 1960s. How was an artist to acknowledge claims of obsolescence while maintaining a critical-minded practice? It can be demonstrated from his works and statements that Oehlen turned to humor as a means of getting around perceived restrictions placed on both the medium itself and the subject matter deemed acceptable. The line he walked between affirmation and negation is highly instructive regarding the medium's promise during the 1980s.

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[41] Eva Geulen, *Das Ende der Kunst: Lesearten eines Gerüchts nach Hegel* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002).

A crucial first point to make is that Oehlen has never stopped painting his own pictures. Although he has always shared Kippenberger's flexible attitude toward the everyday practice of making art, he never relinquished complete control of the production of his works.[42] Oehlen has also developed a more recognizable set of stylistic approaches that, despite obvious shifts over the years, has remained fairly consistent for more than two decades. Like Kippenberger, he has often quoted and parodied familiar styles and genres from the history of painting, but in Oehlen's case these acts of appropriation have centered on a smaller set of painterly precedents. One of Oehlen's recurring themes has appeared to respond, whether directly or indirectly, to the critical debates inspired by the return in West Germany in the early 1980s to a style of painting that seemed to many critics to look back to early-twentieth-century expressionism. The extremely diverse reactions that the so-called *Neue Wilde* inspired, especially around the issue of German nationalism, were rarely directed at the paintings of Oehlen. Here I want to examine how Oehlen's pictures from these years seem to mock as well as support both the style of neo-expressionism and the notion that there is a correct or an incorrect way of dealing with a nation's past sins.[43]

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[42] During the early 1980s, Oehlen did occasionally produce collaborative paintings with Büttner, Kippenberger and Herold, but their aim was less to erase the individual's recognizable painterly signature than to create obvious clashes between two stylistic approaches. See Thomas Groetz, "Sich im Kreis herum gegenseitig verblüffen: Albert Oehlen über Martin Kippenberger," in Groetz, ed., *Gitarren, die nicht Gudrun heißen*, 42.

[43] Neo-expressionism was the catchall term, especially in Anglo-American criticism, used to describe various "expressive" modes of painting in Berlin, Cologne, Hamburg and New York, while in Italy the critic Achille Bonito Oliva applied the moniker "transavanguardia" to the work of artists like Francesco Clemente, Sandro Chia and Enzo Cucchi. For general histories of neo-expressionist painting, see Wolfgang Max Faust and Gerd de Vries, *Hunger nach Bildern: Deutsche Malerei der Gegenwart* (Cologne: Du Mont, 1982); Tony Godfrey, *The New Image: Painting in the 1980s* (New York:

Since the early 1980s, critics have routinely affiliated Oehlen with neo-expressionism, most recently in a survey exhibition charting the course of "obsessive painting."[44] As this exhibition made clear, the artists who practiced "wild" painting in West Germany were by no means single, unified collectives that considered themselves linked in a formal way, as had been the case with the first wave of German expressionists in Dresden's *die Brücke* and Munich's *der Blaue Reiter* groups. Still, the West German painting scene of the time is typically divided into three specific groupings based in Berlin, Cologne and Hamburg. To summarize briefly (for it is not my intent to dwell here on the phenomenon as a whole), the Berlin scene was located near Moritzplatz in Kreuzberg, where Rainer Fetting, Salomé, Helmut Middendorf and Bernd Zimmer founded an artist-run gallery in 1977. In Cologne, Hans Peter Adamski, Peter Bömmels, Walter Dahn, Jirí Dokoupil and others shared a studio building beginning in 1980 in the Mülheimer Freiheit street, the name of which was used to designate their collaborative practice. Finally, Hamburg is the city with which Kippenberger, Oehlen and Büttner were associated at the time that critics and journalists began circulating the term Neo-Expressionism.[45] This is not the place for a thorough discussion of the differences between these loose alliances—the differences certainly outweigh the similarities. It is also important to note that the term was often misleadingly applied to an earlier generation of artists in West Germany. There had already been a general reinvigoration of

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Abbeville Press, 1986); Donald Kuspit, *The Rebirth of Painting in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[44] See Götz Adriani, ed., *Obsessive Malerei: Ein Rueckblick auf die Neuen Wilden*, exh. cat. (Karlsruhe: Museum für Neue Kunst, ZKM, 2003).

[45] For a short overview of these West German developments, see Ulrike Gehring, "Obsessive Malerei: Ein Rückblick auf die 'Neuen Wilden'" in ibid., 8-17.

figurative painting in the 1960s that formed the common denominator among several painters who had been active for over a decade (Anselm Kiefer, Georg Baselitz, Jörg Immendorff, and Markus Lüpertz, to name a few of the better-known artists) but who did not achieve international success until the early 1980s. What ultimately linked these disparate artistic practices was the perceived attempt to revitalize the concerns of the early expressionists. This caused many critics to gasp, as they feared an uncritical redeployment of the kinds of nationalist imagery and mythological subject matter that the National Socialists had incorporated into their cultural program.

Among members of the older generation, Kiefer has probably been the most frequent subject of such debates. In his oft-quoted essay on Kiefer and the question of national identity, Andreas Huyssen lucidly outlined how art critics in Germany and the United States were split over their interpretation of the artist.[46] Huyssen argues that whereas Kiefer's fellow Germans felt threatened by his use of mythological symbols and overt references to the holocaust, several American critics championed his ability to reconcile the ghosts of Germany's past. As Huyssen claims, "Kiefer's work makes visible a psychic disposition dominant in postwar Germany that has been described as the inability to mourn."[47] Huyssen sees an instance of denial in the German critics' unwillingness to confront the painful references in Kiefer's pictures, which is counterbalanced by the Americans' naive glorification of the artist's efforts toward an alleged historical catharsis. Yet the situation was even more complicated, since Huyssen

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[46] Andreas Huyssen, "Anselm Kiefer: The Terror of History, the Temptation of Myth," in *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 209-247.

[47] Ibid., 222.

does not take into account the highly critical reactions of a group of New York writers. This aspect of the debate can be traced in Donald Kuspit's essay, "Flak from the 'Radicals,'" in which he makes a scathing attack on those New York critics (Benjamin Buchloh, Douglas Crimp, Craig Owens and Thomas Lawson) who had serious reservations about the arrival of neo-expressionism. Kuspit is for Huyssen the epitome of the misinformed critic, who, like his German colleagues, believes that the loaded Teutonic references periodically employed by the neo-expressionists can have a healing impact. Kuspit had argued that these artists "suggest that art still has a redemptive power of transformation over history—that art can be an effective intervention in history, using its materials to reveal something more fundamental, yet inseparable from it."[48] The problem with so much of the writing at the time is that it presents these painters as making one drastic choice or the other, opting either for "mourning or melancholy,"[49] as if there were no middle ground.

Amidst all this art-world controversy, Oehlen was busy making images that, on the face of it, should have sparked more criticism than did some of the more tepid works of the neo-expressionists. Oehlen belongs to the same generation as the other artists typically identified as neo-expressionists, all of whom were born between 1947 and 1956.

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[48] Donald B. Kuspit, "Flak from the 'Radicals': The American Case against Current German Painting," in Wallis, ed., *Art after Modernism*, 141 [originally published in Jack Cowart, ed., *Expressions: New Art from Germany* (St. Louis and Munich: The St. Louis Art Museum and Prestel-Verlag, 1983), 43-55]. The counterexample to Kuspit's text is Benjamin H. D. Buchloh's "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting," in Wallis, ed., *Art after Modernism*, 106-135 [originally published in *October* 16 (Spring 1981), 39-68].

[49] See Donald B. Kuspit, "Mourning and Melancholia in German Neo-Expressionism: The Representation of German Subjectivity," in *Signs of Psyche in Modern and Postmodern Art* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 212-227.

Though three centers (Berlin, Hamburg and Cologne) of neo-expressionist painting are often brought together, I want to keep the work of Oehlen and the Hamburg group separate from that of the others.[50] While it is difficult to speak of a unified aesthetic in any of these locations, the Berlin painters typically treated subjects that highlighted gritty street culture (Bernd Zimmer's *Auto—Brennend [Steinwurf]* [Car—Burning (Throwing a Stone)], 1982, fig. 61) and glorified erotic bodies (Rainer Fetting's shower paintings [fig. 62] and Salomé's cavorting naked men [fig. 63]). The Cologne painters moved more in the direction of lightly humorous, fantastical imagery, such as Walter Dahn's cartoon-like self-portrait in *Selbst doppelt* (Self Doubled, 1982, fig. 64) or Jirí Georg Dokoupil's surreal hand in a landscape in *Friedliche Hand, umgeben mit Formen* (Peaceful Hand, Surrounded by Forms, 1982, fig. 65). The one quality that links all of these artists is a general interest in bold, splashy color and an attitude of exuberance.

For the most part, the Hamburg group employed a darker palette while setting its sights on more controversial subject matter. As opposed to Kippenberger, who treated Nazism like any other topic that he appropriated and just as quickly discarded, Oehlen took a more steady approach to the subject between 1980 and 1987. During these years he occasionally appeared in photographs sporting a Hitler-style, toothbrush moustache that attested to his morbidly ironic sense of dedication. With the election to chancellor of Helmut Kohl in 1982, a second *Tendenzwende* took place.[51] As Huyssen points out, the political climate took a general turn to the right as "issues of national identity had

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[50] The three-city concept is the organizing principle in Adriani, ed., *Obsessive Malerei*.

[51] See Jost Hermand, *Die Kultur der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1965-1985* (Frankfurt am Main and Berlin: Ullstein, 1990), 613-633.

resurfaced for the first time since the war."[52] In recognizing the muddied direction this debate was taking, Oehlen, who was born well after World War II had ended, sought to strip away the rhetoric. In an interview from 1988, Oehlen explained his use of controversial symbols: "I do believe, after all, that symbols work only because there's some agreement on what they mean. They represent agreements, nothing else. Take the swastika, for example. 'Swastika' is fascism = evil. Then some smart-ass goes a step further and says that it is in fact an Indian fertility symbol. But either way, the meaning derives from agreement. I'm not trying to criticize, but to make something clear, to reduce a picture to what it really is, and what it must signify."[53] Yet what notion of semantic "agreement" would these pictures support? Oehlen's stated desire not to "criticize" led him to avoid both mourning and melancholy and take an ambivalent, ironic stance.

In *Morgenlicht fällt ins Führerhauptquartier* (Morning Light Falls in the Führer's Headquarters, 1982; fig. 66), a foreshortened swastika appears to scuttle along the floor of a vacant room, its lines echoing those of the walls and window frames. The floor tilts upward to suggest the flattened space of a studio interior painted by Kirchner or Heckel, here minus the nude model that typically occupied the Expressionist room. In an overblown gesture of pictorial destabilization, Oehlen denies the impression of visual access by affixing four small mirrors to the surface of the canvas. The viewer's gaze is caught short by the reflection of his or her own space, the mirrors clumsily calling attention to the fiction of the painted canvas. It is through the title that the sign is clearly

[52] Huyssen, "Anselm Kiefer," 212.

[53] Albert Oehlen, "Interview with Marie Luise Syring and Christiane Vielhaber," in Jürgen Harten and David A. Ross, ed., *Binationale: German Art of the Late 80s*, exh. cat. (Cologne: Du Mont, 1988), 244.

placed within a specific context that lends it significance. Yet when no one is in the room to assign it meaning, the swastika seems to take on a life of its own and deny the attempted control of its interpreters. Contrary to Polke's *Apparition of the Swastika* (fig. 20), Oehlen's *Hakenkreuz* is not simply a disengaged sign appearing in an unexpected place; here it brings the "light" into Hitler's headquarters. But the "bad-painting" gesture delivered by the mirrors, as well as the sign's awkward, skittering motion, lends it just enough absurdity to keep it outside the bounds of sober discourse on national guilt.

In *Ofen 1* (fig. 67), 1982, Oehlen's rendering of a standard, albeit antiquated, coal-fed stove in shades of brown, gray and white force a reading that connects it to Kiefer's paintings of fascist architecture. Both artists use earth tones to present interior spaces containing unmistakable signs of Germany's fascist past, even if the implied meanings could be interpreted differently. Yet in opposition to Kiefer's clean lines and severe single-point perspective in his *Deutschlands Geisteshelden* (Germany's Spiritual Heroes; fig. 68) of 1973, Oehlen's room in *Ofen 1* is only loosely defined with a stretch of brick wall overlaid with painted-over mirrors and diagrammatic connecting lines—more destabilizing elements that undercut the apparent seriousness of the subject. And whereas Kiefer's empty hall conveys the overwhelming lack at the heart of the German cult of heroes, Oehlen's deliberately sloppy workmanship and use of painterly clichés questions the reading of any determined meanings into the artificial space of the painting. In the mid-1980s, Oehlen and Büttner expressed their opinion of those who today call themselves anti-fascists: "Because as everyone has always known, still knows and especially knows now: there is no fascism today. The term—anti-fascist—is defined by the anti-fascist himself.... He who calls himself anti-fascist today mocks the resistance

against the Nazis. He hallucinates his arse into a battle that was over in '45."[54] Their deep skepticism toward the possibilities of enacting a *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) via painting is expressed most definitively in their texts; painting itself can only rely on hackneyed gestures to communicate the artist's mistrust of the medium's capacity for unambiguous statements.

Writing on the "Dummheit in der Malerei" (stupidity in painting), Hans Platschek identifies a weakness of the medium in its offering of a blank slate for the projection of irrelevant interpretations: "The materiality of painting practically invites rupture: colors, tonalities or lines remain constantly stuck in the vestibule of words."[55] Oehlen, along with Büttner and Kippenberger, turned to the newspaper for his subject matter, taking, as he put it, his "vocabulary from reality."[56] The results generally tended to be more text-oriented in Kippenberger's work, more pictorial in Oehlen's. The visual symbols employed by Oehlen avoid the transcendentalist and self-referential approach traditionally associated with expressionism, as well as with its postmodern successor. In "The Expressive Fallacy," Hal Foster exposed the inherent problems with the early-1980s return to expressionist tendencies in terms of language: "…to deconstruct expressionism is to show precisely how it is constructed rhetorically—that the expressionist self and

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[54] Albert Oehlen and Werner Büttner, "Defending Kiefer Against His Devotees," *Artscribe International* (December-January, 1985-1986), 69; quoted in Ellis, "The Boys in the Bande," 120.

[55] Hans Platschek, *Über die Dummheit in der Malerei* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), 164; "Die Dinglichkeit der Malerei lädt zur Entzweiung geradezu ein: Farben, Tonalitäten oder Linien bleiben stets im Vorhof der Wörter stecken."

[56] Oehlen quoted in Wilfried Dickhoff, ed., *Albert Oehlen im Gespräch mit Wilfried Dickhoff und Martin Prinzhorn* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1991), 46; "…Vokabular aus der Wirklichkeit."

sign belong to a preexistent image-repertoire."[57] Oehlen's critique of painting's ability to effectively grapple with the legacy of Nazism both relies on and distances itself from the "image-repertoire" encountered in the daily press.

The West German media have long made profitable use of images from the Nazi period that fill newsstands with their stark, black-and-white scenes of violence and terror as well as everyday life under fascism. As if reducing all of these pictures to their essence, Oehlen produced his 1984 portrait of Adolf Hitler (fig. 69), a frontal view of the dictator's face in close-up. A large painting (about six by six feet) done in the three primary colors, he made deliberate use of "expressive," rough brushstrokes and bold hues to recall the central stylistic features of the original expressionists. This is the "purest" test case for Oehlen's manipulation of media imagery, its directness and relative lack of artifice making the *Ofen* look almost coy in comparison. But what trace of humor remains here? Wolfgang Hartmann, writing in the academic journal *Kritische Berichte*, attempted to locate caricature in the work, pointing to the sloppy painting style, the "comical-whiney" physiognomy, and the exaggerated colors.[58] However, he was left to conclude that the work is little more than a typical example of postmodern relativism, cynical in its "state of openness between recognition and understanding."[59] A more generous reading by Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen—a critic and later curator of the

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[57] Hal Foster, "The Expressive Fallacy," in *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1985), 62.

[58] Wolfgang Hartmann, "Moderne Kunst zwischen Karikatur, Ironie und tieferer Bedeutung: Gedanken zu Albert Oehlens *Portrait Adolf Hitlers* und Felix Droeses *Schwert und Schild*," *Kritische Berichte: Zeitschrift für Kunst- und Kulturwissenschaften* 2 (1993), 58-63.

[59] Ibid., 59.

Kunstverein in Hamburg—of Oehlen's work locates critical value in the *Schlingern* (a lurching back and forth) between different interpretive routes: "This lurching seems appropriate in view of a society that re-coins every protest as affirmation."[60] The first writer would likely find a cynical attitude in the second writer's characterization of the postmodern condition; protest is written off from the start as a possible artistic motivation. For the spectator faced with Hitler's expressionless gaze, an ambivalent emptiness is hard to ignore, yet it is tinged with humor if one thinks of it in relation to the rest of Oehlen's production. The element of caricature suddenly comes across as more aggressive and less resigned.

As if in recognition of the limited options of such a flatly ironic approach, Oehlen embarked on a new direction in the second half of the eighties. Starting around 1987, the figurative element of Oehlen's paintings began to receive less emphasis and his caustic social commentary gave way to what appeared to be a stronger interest in the manipulation of his materials for their own sake. The titles of his works no longer served as conceptual explicators; the pictures often went untitled or took on such generic labels as *Abstract Painting*. Narrative-driven textuality moved aside for a greater focus on an almost unadulterated pictoriality. The notion of the "truth" of a painting had always interested both Oehlen and Büttner, which Oehlen expressed in a 1985 interview: "We heroize all the situations we find. In nearly all our paintings, what we are representing is made immediately clear. What's in the middle of the painting is what we are showing."[61]

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[60] Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen, *Spielregeln: Tendenzen der Gegenwartskunst* (Cologne: Du Mont, 1987), 179; "Dieses Schlingern scheint angebracht angesichts einer Gesellschaft, die jeden Protest in Affirmation ummünzt."

[61] Albert Oehlen, "Interview with Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen," *Flash Art* 120 (January 1985), 24-25.

As the emphasis on the literal message of the work began to decrease, Oehlen's concern with showing "what's in the middle of the painting" turned more and more toward abstraction, toward a more visceral interaction with the medium. This posed clear risks for an artist known for practicing what Bazon Brock had called, in reference to Kippenberger's work, "picture journalism."[62]

The shift in Oehlen's practice was complete by the early 1990s. In a photo from the November 1994 issue of *Artforum* (fig. 70), Oehlen is shown to have left behind all traces of his Hitlerian look and now sits resting comfortably against one of his recent paintings. Clearly Oehlen wants to declare a change of attitude, or at least reposition himself vis-à-vis the medium of painting, when he states, "I come to painting out of the '70s interest in democratizing high art. That lets me view painting with a certain disdain, or at least a lack of respect. So I can romp around in it. And now that I'm having fun with it, I can take its postulates very seriously."[63] This brings us back to the question of seriousness. The tension in Oehlen's later work lies in his two-way approach: on the one hand, he believes that paintings "speak" to us in much the same manner as language, yet he claims that he is working toward an "autonomy" of painting, which is opposed to the principle that the medium "can't happen without a reason."[64] If the forms of painting should act in the way that words do, then Oehlen asserts the ability of his pictures to communicate, to express content, whether more literally (as in his earlier works with

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[62] Bazon Brock, "Picture-Journalism as an Aesthetic Force," in Martin Kippenberger, *Miete Strom Gas*, exh. cat. (Darmstadt: Hessisches Landesmuseum, 1986), 62-77.

[63] Quoted in Diedrich Diederichsen, "The Rules of the Game," trans. Charles V. Miller, *Artforum* (November 1994), 67.

[64] Quoted in ibid., 69.

more explicit messages) or more abstractly (as in his later pictures). It is in this apparent contradiction that the strength of Oehlen's paintings resides; in a sense, they speak to us and remain silent in equal measure. Oehlen accepts this situation and his response is to make it as obvious as possible, to overtly communicate his recognition of the artist's dilemma.

Rosemarie Trockel: Quiet Laughter

The art of Rosemarie Trockel, unlike that of Kippenberger, does not immediately bring to mind aggressive joking. Trockel's objects have never wielded humor as loosely as did her colleagues from the 1980s, and her work has not lent itself to the construction of comedic subjectivity. Instead, it often carries an air of seriousness tinged with a quiet humor, a "delicate equipoise" connoting thoughtfulness rather than boisterousness.[65] Here I want to focus on the role of incompleteness within Trockel's everyday practice by examining a number of relatively ephemeral objects that form a parallel history to her museum-scale works. These objects share affinities with the conceptual and material openness of others from her generation of West German artists. The humor that emanates from them is the closest that Trockel comes, in my opinion, to the workings of singular jokes.

Before moving on to these lesser-known works, I want to briefly discuss how Trockel has often promoted what we might call an aesthetic of indecision in some of her more familiar pieces. I see this as relating to her ambivalent embrace of feminism, sketched out in the previous chapter. If we consider a few of the numerous works Trockel produced in wool between 1984 and 1992, mutually exclusive categories crop up

[65] Deborah Drier, "Spiderwoman," *Artforum* (September 1991), 123.

repeatedly on both formal and conceptual levels.[66] In an untitled wool-picture of 1989 (fig. 71), beige fabric is stretched over the frame above a narrower field in black. Two "speech bubbles," resembling two partially deflated balloons, enter the space from above to interrupt the rigid geometry of the abstract backdrop. In one bubble the words *Bitte tu mir nichts* (Please don't do anything to me) appear, while the other contains the command *Aber schnell* (But quickly). The conflict between the two phrases is mirrored in several points of humorous tension: between the rectilinear fields and the loosely rendered image of hand-written words; between the look of the hand-drawn and the knowledge that the fabric, including the speech bubbles, was knitted by a machine; between the quiet austerity of the abstract ground and the chatty intrusion of language. Barbara Engelbach, the curator of Trockel's 2005 retrospective in Cologne, points to the artist's "ironic marking of the oppositions" that appear throughout the series of wool-pictures.[67] Never clearly favoring one or the other part of an opposition, she keeps all the possible interpretive options at play.

Other instances of such internal conflicts are encountered in the more formally consistent pattern pictures that rely on recognizable logos. Her untitled wool-picture of 1986 has a ground of alternating horizontal stripes in gray and red, over which a tight pattern of hammer-and-sickle figures repeat and seem to extend past the edges of the frame (fig. 72). Here the joke resides partly in the object's awkward treatment of use value. A factory-made fabric with a Soviet logo would initially support a socialist notion

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[66] For a complete listing of Trockel's wool works, see Lilian Haberer and Charlotte Kraft, "Catalog Raisonné of Wool Works and Works Related to Wool," in Barbara Engelbach and Rosemarie Trockel, ed., *Rosemarie Trockel: Post-Menopause*, exh. cat. (Cologne: Museum Ludwig, 2005), 149-192.

[67] Barbara Engelbach, "Patterns, Structures, Ornaments: Rosemarie Trockel's Work with Oppositions and Similarities," in ibid., 34.

of mass production in service to the state. On the other hand, to use this material to produce a singular, bourgeois "painting" to hang on a wall for decoration would have been unacceptable during the Constructivist period of the 1920s, to which Trockel most specifically refers. The alternating stripes can even be read as a reference to the United States' flag, such that a Cold-War conflict is hinted at without being explicitly signaled. As Christina Kiaer has argued, Russian Constructivism (in particular the work of Varvara Stepanova) was full of similar conflicts as the artists attempted to translate earlier abstract painting into materials and forms useful for the new state.[68]

The numerous ambiguities and semantic conflicts in the wool-pictures turn up consistently in the artist's books and editions that have often accompanied Trockel's gallery and museum shows. In recent years, she has also begun to exhibit a host of previously unseen projects under the label of "unrealized proposals," to which I want to devote some attention. Three years ago at New York's Dia Center for the Arts, Trockel first presented a number of these open-ended book and catalogue projects.[69] The act of submitting these rejected books and catalogues years later to the scrutiny of viewers implies as much a reactivation of latent ideas as a laying to rest of failed projects. In one of the few interviews she has granted over the years—the one quoted in virtually every major essay on her work—Trockel spoke of "der langsame Entstehungsprozeß" (the slow process of creation) at the heart of her practice, which can suffuse her art with "an aura of

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[68] Christina Kiaer, "The Russian Constructivist Flapper Dress," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 28, no. 1 (Autumn 2001), 185-243.

[69] Trockel's exhibition *Spleen* was on view at the Dia Center for the Arts in New York from October 2002 to January 2004. See my essay, "Full of Potential: Rosemarie Trockel's 'Unrealized' Books and Catalogues," in the forthcoming catalogue.

timelessness."[70] By this she presumably did not mean to impart an air of classicism to her work, but sought rather to highlight the way in which she treats the idea of completion. Alongside the finished objects that have been produced with gallery and museum exhibitions in mind, Trockel has consistently fashioned small-scale works that form their own parallel history. From artist's editions created for magazines like *Parkett* and *Texte zur Kunst* to gifts given to friends and colleagues, Trockel has invested a great deal of energy in a more ephemeral, modest output. This is by no means an uncommon activity among artists, but in Trockel's case these objects have always heavily tempered the reading of her more comprehensive projects, even if they haven't received adequate critical analysis.

It is in the long-term casting of doubt on what the philosopher Richard Rorty has termed "final vocabularies" that Trockel and her contemporaries maintain their avoidance of closure.[71] The person Rorty defines as a "liberal ironist"—for the most part gendered as female—is suspicious of unquestioned words and figures of speech that are ordinarily employed in the process of self-definition. These "final vocabularies" are opened up to analysis and routinely abandoned; eventually, they are replaced with equally unstable, impermanent terms. Rorty describes the structure, or "grid," underlying final vocabularies, claiming that the ironist tries to "avoid cooking the books she reads by using *any* such grid (although, with ironic resignation, she realizes that she can hardly

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[70] Rosemarie Trockel, "Endlich ahnen, nicht nur wissen: Ein Gespräch mit Doris von Drateln," *Kunstforum International*, vol. 93 (February/March 1988), 214.

[71] Richard Rorty, "Private Irony and Liberal Hope," in *Contigency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 73-95.

help doing so)."[72] Trockel was conscious of the difficulty of forming her own vocabulary, one associated with the West German art scene around Cologne and Düsseldorf in the early 1980s. While it would be too limiting to argue that she wholly conceded to the power of the "grid," her work, as well as that of her male contemporaries, was always conditioned by an awareness of this obstacle.

One of the works, *Looking at Idols* of 1984 (fig. 73), comes close to a moment of finality, but one in which a project is shelved due to lack of supplies. Here Trockel had planned to produce a book of interviews with local artist friends, including Georg Dokupil, Martin Kippenberger and Ulrich Wellmann. As she laconically explains in the vitrine caption, the "project failed from the beginning, with the first named artist, because we couldn't find any suitable photo-material." What remains from the concept is a photograph, on brown newsprint paper, of a young woman lying on a bed and looking at photographs. Printed in a column next to this image is an alphabetical list of famous international artists, all of them male except for Yoko Ono. Given that photographs of the artists mentioned—from superstars like Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol to slightly lesser-known, though still highly regarded, figures such as Carl Andre and Robert Smithson—could not have been in short supply, Trockel opened up a gap between the level of notoriety enjoyed by these luminaries and those of her own generation and environment; there are noticeably no Germans included in the printed list. At the same time, even though friends are kept separated from celebrities, no one gets the respect he (or she) deserves, so the professional playing field is leveled out. In this case, the very lack of finality allows the joke to unfold.

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[72] Ibid., 76.

Jutta Koether, an astute interpreter of Trockel, has expressed a preference for these marginal works, which she describes as "objects that have vision."[73] For Trockel, the slow nature of her production process is tied to this sense of looking forward while reacting to the demands of the present. Some ideas are not entirely ripe, even though the pressures of exhibition schedules typically force an artist to accomplish the *look* of a thoroughly executed project. The maquettes for "unrealized" proposals shown at Dia clarify just how crucial such works put on hold have always been for Trockel. Indeed, Birte Frenssen noted a few years ago that Trockel does not "recognize the opposition between masterpiece and marginalia."[74] One might slightly alter this formulation to say that Trockel consciously acknowledges the separation between the two, but seeks to have one inform the other in an ongoing exchange.

Despite appearing to be objects of notable simplicity, neither the proposals themselves nor their multivalent contents are allowed to settle into a secure configuration. Another example of this process encountered in the vitrines at Dia was *Ein zum Leben verurteilter ist entflohen* (One Sentenced to Life Has Escaped, 1993; fig. 74), an unpublished artist's book. Here Trockel treats a paradigmatic instance of pictorial interpretation by producing a series of color drawings in watercolor that overturn the procedures of the Rorschach psychological test. Rather than verbally respond to the random spills, Trockel based her drawings on unidentified patients' recorded reactions to the standard pictures used by therapists. More than a mere reversal of terms, Trockel's

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[73] Jutta Koether, "Out of Character: The Strategies for Visual Practice of a Female Artist in Germany," in Gregory Burke, ed., *Rosemarie Trockel* (Wellington, New Zealand: City Gallery, Wellington, 1993), 27.

[74] Birte Frenssen, "B.B.: 'Ich kann über meine Filme nur lachen': Rosemarie Trockel meets Brigitte Bardot," in Birte Frenssen and Rosemarie Trockel, ed., *Rosemarie Trockel: Werkgruppen 1986-1998* (Cologne: Oktagon Verlag, 1998), 49.

intervention jettisons the original experimental context as she willfully replaces spontaneity with deliberation. Still, her drawings are tied to her own subjective reworking of the patients' descriptions, implicating Trockel in a new instance of mental projection. The interpretive routes essentially parallel one another, existing independently yet each requiring the other's presence to construct a "condensed allegory" of psychic association.[75] The in-between status of the "unrealized" books, editions and catalogues represents one of Trockel's most radical attempts to embrace the fragmentary as a means of avoiding an unwelcome moment of closure.

Given the significant number of small-scale objects produced by Trockel over the past twenty-five years—thousands of drawings, numerous artist's editions, exhibition catalogues and the free-floating "unrealized" projects—it can be a daunting task to get an overview of her work as a whole. Koether aptly described this effect when comparing Trockel with her contemporary Kippenberger, writing that both artists have produced an "excess of the non-masterly."[76] As the "unrealized" projects attest, Trockel has consciously embraced failure as a highly productive aspect of her practice. Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen recognized at the end of the 1980s a certain affinity in Trockel's work for modes of thinking that approach the logic of philosophy. Yet any tendency toward structure and stability is only part of the picture, since "a moment of failure is always built in, as if the individual works are also there to uphold the certainty of uncertainty."[77]

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[75] Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, 230.

[76] Koether, "Out of Character," 30.

[77] Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen, "Rosemarie Trockel und die Philosophie," *Noema* 22 (January/February/March 1989), 28; "Und doch ist ein Scheitern schon immer eingebaut, so als seien die einzelnen Werke auch dazu da, die Gewißheit der Ungewißheit wach zu halten."

Giorgio Agamben offers a useful insight here in his thoughts on the nature of *potential*, a term with a long philosophical history. Agamban, making reference to Aristotle, explains that potentiality requires being "one's own lack, *to be in relation to one's own incapacity*."[78] Trockel's artist editions, books and catalogues often exist in this very state of potentiality that Agamben elaborates, and in the case of their recent exhibition appearances, this acknowledgment, even embrace of, incapacity coaxes new and unexpected readings of the more "finished" works to the fore. Agamben writes of Aristotle's "extraordinary" definition of potentiality as the "*potential not to be*."[79] This offers a positive alternative to the more directly active position of actuality. Through a series of logical steps, traced and explicated by Agamben with a high degree of clarity, Aristotle finds a place for potentiality as an inextricable part of actuality. The end result is an opening up of a certain kind of freedom, though this freedom entails the acknowledgment of passivity as an integral part of human behavior; one is forced to live "in relation to one's own privation."[80] In other words, "*to be capable of one's own impotentiality*"[81] is to open up the possibility of seeing a non-action as both part of the structure of action as well as an inherent, if not always welcome, aspect of human behavior.

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[78] Giorgio Agamben, "On Potentiality," in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 182 [his emphasis].

[79] Agamben, ibid. [his emphasis].

[80] Ibid., 183.

[81] Ibid. [his emphasis].

In exhibiting her "unrealized" books and catalogues, Trockel has taken a set of objects once laid aside and given them a new lease on life. Yet their limbo status simultaneously banishes them into something akin to a purgatory for artworks. Neither fully realized nor definitively dropped, they dwell at the edges of Trockel's overall practice, suspended between potentiality and actuality. There is a quiet intelligence and clear level of intent operating behind this seeming indecisiveness. The vitrines rewarded thorough consideration, as casual as they might first have appeared. Anne M. Wagner has noted the unimposing look of Trockel's drawings, writing, "At first glance her work can seem aggressively (and deceptively) de-skilled."[82] Even more than the drawings, the "unrealized" projects can easily mislead in their state of irresolution. But rather than view them as studio novelties, it is worth allowing them to speak for themselves. Like the display captions that accompany them, they present a focused and productive form of note taking. In the process, Trockel is as much in dialogue with herself as she is with the viewer.

The alternative that Trockel offers to the more predominant patterns of male joking in 1980s Cologne brings us back to the comment by Peter Sloterdijk that opened the chapter. Her embrace of potential as a positive strategic move recalls Sloterdijk's idea of a "humor that has ceased to struggle."[83] Trockel's ability to make productive use of her own "incapacity" demonstrates her willingness to laugh at herself, and it suggests a role for humor that does not require heavy posturing. Yet, as will be explained in chapter 6, Trockel also has a capacity for simmering aggression in works that have occasionally

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[82] Anne M. Wagner, "Trockel's Promise," in *Rosemarie Trockel: Metamorphoses and Mutations*, exh. cat. (New York: The Drawing Center, 2000), 12.

[83] Sloterdijk, *The Critique of Cynical Reason*, 305.

moved in the direction of mischievousness. These works partake of the tradition of dark humor and place her closer to Kippenberger and his peers than is often considered to be the case.

Chapter 5—The In-Joke: Constructing Audiences

In the triangle of author, work, and public the last is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but rather itself an energy formative of history. The historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its addressees.[1]

Hans Robert Jauss

Intertextuality

In his 1987 book on contemporary trends in art, German critic and curator Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen wrote that under postmodernism the codes circulating elliptically within single works of art, as well as between them, had begun to flow together inseparably: "The genealogy of a single sign can hardly be determined any longer."[2] Interpretations of a given work of art were confronted with the obstacle of negotiating all the other works that were brought up as part of one large tapestry of signs. Intertextuality was considered to be running rampant, having become enough of a cliché that a tone of mild concern, even confusion, could be registered in Schmidt-Wulffen's essay. It is easy enough to attribute to the work of Herold, Kippenberger, Oehlen and Trockel the drive to use humor as the most effective vehicle for intertextual gamesmanship. Yet when the artist is in the midst of such developments, one cannot assume with hindsight that he or she was entirely aware of the changes that were taking place. Kippenberger's rapid-fire production of work was surely a strategic choice, which does not mean that he always

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[1] Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 19.

[2] Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen, *Spielregeln: Tendenzen der Gegenwartskunst* (Cologne: DuMont, 1987), 162; "Die Genealogie eines einzelnen Zeichens läßt sich kaum mehr feststellen."

had control over the intertextuality produced by his work. Despite the apparent chaos, there is a consistent working method behind his output.

It is certainly clear that the time from concept to solution was usually kept to a minimum, thus one has to question the notion that decisions were made according to a master plan. Furthermore, the types of jokes made by these artists were typically not in the category of direct critique, as in the tradition of political satire. It can come as a surprise that most of the jokes they made were not particularly topical in terms of politics; Helmut Kohl, for instance, is conspicuously absent from their attacks. The political joke operated on a different register from that of free-form intertextuality, its targets perhaps too obvious to warrant the artist's response. In an article on the politics of laughter in West Germany, the authors point to the odd lack of satire in the Kohl era: "Today there is so much to satirize, yet we look for that satire in vain. The 1980s are a time of disillusionment and apathy. Kohl *is* a satire, people will tell you."[3] It took a lot more creativity to think up absurdist phrases to attach to found images than to make yet another comparison between Kohl's figure and various fruits or vegetables.

Speaking about the selection of themes for their work of the 1980s, Oehlen stated that "[t]he most demanding roads intersect with the most stupid."[4] It seems that often the joke's simplicity masked the complexity of its effects. The following chapter will explore how critics and other members of this generation's audience interpreted the convoluted semantic layers built up between image and title. In order to maintain public interest in

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[3] Friedemann Weidauer, Alan Lareau and Helen Morris-Keitel, "The Politics of Laughter: Problems of Humor and Satire in the FRG Today," in Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand, ed., *Laughter Unlimited: Essays on Humor, Satire, and the Comic* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 69.

[4] Albert Oehlen quoted in Petra Franz, ed., *Kippenberger: Paintings*, exh. cat. (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reine Sofía, 2004), 104.

their work, the artists had to keep their in-jokes just comprehensible enough for an uninitiated viewer to find some route of access into the objects. By keeping the majority of concepts "dumb" enough, everyone could enter into the conversation, even if it took them to different places. And as long as the artists did not dwell for too long on any given idea, the odds that some aspect of the joke's effect would strike a chord only improved.

Private Languages and the Audience

In order to define the varying levels of accessibility to the jokes embedded in the images and objects produced in the 1980s, we need to turn away from the makers and attempt to define their audiences. The twentieth century is full of examples of small groups that carved out space for themselves by constructing partially private languages and pseudo-dialects. Renato Poggioli has written that an essential quality of the avant-garde's "antagonism" toward the older generation and academic tradition is its "use of an idiom all its own, a quasi-private jargon."[5] By the time that postmodernism had relegated the avant-garde to a historical category, artists from the generation of the 1980s could only play with the suggestion of resistance through obfuscation. As we have seen in the works themselves, they could swing wildly from borderline illegibility to hyper-clarity. Part of the task involved in assessing their communicability is to investigate their reception by diverse groups.

The question of what audiences were imagined and constructed by the artists forms the core of this chapter. Specifically, I will address the ways in which a collaborative mode of production among friends and assistants led to differing degrees of

[5] Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1968), 37.

accessibility to the work. On the one hand, their paintings, sculptures and drawings could be immediately understood as humorous, telegraphing an unmistakable sense of the comedic to the widest audience possible, yet a strong current of obfuscation has always accompanied the moments of clarity. One way of prying apart these two aspects of the work is to explore the differences between irony and humor as distinct forms of address. Numerous scholars have discussed the specific qualities of each term, yet they have often been placed into a single overarching category.[6]

In the 19th century, Søren Kierkegaard made an attempt to give each term its conceptual due, despite being primarily concerned with irony. Until the final passage of Kierkegaard's dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*, the reader encounters few remarks on the relationship between irony and humor, or irony and the comic. Kierkegaard's rigorous tracing of irony's roots in Socratic philosophy and its reassessment by Hegel does not allow for many detours into such related territory. Yet in the last paragraph of the second and final section of the work, Kierkegaard makes a brief observation that offers a productive starting point for this chapter. Writing about the temporal range of irony's impact, in particular its emphasis on actuality, he claims that humor must be mentioned in order to distinguish irony's firm presence in the here and now. Humor, in contrast to irony, places its focus "on sinfulness, not on finitude."[7] This leads Kierkegaard to argue

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[6] See Dieter Hörhammer's overview of humor as an historical concept in Karlheinz Barck, et al, ed., *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe: Historisches Wörterbuch in sieben Bänden*, vol. 3 (Stuttgart and Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 2001), 66-85. The following places a wide array of terms (irony, wit, comedy, satire, etc.) under the general umbrella of humor: Jon E. Roecklein, *The Psychology of Humor: A Reference Guide and Annotated Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002).

[7] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 329.

that humor's skepticism is more "profound" than the skepticism of irony, which gives humor "a far deeper positivity."[8] The implication here is that irony is down to earth and profane, whereas humor is capable of addressing questions of a deeper, more spiritual nature. However, his terms remain vague and the distinction between the two categories is undeveloped with his final sentence leaving the thought unfinished.

Adding to the confusion for a present-day reader of *Concept of Irony* is the sense that Kierkegaard's separation of the terms contradicts current usage. Humor is frequently thought of as a coping device for the frustrations of daily life, an aspect emphasized in a recent German dictionary definition.[9] Irony, on the other hand, is typically associated with a rhetorical distancing, giving the impression that the ironist is somehow "above it all." Kierkegaard left behind substantial journal entries and papers where the humor/irony relationship receives further elaboration. In 1836, five years before he submitted his dissertation, he had already written in a note that humor and irony can be "united in one individual, since both components are contingent on one's not having compromised with the world."[10] But whereas humor involves a lack of concern for worldly affairs, irony is directed toward exerting influence on the world. Though these two approaches stand in an oppositional relationship to one another, they are linked as two ends of a "teeter-

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[8] Ibid.

[9] See the entry under "Humor" in *Duden: Das große Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache in zehn Bänden*, vol. 4 (Mannheim: Dudenverlag, 1999), 1880: "The ability of a person…to face the difficulties and mishaps of everyday life with cheerful equanimity." ["Gabe eines Menschen…den Schwierigkeiten und Missgeschicken des Alltags mit heiterer Gelassenheit zu begegnen."]

[10] Ibid., 425.

totter," one continuously giving way to the other.[11] In another set of notes from later in the same year, Kierkegaard makes reference to these contrary positions and puts forward the idea that "life is a constant pendulum-movement between them."[12]

This dissertation is not the place to unravel the complex histories of these terms, let alone the competing theories regarding questions of everydayness or otherworldliness. The artists themselves would likely laugh at the thought of interpreting their work through the lens of 19th-century theories of irony. Nevertheless, for the purposes of analyzing the effects of the artists' works on their audiences I want simply to enter the discussion with Kierkegaard's insistence on the interdependent affiliation between humor and irony in mind. Following the preceding chapter's analysis of jokes as they appeared within the images and objects, the next two chapters will explore the differing effects that humorous and ironic address have on the recipient. Both modes rely on a virtual contract between humorist/ironist and audience. Comedians who are not in tune with the sensibilities of the receiving public will in all likelihood bomb, given the regional specificity of what is considered to be funny. In this respect, humor and irony share a dependency on the crucial role of comprehensibility.

Literary historian Eckhard Schumacher has recently posited Friedrich Schlegel as the theoretician whose writings on irony and incomprehensibility laid the ground for developments that transpired more than 150 years later in association with the

[11] Ibid., 426.

[12] Ibid., 427.

deconstruction of philosophers like Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man.[13] What Schumacher calls the "postponement of comprehensibility" in theoretical writings of the late 1960s and 1970s seems to turn up in bowdlerized form in West German visual art of the late 1970s and 1980s.[14] These artists were capable of combining irony's tendency toward opacity with humor's potential for playful subversion to challenge the position of the viewer/reader. I want to explore Kierkegaard's "teeter-totter" effect as a way of understanding how the works of art form a bridge, whether secure or tenuous, between the social context of their production and the later moment of their reception. The way that the pendulum rotates between humor and irony within a single work of art allows us to distinguish the differing attitudes held by the artists toward the involvement of the audience.

The "Secret Explainer"

The audience to be considered in this chapter is not the general art-viewing public that encountered the artists' gallery and museum shows firsthand. To identify such a crowd would require a wider sociological and demographic investigation than this dissertation seeks to perform. Rather, I want to explore the initial instances of audience formation as it took place in direct communication amongst the artists themselves. Renato Poggioli's notion of the "quasi-private jargon" that the historical avant-gardes had used as a form of

[13] Eckhard Schumacher, *Die Ironie der Unverständlichkeit: Johann Georg Hamann, Friedrich Schlegel, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000).

[14] See the section entitled "Apokalyptische Wendungen: Der Aufschub der Verständlichkeit"; ibid., 259-278.

resistance had long since lost its truly alienating capacity.[15] The heterogeneous and polyglot nature of both modern and postmodern art meant that by the 1980s semantic obscurity had become the norm rather than the exception. Still, the inability of artistic dialects to reinforce alienation did not mean that artists gave up their hermetic modes of communication. Instead, in-jokes and group-speak were utilized more for their positive generative powers than for their negativity.

We can begin by examining the conversations that arose in the studios and bars, where jokes were spawned and translated into works of art. In his remarks on Kippenberger's fostering of group dynamics in the studio, former assistant Merlin Carpenter has called the collaborative act itself the "'secret explainer' of the aesthetic."[16] Kippenberger's works and titles originate in a situation that to some extent already presupposes the place of an audience. Ideas were exchanged, many of which came from the assistants themselves (according to Carpenter, there were phases when they came primarily from the assistants), and the ensuing conversation shaped the final work. As an already partially public encounter, Carpenter argues that the dialogue between artist and assistant enables "others to see the joke."[17] In other words, a degree of semantic transparency would seem to be built into Kippenberger's everyday production activities in the studio. The references may have been obscure, but at least one additional person besides the artist himself had understood the humor at the moment of the joke's inception.

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[15] See note 5.

[16] Merlin Carpenter, "Back Seat Driver," in Thomas Groetz, ed., *Gitarren, die nicht Gudrun heißen: Hommage à Martin Kippenberger*, exh. cat. (Berlin: Galerie Max Hetzler, 2002), 28.

[17] Ibid.

Carpenter's insight reveals the way in which Kippenberger's jokes were committee-generated rather than springing directly from the artist's comedic mind. Assistants, friends and artist-colleagues were relied upon to launch concepts for visual gags, with Kippenberger participating as much as he needed to, even if this meant only stepping in at the last minute to give an idea his blessing. Yet how are we to locate the "secret explainer"? The term itself incorporates the idea that the explanation is partly hidden away behind what amounts to the inherent secrecy of studio work. Carpenter seems to imply that if we could only retrace the original conversation, then the first instance of laughter would be revealed and the work's code would be cracked. In other words, a kind of archeology of the anecdote is ultimately the best route toward comprehending the workings and effects of the in-joke.

It goes without saying that to reconstruct the initial studio (or bar) exchange with any certainty is nearly impossible. For one thing, the encounters between artists were not recorded on the spot; they can only be rediscovered as fragments within the images and titles. Another point to make clear at the outset is that the collaborations between the artists under discussion were carried out for a limited time and at specific phases in their careers. One can fairly easily track the cooperative periods through works and exhibition catalogues, enabling a relatively reliable account of when, say, Büttner and Oehlen, or Kippenberger and Oehlen, or Büttner and Herold, or a combination of several of them, worked together. Aside from the concrete evidence of objects and catalogues, these artists, in particular Kippenberger, Oehlen and Herold (much less so Büttner and Trockel), have given regular interviews that also offer productive information. Oehlen, for instance, commented recently on his limited phase of collaboration with

Kippenberger, explaining that their most active phase of co-production came to an end when the latter's career took off in a significant way in the late 1980s: "He was under so much pressure that at some point he no longer had time to listen to anyone."[18] At this point, the conversation shifted increasingly to exchanges between Kippenberger and his studio assistants.

To return briefly to the painting from 1985 discussed in the previous chapter, *Kaputtes Kind* (Broken Child; fig. 47) was the result of a particular mid-1980s exchange between Kippenberger and Oehlen that led to this image and a great number of other works in the following years. The exact origin of the concept does not need to be discovered in order to recognize how in-jokes could dwell at the edges of more public expressions of humor. As in many other instances, here they seized on the inescapable presence of the then-trendy "I Love" bumper stickers. They stuck to the recognized format and substituted "I Love Berlin" with their own inventive variations. The relevant aspect here is that a broad spectrum of accessibility is on display: From the topicality of "I Love Mad Max" to the crass suggestiveness of "I Love Durchbruch von hinten" (breakthrough from behind), from the self-referentiality of "I Love No go home" (making reference to a work by Kippenberger discussed below) to the teasing fatherly glorification of "I Love Polke + Baselitz," virtually any viewer can find something to latch on to. None of the phrases are laugh-out-loud funny, but all of them are at least awkward and absurd enough to be recognized as having been produced in a fit of laughter on the part of the artist/s. This is the condition of most in-jokes with this group: a tightrope walk

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[18] "Sich im Kreis herum gegenseitig verblüffen: Albert Oehlen über Martin Kippenberger, ein Gespräch von Thomas Groetz," in Groetz, ed., *Gitarren, die nicht Gudrun heißen*, 45; "Er war so unter Druck, dass er irgendwann nicht mehr Zeit hatte, jemanden zuzuhören."

between private laughter and public reference, the joke performing its traditional function of shifting back and forth between familiarity and estrangement. In this sense, Carpenter is right: the group conversation often brings the joke one step closer to general comprehensibility through the collective reliance on familiar (often painfully so) codes.

Familiarity was typically bred by the crab-like movement of visual and textual jokes spawned by well-known images from the media. Oehlen once recalled how he, Büttner and Kippenberger had early on found their concepts and problems in the daily paper, with the goal that their subjects "should be truly unpleasantly accessible to everyone."[19] A prime example of such a collaborative venture is Kippenberger and Oehlen's appropriation of a coffee-table book of photographs by the photojournalist Ernst Haas. The book, *In Germany*, was first published in 1976 and contained photographs from various German regions that attempted to collectively portray a national culture.[20] Kippenberger and Oehlen reworked the book by giving it their own title, *The Cologne Manifesto* (fig. 75), and plastering its pages with their self-made "I Love" bumper stickers.[21] Patently comedic pairings (fig. 76 and 77) alternate with more absurdist juxtapositions (fig. 78 and 79). Such a project certainly leaves behind the declaration of intentions associated with historical avant-garde manifestos, instead favoring the idiosyncratic humor of the artists' social milieu. Yet the book also shares aesthetic

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[19] See Wilfried Dickhoff, ed., *Albert Oehlen im Gespräch mit Wilfried Dickhoff und Martin Prinzhorn* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1991), 46; "...es soll richtig schön unangenehm allen zugänglich sein."

[20] Ernst Haas, *In Germany*, trans. Lu Fenton (New York: Viking Press, 1977) [first published in Germany in 1976.]

[21] Martin Kippenberger and Albert Oehlen, *The Cologne Manifesto* (Graz, Cologne, Hamburg: Edition Lord Jim Loge, 1985), edition of 25 signed copies. The artists produced their own dust jacket that was wrapped around Haas's original book.

strategies with German Dada, in particular Hannah Höch's numerous collages that incorporate the word "Dada" into their chaotic layering of pictures taken from the media and advertising (fig. 80). In both projects, group identity is embedded within images associated with mass culture.

Another instance of excessive legibility is found in Kippenberger's 1982 multiple, *The Night Is Alright* (fig. 81), a sign made of a thin sheet of wood that can be hung around the neck by a length of yarn. On the front of the panel, the words *Bitte nicht nach Hause schicken* (Please Don't Send Home) are written by hand in all-caps. More than just a justification for long nights out drinking, it makes clear reference to the famous images of hostages taken by the Red Army Faction during the second half of the 1970s in West Germany. One famous example is the photograph (fig. 82) printed on the cover of *Stern* magazine in March of 1975 that shows Peter Lorenz, the head of the Christian Democrats in West Berlin, wearing a similar sign stating the fact of his capture by the Bewegung 2. Juni (Movement of June 2, a terrorist group loosely affiliated with the RAF[22]). The hostage-takers had sent a Polaroid photograph to the media to publicize their cause, so Kippenberger similarly took Polaroid snapshots of friends sporting his sign in various locales. And sticking with his tendency to mine found visual material for all it was worth, the following year he painted an oil-on-canvas based on a Polaroid of himself sheepishly sporting the multiple (fig. 83). The highly public nature of the original press reference is

[22] The history of the Movement 2 June has so far been told primarily by the group's former members or through collections of statements and oral histories. As in much writing on Oehlen, Kippenberger, et al, the anecdote still seems to function as the most consistent source for historical information. For a history delivered by two former members, see Ralf Reinders and Ronald Fritzsch, *Die Bewegung 2. Juni* (Berlin: ID Verlag, 1995). A similarly subjective history is provided by Gabrielle Rollnik's *Keine Angst vor Niemand: Über die siebziger, die Bewegung 2. Juni und die RAF* (Hamburg: Edition Nautilus, 2004).

reemployed for the purposes of a private laugh, itself reliant on the original image's familiarity. This is a degree of familiarity that for many is too close for comfort, given the capacity of images from Germany's ongoing crisis of terrorism to provoke a local domestic audience.

The private/public split that defines the anecdotal formation of jokes in this group's work might again be compared with Dada in terms of public provocation. Hans Richter, one of the founding members of Dada in Zurich in 1916, wrote in his history of the movement that its core drive was to "outrage public opinion."[23] It is worth examining Richter's assessment: "The devising and raising of public hell was an essential function of any Dada movement, whether its goal was pro-art, non-art or anti-art. And when the public (like insects or bacteria) had developed immunity to one kind of poison, we had to think of another."[24] As much as this was a social group whose members sought to challenge and impress each other, their primary goal was to offend and shock the general public. This took place not only on the stages of the Cabaret Voltaire and other clubs, but also in the newspaper and city streets, sites that could guarantee a wide audience well beyond a bar scene. The historical backdrop of World War I lent their efforts a sense of urgency and import that seems to have been lacking in the 1980s generation.

There is no doubt that, like their Dada predecessors, these young artists had a public audience in mind as they fabricated their in-jokes. Their thirst for art-world recognition prevented them from ever retreating into a realm of predominantly private exchange. However, much of their work, and especially what was done in collaboration,

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[23] Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, trans. David Britt (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), 66.

[24] Ibid.

retained the appearance of stemming from conversations among friends and close colleagues. Nowhere is this more apparent than in their frequent group exhibitions that led to catalogues in which a kind of collective identity was suggested at the outset, only to be cancelled out by a close reading. These exhibitions brought different short-term groupings together, such as Büttner-Oehlen, Herold-Kippenberger, Büttner-Oehlen-Kippenberger, and so on. There were enough such projects that took place during the mid-1980s to give the impression that the artists saw themselves as participating in a collective endeavor. At the same time, they challenged their audience to identify the source of group cohesion.

The split I want to explore here between suggested and denied instances of collectivity involves the formation of social context in places outside of the physical encounters in bars and galleries. Exhibition catalogues offered in-between spaces in which the artists could pursue jointly authored statements while still maintaining their individuality as makers of images and objects with a singular imprint. In his analyses of 19th-century literature and art, Pierre Bourdieu developed a productive distinction between "positions" and "position-takings."[25] Whereas "positions" signify the formal aspects of the work of art, "position-takings" are carried out in the social realm in the form of "political acts and discourses, manifestos or polemics, etc."[26] The close relationship between the two categories "obliges us to challenge the alternative between an internal reading of the work and an explanation based on the social conditions of its

[25] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 231-234.

[26] Ibid., 231.

production or consumption."[27] The collaborative catalogues pair socially motivated group activity with individual objects; in order to interpret them, we must continually straddle the boundary that ordinarily exists between internal and external readings. Kippenberger and Oehlen's *Cologne Manifesto* is one example of such a process.

Other collaborative books include documentation of the conversation that led to their creation. For a 1982 exhibition at Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst in Berlin, Büttner and Oehlen produced a small catalogue. Entitled *Rechts blinken—links abbiegen* (Blink Right—Turn Left), the 32-page book contains brief biographies of each artist that include mention of the several projects on which they had already cooperated.[28] Each artist then has his own section with seven color reproductions of their respective paintings. A shared preference for brushy, expressive painting styles serves to link the works on a visual level, but their individual output is prioritized. Though one could easily confuse their images, Büttner seems to favor motifs with single or a few objects and figures. One image is a self-portrait of the artist inhaling chamomile tea under a towel (fig. 84). Oehlen, on the other hand, concentrates more on architectural interiors, including several works with inset mirrors that toy with clichés regarding painting's historical pursuit of illusionistic depth (fig. 85). Again, the uninitiated viewer would understand the curatorial decision to place their works side by side, but a clear degree of independence is maintained up to this point.

It is in the following pages that Büttner and Oehlen open up a space for dialogue that occupies both public and private realms. In their "Briefe an Georg" (Letters to

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[27] Ibid.

[28] Werner Büttner and Albert Oehlen, *Rechts blinken—links abbiegen*, exh. cat. (Berlin: NGBK RealismusStudio 21, 1982).

Georg), the artists print seven "letters" written to a figure named "Georg," with no last name given. However, anyone familiar with their work at the time would identify the addressee as Georg Herold, a friend and frequent collaborator during the years when he and Oehlen were students in Hamburg. This impression is reinforced by the familiar tone of address, with Büttner and Oehlen signing off with their first names only and the salutation taking the emphatic punctuation (uncommon in the German-speaking countries) of an exclamation point ("Lieber Georg!"). Each letter is similarly brought to a close with friendly last words, such as "that's enough for today." Though Herold is not part of the exhibition and his work does not appear in the catalogue, he is an implied member of a community of like-minded individuals.

The bodies of the letters relate a series of disconnected stories that revolve primarily around odd events happening to friends and acquaintances, mostly things of a grotesque bodily nature or evoking some scene of embarrassment. Kippenberger visits a brothel in Zurich, only to spend his money on a pillow for a good night's sleep; their dealer Max Hetzler is transformed into a bloodied body trailed by a swarm of flies, forcing the artists to flee; Büttner and Oehlen have to slaughter hordes of malicious iguanas in the bushes in order to protect themselves.[29] One account even takes the narrative form of a joke, in which Büttner runs into Oehlen on the street and they go through a series of exchanges in which one attempts to guess what the other ate over the last several days based on the smell of his breath. The whole dialogue does not need to be recounted in order to sense the humor of the punch line, "Idiot! I ate strawberry tarts!"[30] These tales derive from the one-upmanship and exaggeration characteristic of meetings in

[29] Ibid., 21-25.

[30] Ibid., 22.

bars and studios. The artists have simply relocated the conversations to the pages of their exhibition catalogue.

Testifying to Büttner and Oehlen's awareness of the importance of lending critical respectability to their project, or at least mocking the compulsion to do so, one of the letters, by far the longest, takes the form of a discourse on the foolishness of youth and its attachment to rock music. Suddenly they assume the role of responsible adults questioning whether rock aids in the development of personality, basing their analysis on the reading of song lyrics, primarily from bands singing in English. Discussing a song by the English band Queen, they caution that it is not important "to decide whether these lines are niggling, quarrelsome or ironic."[31] According to their assessment, the main thing to consider is that the band is sending the youth into a "social cul-de-sac."[32] In the end, however, they conclude that popular music is no worse than any other influence, whether acquired from a book or a conversation. Despite their initially skeptical remarks, they wind up in the predictable place where cultural relativism would appear to condition the lives of young people.

The artists round out the catalogue-based conversation with a textual montage that takes up the last several pages. Excerpts from four recognized German critics (Michael Elsen, Wolfgang Max Faust, Ulla Frohne and Barbara Straka) are cut and pasted in sections that identify the authors but that render their original words almost unrecognizable. Snippets of sentences are strung together, separated by hyphens and ellipses. A few passages appear to have been left more or less intact, yet the overall effect

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[31] Ibid., 23; "…zu entscheiden, ob diese Zeilen nörgelnd, zänkisch oder ironisch abfaßt sind."

[32] Ibid.

is one of uninhibited sampling. Here the tighter group dialogue, with its emphasis on the in-joke, opens up into the wider art realm. One fragment from a Michael Elsen text is relevant to the discussion of the in-joke: "…the image titles are important, but more about uncertainty than comprehension aids, often they are intentional traps…"[33] We are not told where this line was first printed, nor informed as to the topic of Elsen's essay. In order to hold it all together with the remainder of the catalogue, quotes by Büttner and Oehlen taken from within the original published texts are reproduced, giving the whole thing the air of an unraveling art-world panel discussion. Finally, reproductions of their paintings run along the bottom of the pages of this section (fig. 86), presumably to guide the reader who might otherwise lose sight of the true subject of the publication.

The intertextual strategies employed here by Büttner and Oehlen were taken up again two years later for their exhibition with Kippenberger, *Wahrheit ist Arbeit* (Truth Is Work; fig. 87), at the Museum Folkwang in Essen.[34] In this publication a three-way, jointly authored essay employs the same type of montage technique in the accompanying catalogue, this time blurring the boundaries even further between the voices of the artists. All three were responsible for the rambling text that flows alongside the illustrations of works included in the show, pictures taken from the media and popular culture, photos of the artists' mothers and friends, and various other images that emerged out of their collective interests and obsessions (fig. 88). Despite the lack of attribution of specific passages of writing, one is tempted to read Kippenberger's contribution as being located strictly in the aphoristic phrases that break up the main body of text. They all carry the

[33] Ibid., 28; "…die Bildtitel sind wichtig, aber mehr Verunsicherung als Verständnishilfe, oft bewußte Fallen…."

[34] Werner Büttner, Martin Kippenberger, Albert Oehlen, *Wahrheit ist Arbeit*, exh. cat. (Essen: Museum Folkwang, 1984).

exclamatory tone of his work titles that often pose as nuggets of wisdom, such as "Better a Slap Than a False Kiss."[35] Given how little he published on his own (if we exclude his large number of published interviews), it is reasonable to suppose that Kippenberger was not part of the main writing team.[36] In contrast to his abbreviated bursts of joking rhetoric, the main bulk of the text has the same anecdotal quality, held together by a veneer of the serious and sober, characteristic of Büttner and Oehlen's numerous co-authored essays from this period. Their texts are structured around the long-winded telling of stories from their daily lives, all of which is communicated in a comically dry, almost pedantic mode of address. The content of these subjective accounts of the artists' social and working lives is elevated to a position of uncommon prominence within the pages of an exhibition catalogue. If the "secret explainer" can be located anywhere, one would assume its likely home to be somewhere between the lines of the collaborative essay. Yet even in these pages, the verbal joke does not easily translate into the written narrative; the reader is given no guidance in the attempt to trace the recorded events back to their emergence in an instance of collective laughter.

In contrast to the essay's textual confusion and highlighting its arbitrariness, the artists included in the lower register of the pages a series of "serious" contributions from different writers, including Diederichsen, the theorist Nicola Reidenbach, the novelist Rainald Goetz and even the philosopher of science, Sir Karl Popper, appearing most likely without his knowledge or consent. Diederichsen and Goetz represent a second circle of involvement with the group dialogue; both of them were closely involved with

[35] "Besser eine Ohrfeige als ein falscher Kuss."

[36] Diedrich Diederichsen supported this assumption in conversation with the author in Philadelphia, 23 September 2005. He claims that Kippenberger only participated fleetingly in the catalogue production.

all of the artists at the time of the exhibition. Popper, on the other hand, could not be further removed from the group; a portion of his 1934 essay "Logik der Forschung" (Logic of Research) is reproduced here in what would seem to be the most inappropriate of venues.[37] Yet a perverse degree of connectivity cannot be overlooked: Popper's essay treats the question of certainty in scientific investigations. He argues that scientific objectivity leads unavoidably to the notion that "every scientific sentence is provisional."[38] We can only be certain about any of our observations on a subjective level, an idea that touches, however indirectly, on issues of relativism that crop up in the work of this generation. Furthermore, seen in this context, one might be led to question the very truth content of more rigorously analytical and scholarly writings from an intellectual like Popper. Of course no one will feel compelled to seriously doubt the validity of Popper's theories; ultimately, all of the textual material in the lower register serves merely to enhance the absurdity of the artists' own writings at the same time that it lends them a kind of dubious "credibility."

The highly artificial rubbing of shoulders with thinkers and other cultural producers operating in different spheres does not, of course, convincingly extend the studio conversation beyond the small-group context. One can, however, gain a sense from the invented dialogue that the artists thought of themselves as somehow implicated in a broader network of influences and ideas. The frequency with which they used their collaborative projects as a basis for situating their work imaginatively within a more public discursive space testifies to a need to move past the private domain. Their in-jokes

[37] For the book-length, English translation of the essay, see Sir Karl R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1959).

[38] Büttner, et al, *Wahrheit ist Arbeit*, 82; "…dass jeder wissenschaftliche Satz vorläufig ist."

functioned as bridges between these realms. Yet for all the moves in the direction of a more expansive conception of critical and aesthetic discourse, during this period from the early 1980s until around 1988, their group humor always circled back into the zone of the private laugh. And when the laughter was overtly public, it was, as Tom Holert has claimed, marked by "ironic detachment," as the artists "were putting each collective effort in bold quotation marks."[39]

The happy skepticism at the heart of these collaborative catalogue projects stands in marked contrast to the optimistic production of large, flashy exhibition publications during the 1980s. Several large-scale group exhibitions that sought to define modern and contemporary aesthetic positions, particularly in the realm of painting, were mounted in Germany and abroad in the first half of the decade. Exhibitions such as *Westkunst* in Cologne (1981), *Zeitgeist* in Berlin (1982) and *German Art in the 20th Century* in London and Stuttgart (1985) were blockbuster affairs that required sizable publications to match their ambitious agendas.[40] The innumerable exhibition catalogues and books produced by Kippenberger alone (at least 53 catalogues, not to mention an almost equal number of artist books, were published during his life[41]) could only be accomplished by lowering the expectations of scale. Small and intimate, with the immediate gratification of a short turnaround time, the books' qualities did not detract from their contribution to posterity. Diederichsen recognized the two-fold appeal of these objects for Kippenberger:

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[39] Tom Holert, "Blood of the Poets: The Tribal '80s," *Artforum* (March 2003), 276.

[40] See Laszlo Glozer, *Westkunst: zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939*, exh. cat. (Cologne: DuMont, 1981); Christos M. Joachimides and Norman Rosenthal, ed., *Zeitgeist*, exh. cat. (New York: George Braziller, 1983); Christos M. Joachimides, et al, ed., *German Art in the 20th Century: Painting and Sculpture, 1905-1985*, exh. cat. (Munich: Prestel, 1985).

[41] See Uwe Koch, ed., *Annotated Catalogue Raisonné of the Books by Martin Kippenberger, 1977-1997* (Cologne: Walther König, 2002).

"Producing his own catalogue meant that the mythological promise of immortality could also be consumed in the moment, a simultaneous having-and-eating of the cake."[42] Working collaboratively could only speed up the process.

Schizopullover: Rosemarie Trockel and Monika Sprüth

The visible presence of the single artist within the men's group thus remained strong throughout their most collaborative years. Their catalogues, invitations and posters frequently included photographs of the artists such that each figure maintained a high degree of individual subjectivity. By contrast, Rosemarie Trockel, while certainly not a recluse, cultivated an image of the artist located always at one remove from the core of the art scene. Beginning with her early phobic resistance to occupying an overtly public position, Trockel fashioned herself as something of an outsider at the same time that she actively sought exposure for her work. The result is that the boisterous group conversation and in-jokes of Kippenberger, Oehlen and their peers took on a less rowdy tone in the work of Trockel and her supporters. A greater emphasis on intimacy and the private, quiet utterance stood in opposition to the loud chuckles and backslapping of the masculine studio and bar culture. In the process, Trockel established a greater distance between her work, including its appearance in catalogues and promotional materials, and her person.

When Trockel teamed up with Monika Sprüth in the early 1980s, they were conscious of forming an alternative to other recently established galleries run by Max Hetzler (who showed the Büttner/Kippenberger/Oehlen group) and Paul Maenz (who represented artists from the Mülheimer Freiheit group). At the same time, as Trockel has

[42] Diedrich Diederichsen, "The Bookworm," in ibid., 8.

recently made clear, there was no seriously antagonistic relationship among the different galleries. Sprüth included members of the Mülheimer Freiheit in her first exhibition, held in the studio rooms she shared with Trockel, and a generally cooperative spirit prevailed even as the various players staked out their territories.[43] The formation of groups in 1980s Cologne has already been addressed in the previous chapter; here I want to point to Trockel's development within her images and objects of a distinct voice, one that presupposes a unique audience and is based less on competition with a group of peers. Jutta Koether has claimed that having studied at the Werkkunstschule (School of Applied Arts) in Cologne, Trockel was less inclined to compete with a "master," as was the case with male artists who had studied at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf or the Kunsthochschule in Hamburg.[44] The Werkkunstschule, a more crafts-based institution, was not known for producing artists that competed in the gallery scene, contributing to Trockel's sense of not belonging to the dominant groups.

The critic Isabelle Graw, one of Trockel's collaborators in the second half of the eighties, recently described the artist's early attitude toward self-positioning in the Cologne art scene: "To maintain contact and nevertheless tread a separate path—those are the two components that define Trockel's mode of action."[45] This characterization of

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[43] See "Rosemarie Trockel talks to Isabelle Graw," *Artforum* (March 2003), 224. For a short history of the Cologne art scene in the 1980s, see also Daniel Birnbaum, "Ripening on the Rhine: The Cologne Art World of the '80s" in the same issue of *Artforum* (216-221, 270, 272).

[44] Jutta Koether, "Out of Character: The Strategies for Visual Practice of a Female Artist in Germany," in Gregory Burke, ed., *Rosemarie Trockel*, exh. cat. (Wellington, New Zealand: City Gallery, 1993), 24.

[45] Isabelle Graw, "Der Faden ist nie gerissen: Fixe Ideen, Kunstbetrieb und Freundschaft," *Du* 725 (April 2002), 86; "Den Kontakt zu halten und dennoch einen

Trockel's career as an outsider on the inside track has been repeated numerous times during the past 25 years. In many ways, it is true that she has consciously and intelligently charted an individual course, but she has done so with considerable help from a tight network of supporters and fellow travelers. Most important has been her long-term relationship with her gallerist Sprüth, who had a knack for publicizing the work of her artists and thereby increasing her own visibility. An early instance of Sprüth's effective promotion of Trockel and other women artists was the series of three exhibitions, beginning in 1985, called *Eau de Cologne*, each of which was accompanied by a magazine of the same title.[46] Within the pages of the magazine, Sprüth and Trockel established a trans-Atlantic exchange with New York artists such as Jenny Holzer and Cindy Sherman, whose works were reproduced. A conversation among international women artists thus ensued, which was thematized in the first issue by a printed dialogue between Sprüth and Trockel. Toward the end of the discussion, Trockel comments that it is virtually impossible to solve the problem of wishing to take part in the art market while not wanting to be absorbed by it. She then questions whether men and women want the same thing.[47] For her part, Sprüth looks back to 1982, the year she founded her gallery, and explains that the goal was to operate somewhere between the successful women art dealers in New York (who, in her opinion, had too closely followed the male model) and

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Sonderweg zu beschreiten—das sind die beiden Komponenten, aus denen sich Trockels Vorgehensweise zusammensetzt."

[46] On the significance of this project within the Cologne art scene, see Holert, "Blood of the Poets: The Tribal '80s," 276.

[47] Monika Sprüth and Rosemarie Trockel, "Wollen Frauen und Männer eigentlich das gleiche"?, *Eau de Cologne* 1 (1985), not paginated.

the retreat by feminists in the 1970s into *Selbsterfahrung* (self-awareness).[48] Group dynamics were still actively pursued and shaped, but the previous decade's belief in the personal-as-political had come to seem untenable; a middle course was deemed the only acceptable option.

A work by Trockel from 1988 would appear to treat the sense of dividedness that she and Sprüth discuss in *Eau de Cologne*. A modified sweater, *Schizo-Pullover* is wider than the usual garment so that it can accommodate two holes for two heads (fig. 89). Produced after she had already initiated a series of wool paintings in 1985, the *Schizo-Pullover* no longer hangs on the wall and is not stretched in traditional fashion over a wood support. Now the object can be worn by two people or, at least on a conceptual level, contain the two sides of a single person's personality. On a page of the catalogue to Trockel's 1991 traveling retrospective, two photographs printed side-by-side illustrate the different possibilities for wearing the sweater. The right image contains two photographs of the head of Esther Schipper—another Cologne dealer and friend of Trockel and Sprüth—who had also founded a gallery in the early 1980s (fig. 90). Her portrait is manipulated to appear as if she were doubly occupying the space of the sweater. This is the recognizably classic variation on the theme of schizophrenia, where the afflicted person copes with multiple versions of the self. Schipper's blank, if slightly bemused, facial expression gives no indication that she finds her predicament either comical or horrible. If anything, she projects an image of self-possession that is at odds with the doubling of her subjectivity. And unlike the emphasis on the pathetic body and personal failure projected by Kippenberger, Trockel grants Schipper a humorous role that does not eschew elegance.

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[48] Ibid.

The image to the left speaks more directly to the question of Trockel's fostering of group dynamics. She and Schipper are pictured sharing the single, double-necked sweater, their heads floating above the fabric on the same level only inches apart (fig. 91). Again, there is no attempt to perform as clowns or indicate that they are suppressing laughter; the pose is adopted with completely straight faces. In fact, their serious expressions, combined with the dark monochrome of the sweater, recall numerous portraits of artists, not to mention dealers and critics, in the 1980s during the heyday of the art market boom, notably captured in the 8 x 10 glossy studio portraits parodied by David Robbins in his 1986 series *Talent* (fig. 92). In the catalogue photograph, Trockel and a dealer/collaborator are united physically to form a hybrid figure that might either triumph through their combined powers or implode due to the inherent conflicts that emerge between producer and agent.[49] Certainly the impact of the image was to strongly assert and reinforce their productive collaboration, despite the humorous overtones.

Trockel also took advantage of Monika Sprüth's willingness, or desire, to occupy a public and visible position in the artist's place within other works. One well-known photograph (fig. 93) shows Sprüth wearing Trockel's 1986 *Dress* while standing in front of an untitled wool painting from the same year. The "painting" and the dress are both made from the same knit fabric emblazoned with the repeated pattern of the international symbol for wool. In the photograph, Sprüth's head is seen in profile as her body, covered in the fabric with her hands out of view behind her back, appears to merge with the background. Countering the impression of two-dimensionality is the fact that the two wool symbols on the dress are place strategically over the wearer's chest; Sprüth's head

[49] Although Schipper was not Trockel's official representative, they worked together on several projects and generally maintained a supportive relationship during the early years of their emergence in the Cologne art scene.

and bosom are the two elements of her body that appear to emerge out of the flatness of the knit painting. The wool logo was appropriated by Trockel and ultimately transformed into a sign that her audience could associate with her extensive series of wool-based works. Sprüth thus takes an active role in the production of the work's meaning and reception, moving beyond the usual activities of selling, distributing and publicizing it from within the space of the gallery.

In an essay on Trockel's wool pictures, Peter Weibel describes the process by which she turns icons into logos: "By the very fact of using material and clothing designs as visual motifs, the picture is itself converted into a garment, and in the process the wearers themselves become pictures."[50] Trockel clearly encouraged such a reading by picturing Sprüth as occupying an ambiguous space between the painting and the garment, her physicality partially subsumed by both material elements. But just what kind of picture does Sprüth become? In one sense, her status as dealer and promoter is momentarily left behind as she slips into the position of model. Today Trockel is well known for including friends and assistants within her work, especially in the large number of video- and film-based pieces that she produced since the 1990s. In the early years of her career, it is perhaps only natural that she turned to Sprüth as a voluntary participant in projects that relied partly on photographic documentation to demonstrate their utilitarian side. At the same time, Trockel openly declares her close intellectual affiliation with Sprüth, who thereby exceeds her official capacity as business partner and promoter. An aspect of their behind-the-scenes, private working relationship is brought before the public eye.

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[50] Peter Weibel, "From Icon to Logo," in Wilfried Dickhoff, ed., *Rosemarie Trockel*, exh. cat. (Basel: Kunsthalle, 1988), 26.

There is an easily identifiable undercurrent of lighthearted laughter that defines these jointly produced images by Trockel and Sprüth. One can recognize the bonds of friendship that, as seen in the bar humor of Kippenberger and Oehlen, allowed for the day-to-day contacts conducive to brainstorming and spontaneous execution of ideas. During the years in which Trockel established herself as an internationally successful artist, she experimented with the exposure of portions of the ongoing dialogue that she and Sprüth had conducted since the beginning of the decade. Yet in spite of a few shared attitudes toward cooperation, their mode of collaboration is quite distinct from the in-jokes generated in exhibition catalogues by Kippenberger and his group of like-minded artists. Trockel consistently avoids the sophomoric, beery humor of the all-male *Bande*. Her humor moves more in the direction of a stealthy irony, a smart reshuffling of categories and expectations that plays with the language of how careers are built up and nurtured. Humor is at the heart of this language, but it is of a kind that relies less on self-aggrandizement or self-debasement. Although all of these artists pursued working relationships that ultimately make for a definitively social practice, their means of publicizing that social space differed significantly.

Diedrich Diederichsen: Keeper of the Anecdote

The tight circles that were formed among the male artists required a second ring of support in order to convey their ideas to the public. While it is obvious that the role of art critics in disseminating an artist's work to the general public is pivotal, the relationship between Kippenberger, Oehlen and a small group of art critics presents a noteworthy situation of co-dependency. Indeed, one of the most effective routes by which they and

their group of collaborators drew attention to themselves was through the cooperation of a small group of increasingly influential critics. Through the ongoing support of these writers, who themselves benefited significantly from the connection with the artists, the latter were able to enter the West German art world and situate themselves firmly in the marketplace. Operating as much like apologists as critical analysts, these writers need to be considered as semi-collaborators. It is through their efforts that the artists' in-jokes could be translated for a wider audience.

In particular, Diedrich Diederichsen, but also Martin Prinzhorn, Roberto Ohrt and Wilfried Dickhoff, have written a steady stream of reflections on the artists, often repeating their anecdotes and thus cementing the stories of works' origins firmly in the public record. Keeping in step with the loose, shifting nature of the artists' own alliances, the critics never took on any official status of collaborative support in, say, the manner of the art historian Charles Harrison's partial "membership" in the British collective Art & Language.[51] Nonetheless, they made their contribution indispensable. Their brand of critical reception has functioned as genuinely nuanced interpretation of the works; indeed, reading Diederichsen on Kippenberger and Oehlen grants insight into the production of the objects that no writer who was not personally present during the work's creation can match. At the same time, their writing takes on a critical, distanced tone, allowing the reader to forget how close they actually were to the production of the work. There are moments when it seems that the two lines of interest—the objectively critical and the market-driven—intersect to cast doubt on the writers' capacity for unbiased critical appraisal.

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[51] See Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001) and *Conceptual Art and Painting: Further Essays on Art & Language* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

Diederichsen's history of writing about Kippenberger and Oehlen offers the most cogent example of how the critic moves in and out of the role of a friend versus that of an interpreter operating at a distance. It would, of course, be absurd to suggest that any critic who had personal ties to an artist should be expected to suppress biases toward the work that stem from the bonds of friendship and social exchange. But Diederichsen's presence within the general reception of Kippenberger and Oehlen has been so extensive that there are few major catalogues of their work from the 1980s or early 1990s that do not contain one of his essays.[52] Furthermore, his analyses of their work have been published at regular intervals since their earliest exhibitions with the result that he has heavily shaped their critical positions within the German and international contexts. For artistic practices that are grounded so firmly in the cultivation of in-jokes and anecdotes, it has been particularly beneficial for the artists to have a writer at their disposal who could serve as a not-so-secret explainer. The impression given is that the meaning embedded in the artists' work cannot be conveyed by anyone but a *Mitstreiter*, or comrade-in-arms, familiar with the group conversation that initially led to a painting or a sculpture. Part of the critic's skill here lies in building up an interpretive model that reveals previously unseen aspects of the work while convincing the reader that this ability does not require a privileged position.

For a 1995 exhibition by Oehlen and the American artist Christopher Williams at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, Diederichsen contributed an essay

[52] In a conversation with the author (Philadelphia, 23 September 2005), Diederichsen explained that he is currently at work on a monograph on Martin Kippenberger. His motivation for the project was a comment by Albert Oehlen, who said that only Diederichsen could adequately convey the anecdotal origins of Kippenberger's works.

concentrating strictly on Oehlen's paintings of the early 1990s.[53] By this time, in contrast to his media-derived images produced during most of the previous decade, the artist had moved in the direction of abstract painting.[54] However, he did not leave behind his collage-based aesthetic; now the layers of references to recognizable images and motifs had shifted toward a play with styles from the repertoire of modern painting (fig. 94). Diederichsen first describes Oehlen's avoidance of a hierarchical structure in the compositions. Three paintings from a 1990 series are illustrated in the exhibition catalogue to demonstrate the point (fig. 95, 96 and 97). Vaguely biomorphic, hard-edged forms overlap with each other and share space with looser, more "painterly" brushwork. As in the work of his teacher, Sigmar Polke, styles as diverse as Cubism, Surrealism, expressionism and Pop all receive equal attention in Oehlen's archeological reassessment of modern painting. The multiple signs themselves are not the issue; instead, according to Diederichsen, one needs to concentrate on the "distinctions among them."[55] These distinctions are understood to be the features that resist hierarchy. The remainder of the essay consists of Diederichsen's own ruminations on a series of seemingly disconnected cultural products: a film directed by John Ford, record album by bands and musicians as

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[53] Diedrich Diederichsen, "Triumphs, Setbacks, Rear Exits, and Cease Fires: Some Aesthetic Issues Concerning Albert Oehlen, and Some Architectural and Musical Comparisons," in Catherine Gudis, ed., *Oehlen Williams 95*, exh. cat. (Columbus, OH: Wexner Center for the Arts, 1995), 102-117.

[54] Since this dissertation concentrates on the 1980s, I will not explain in detail the change in Oehlen's work from an overtly figurative style to one with a more abstract idiom. However, it is important to point out that his work has only rarely moved into relatively pure abstraction. The presence of recognizably figurative motifs merely jostled for space with or receded behind more abstract elements.

[55] Diederichsen, "Triumphs, Setbacks, Rear Exits, and Cease Fires," 102.

diverse as The Melvins and Archie Shepp, a mosque from 15th-century Córdoba in Spain, and the city of Los Angeles.

These thoroughly isolated cultural manifestations collectively allow Diederichsen to develop his theories about Oehlen's early-1990s painting without actually having to describe the works themselves. Several paintings are illustrated elsewhere in the catalogue, and one small black-and-white reproduction is placed within Diederichsen's essay alongside the cover of a Melvins album, views of Córdoba and aerial shots of Los Angeles. In general, however, Diederichsen demonstrates rather than explains Oehlen's work by way of analogies, effectively constructing an art-critical, text-based version of Oehlen's painterly practice, or at least an idea of what this might look like. Diederichsen came to writing art criticism after already establishing himself as a music editor and critic for the German magazines *Sounds* and *Spex*. His interests in new wave, jazz and experimental music led him to construct a critical voice that could come close to matching the freedom of stylistic movement associated with the music he championed. A sentence from a short biography that appeared at the front of a collection of essays published by Diederichsen in 1993 sums up his approach: "Since 1979 Diedrich Diederichsen has written about pop music and related fields with the aim of combining the closest proximity to his object with theoretical and political reflection."[56] The notion of proximity is crucial here in more ways than one. On the one hand, Diederichsen presents himself as a knowledgeable, sympathetic interpreter of Oehlen's work, someone who works in a similar vein and is capable of demonstrating by example how the painter

[56] See the biography page at the front of Diedrich Diederichsen, *Freiheit macht arm: Das Leben nach Rock'n' Roll, 1990-93* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1993); "Seit 1979 schreibt Diedrich Diederichsen über Pop-Musik und benachbarte Gebiete mit dem Anspruch, größtmögliche Nähe zu seinem Gegenstand mit theoretischer und politischer Reflexion zu verbinden."

constructs his images; the writer arrives at the pictures having already truly comprehended what went into their making. At the same time, Diederichsen claims a degree of expertise that only comes through the employment of like-minded practical strategies. He thus establishes a niche for himself as the ideal respondent to paintings that often baffle unfamiliar viewers.

In being situated both near and distant to the object, Diederichsen becomes indispensable as a respondent, allowing him to shape the reception of the artists' work such that he also benefits. In the final paragraph of the essay, Diederichsen argues that his approach, as well as the painting style of Oehlen, have the potential to reorder power relations: "The painting of distinctions (not understood as having a metaphorical or allegorical relation to anything in the world) represents the representability and attainability of power relations beyond those which exist and can be identified. This allows one to imagine other relations, to deal with existing ones differently, as well as offering protection from them."[57] More than a mere interpretive model for the paintings of a specific artist, Diederichsen's method of elaborating "distinctions" has political overtones and almost functions as a practical guide for daily living. Oehlen's painting, and by implication Diederichsen's writing, would appear to have therapeutic value: "The more distinctions appear as art, the stronger the user becomes in dealing with everything else."[58] Going beyond an explication of a complex image-making practice, the text attempts to show how the critic can pass on skills useful in interpreting culture in an everyday context.

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[57] Diederichsen, "Triumphs, Setbacks, Rear Exits, and Cease Fires," 116-117.

[58] Ibid., 117.

As with most of Diederichsen's critical writing, in this essay a pronounced playfulness and vernacular tone merges with one of a more theoretical, scholarly nature. It is satisfying to read, by turns surprising and convincing, and it does pursue a fairly ambitious goal: to reinvigorate art-critical writing with political clout after the decadent 1980s, as well as to promote a serious reading of an artist associated in many people's minds—for many American visitors to the Wexner Center, this would have been their first encounter—with the excesses of that decade. Diederichsen presents himself here not so much as the "secret explainer" of enigmatic paintings, but as a sympathizer who operates in similar ways, who is ideally situated to perform an analysis of the works based on his own style of writing. And by offering a compelling example of a writing of "distinctions," he implies that such a painting practice is equally valuable. In other words, by telling his own "story" he tells the story of the artist. Having met each other in Hamburg in the late 1970s, Diederichsen and Oehlen had developed their respective styles while they were in frequent dialogue with each other. Oehlen's own serious investment in music as the member of several bands and, later, as the founder of a small recording label meant that the two shared many interests.[59] Although the critic here does not project the kind of intimate, interpersonal collaboration shared by fellow artists, Diederichsen is not far removed from the group conversation.

For Diederichsen, the names of artists, musicians, record albums, cities, architects, etc., that fill his essay are not unlike the references to styles of modern painting that jostle for space in Oehlen's canvases. Names call up associations that escape

[59] Some of the musical groups to which Oehlen has belonged are the Alma Band (with Kippenberger), Red Krayola, and, most recently, Van Oehlen (with his brother Markus Oehlen). His publishing label is called Wendy Gondeln, and he has produced cover art for several other bands.

the set of ideas circumscribed by the theme of the essay while they simultaneously reinforce it. In his 1992 essay for an exhibition by Büttner, Kippenberger and Oehlen entitled *Malen ist Wahlen* (To Paint Is to Choose [or Vote]), Diederichsen describes how names had operated within the tangled web of texts in the *Wahrheit ist Arbeit* catalogue: "Names, however, are not just on the one hand precise and on the other hand extraneous descriptions; beyond that they are pretty simple signs."[60] Despite their apparent arbitrariness, the usefulness of the names is clear for Diederichsen and the artists: they offer "short and direct routes"[61] to their reference points. What may look like utter randomness to the uninitiated reader is based on concrete and identifiable decisions that stem from collaboration; the critic was present as the studio or bar conversation took place.

Diederichsen's final sentence in the essay comes close to summing up these artists' working methods of the mid-1980s. He describes how the semantics of the catalogue breaks down under the pressure of name-dropping run amok. Fortunately, we are able to leave the text and move back to painting, which "turns into a language itself that can attain all other effects of language on its own, especially the one that is decisive here: unconditional access for everyone and total hermeticism at the same time."[62] Diederichsen, as the consummate insider/outsider, can recognize both aspects of the

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[60] Diedrich Diederichsen, "Virtueller Maoismus: Das Wissen von 1984," in Werner Büttner, Martin Kippenberger, Albert Oehlen, *Malen ist Walen*, exh. cat. (Munich: Kunstverein München, 1992), 38; "Namen sind aber nicht nur einerseits präzise und andererseits überschüssige Bezeichnungen, darüber hinaus sind sie ziemlich einfache Zeichen."

[61] Ibid.; "…kurze und direkte Wege."

[62] Ibid.; "…selber zu einer Sprache werden, die alle anderen Effekte der Sprache aus eigener Kraft erzielen kann, und insbesondere den hier entscheidenden: voraussetzungslosen Zugang für jedermann und totale Hermetik zur gleichen Zeit."

group's semantic juggling act. He can retrace the specifics of the naming process, including the occasionally arcane terminology of in-jokes, while acknowledging how the viewer might experience it all as a hermetically sealed system closed to non-participants. In the end, however, the paintings are the paintings and the in-joke is the in-joke. They may occasionally cross paths, but there are no guarantees that this will happen.

Isabelle Graw: The Model Critic

Diederichsen's personal presence in these catalogues was carried out strictly on the level of his textual contribution. He is not pictured physically within any of the major publications to which he contributes as a writer. A somewhat different situation emerged in the late 1980s in the relationship between Rosemarie Trockel and the critic and editor Isabelle Graw. In her early and steady support of Trockel's work, Graw has never shied away from publicly acknowledging that the two were connected by friendship, which has included a willingness on her part to appear physically within a few of Trockel's works. Her role as critic extends beyond that of respondent to an active participant in the creative process.

Perhaps the most famous of their collaborations is the mock advertisement Trockel produced in reference to the Uli Knecht line of fashionable clothing in 1989 (fig. 98). Graw stands firmly at the center of Trockel's untitled photomontage produced to resemble a then-current ad campaign for the company. Its slogan, "Male-Tested Fashions," is positioned to the right above Graw's head and next to a portrait of the designer, who was known for his suavely masculine appearance. Graw balances on one foot in a highly artificial pose; her left hand is on her thigh, the right hand holding up a

folded shirt by Knecht to suggest self-confidence and forward motion. The wide grin on Graw's face reveals the pleasure that went into the image's making and signals that the project was intended as a transparent gag; no one would mistake the faked ad for an appropriation that seriously aims to subvert the Knecht brand. The image also looks back to collages by Hannah Höch (fig. 99) and Kurt Schwitters (fig. 100) that play on the image of the German "New Woman" of the interwar years.[63]

Graw also posed for a photograph that was used for the cover of the third and final issue of *Eau de Cologne* (fig. 101) in 1989.[64] Sporting the same short, modish haircut, she wears a dark, monochrome sweater and pants made from what appears to be knit-wool fabric. Around her waist and upper left arm are two wool bands with the name of the magazine and the issue number stitched into their surfaces. Graw has made the transition here to cover girl, this time with a more serious facial expression and self-confident, relaxed posture. There is little irony evident in this image, and Graw could easily pass for a professional model. As a magazine, short-lived as it was, dedicated to showing the work of women artists, *Eau de Cologne* offered a visible platform for Graw, at the time a young critic and journalist who in the following year would co-found the journal *Texte zur Kunst* with the art historian Stefan Germer. This open mode of collaboration would seem to contradict the model of the critic as distanced observer and

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[63] See Maria Makela, "By Design: The Early Work of Hannah Höch in Context," in Maria Makela and Peter Boswell, ed., *The Photomontages of Hannah Höch*, exh. cat. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1996), 49-79; Dorothea Dietrich, "Love as Commodity: Kurt Schwitters's Collages of Women," in Naomi Sawelson-Gorse, ed., *Women in Dada: Essays on Sex, Gender, and Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 206-239.

[64] Cover of *Eau de Cologne* 3 (1989).

neutral evaluator, but it fits comfortably into the tribal art world of Cologne in the late 1980s.

Graw, born in 1962, entered the art scene at a moment when the public acknowledgement of her cooperative and friendly relationship with Trockel could be read as part of the recent history of women artists' attempts to form visible and productive working communities. Trockel's own collaboration with Sprüth profited from the advances made by feminist artists in the 1970s, though both artist and gallerist have always resisted being classified as politically involved with feminism. Trockel's well-known remark in a 1987 interview with Jutta Koether sums up her attitude toward an art that overtly thematizes women's issues: "Art about women's art is just as tedious as the art of men about men's art. Sniping at madonnas is as questionable as the eternal citing of the *Black Square* by Malevich."[65] Despite such assertions distancing themselves from an overtly feminist practice, Trockel and her friends consistently treated the position of women in the Cologne art world as subject matter for their work. By producing a limited-run, but locally well-circulated, magazine focusing on women artists, the artist, the dealer and the critic all come together to contradict Lawrence Alloway's assessment from five years earlier of publications devoted to women's art: "The ephemeral literature of feminism, the various newsletters, are tightly beamed to an internal audience: they perform a service for their readers, but do not deal in more widely usable concepts."[66] These remarks are no doubt debatable, but that is not what makes them pertinent to my discussion. Although Alloway is referring here to the situation in the United States, his

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[65] Jutta Koether, "Interview with Rosemarie Trockel," *Flash Art* 134 (May 1987), 42.

[66] Lawrence Alloway, "Women's Art and the Failure of Art Criticism," in *Network: Art and the Complex Present* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1984), 291.

comments are relevant to Cologne of the 1980s, where women in the art world had to contend with macho painters and male dealers whose artists were drinking buddies as much as they were business partners. At the same time, the small scale of the Cologne scene in comparison with that of New York or London meant that a publication like *Eau de Cologne* would automatically be noticed.

Graw's appearance on the cover of the magazine was as much an act of self-promotion as it was a gesture of support for an artist-friend. As Pierre Bourdieu points out, "critics never defend the interests of their clientele as sincerely and hence as effectively as when they defend their own interests against their adversaries."[67] Graw's own adversaries would be, on the one hand, the old-boy network of neo-expressionist painters and dealers who championed their work. On the other, she is clearly competing with other women critics who might be attempting to carve out a niche in the West German art-publishing world. During her almost 20-year career, Graw has not been afraid to openly discuss the friendships and alliances that have inspired and nurtured her own work.[68] For a 2002 issue of the Swiss art magazine *Du* dedicated to the work of Trockel, Graw discussed "obsessions, the art industry and friendship."[69] She begins by "admitting" that the two are friends, which, she claims, is not unusual between critics and artists: "The [friendships] are rather the rule, but these friendships are almost never

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[67] Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 163.

[68] The most recent such example is the issue of *Texte zur Kunst* dedicated to the theme of love, in which Graw and other contributors, in response to a poll, speculate about the role that personal, intimate relationships play in their working lives. See *Texte zur Kunst* 52 (December 2003), 119-129. Two of the published responses questioned the relevance of the question itself in the pages of a critical art journal.

[69] Isabelle Graw, "Der Faden ist nie gerissen: Fixe Ideen, Kunstbetrieb und Freundschaft," *Du* 725 (April 2002), 58-60, 86.

mentioned in the texts of critics."[70] Before moving on to the importance of drawing in Trockel's practice, Graw acknowledges that some of the themes she has written about over the years in relation to the artist's work emerged directly out of their conversations. Looking back on several major "obsessions" (Graw uses the French term, *idée fixe*) that turn up repeatedly in Trockel's work (beauty vs. ugliness, drawing as a "meta-medium," the pronounced plurality of modes of artistic expression, the role of the fetish, among others), she summarizes Trockel's general working method as pendular in relation to the social groupings of the art world: "To maintain contact and nevertheless tread one's own path."[71] This is arguably the consensus viewpoint within most critical writing on Trockel; reading this article by Graw reminds us of how great a role she herself has played in shaping the artist's reception.

Finally, Graw uses the article as an opportunity to give some of her own "friendly" advice, which she feels entitled to proffer based on her own involvement in the social network that Trockel has always maintained. Graw returns to the idée fixe in order to make the case that Trockel's recent work is too concerned with making "commentaries on art history."[72] Instead, Graw recommends a concentrated move back in the direction of the personal obsession, which, in any case, "remains embedded in aesthetic conventions."[73] One could certainly understand such advice as deriving from the balanced judgment of someone with a long history of looking at the work, someone who

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[70] Ibid., 58; "Sie sind vielmehr die Regel, nur finden diese Freundschaften in den Texten der Kritiker so gut wie nie Erwähnung."

[71] Ibid., 86; "Den Kontakt zu halten und dennoch einen Sonderweg zu beschreiten."

[72] Ibid.; "…Kommentare zur Kunstgeschichte…."

[73] Ibid.,; "…in ästhetische Konventionen eingebettet bleibt."

recognizes the artist's tendencies to latch onto certain themes or shift back and forth between conceptual positions. Yet Graw's emphasis on the idée fixe might reveal something about her own relationship to Trockel's work. The latter's obsessions, the kinds of subjects and materials that have come to be associated with her work, operate on the terrain of the unusual and unexpected; they are thus illegible for many members of her international audience.[74] The idiosyncratic side of Trockel's aesthetic has always been tempered just enough by intelligible references to the history of art, which, Graw might agree, have kept her work from becoming trapped in the German-speaking realm. The art-historical points of orientation are what have allowed Trockel to speak more directly to a wider, transnational public. With the emphasis on this aspect of the artist's aesthetic, the well informed, insider critic has less to offer in the way of explanatory models. By urging Trockel to re-channel her energies in the direction of the idée fixe, one wonders whether Graw was not again acting in her own interest as the critic who can best shed light on the artist's obscure art. The essay that takes stock of the history of a working relationship is of course simultaneously propelling the dialogue into the future.

Limitations of Audience Construction

This chapter has explored the first instances of audience formation as it developed at close proximity to the artist's working context. The critics and colleagues discussed above occasionally took on a collaborative role that guaranteed their friendly reception of the artists' works. A more broad-based analysis of global trends in the contemporary art

[74] Reviews of Trockel's work in the non-German context often point to the difficult time had by the local public in trying to decipher the images and objects. For one such example, see Rachel Withers's review of Trockel's 1999 exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, *Artforum* (March 1999), 110. In England, writes Withers, Trockel's "success has failed to translate."

market and exhibition circuit would be required in order to form a picture of the general public that has encountered these artists in galleries in museums—well after the exchanges in studios and bars that stimulated the works' production. The following chapter will discuss the next circle of reception by focusing on some of the early negative critical reactions to the artists' exhibitions. What will be become clear in comparing these different positions is that the reception of humor depends entirely on the audience's predisposition to the joke's upsetting of communicative codes. The sociologist Arthur Asa Berger has used the term "jokemes" to describe the smallest elements of the joke's structure.[75] When the audience fails to understand or, equally relevant, *accept* the incongruous alignment of the jokemes, the work invariably falls flat.

It is worth reiterating here the seemingly obvious idea that even if the intended humor is understood, sympathetic laughter is never a guaranteed result. Nor, of course, is it always the goal. For artists like Kippenberger, who employed humor's most aggressive tactics—satire, ridicule and parody—reactions of shock and offense were expected and encouraged. Once he had become known for provocation, Kippenberger's public was conditioned to identify a given work's jokemes in relation to how they formed incongruities that might cause offense. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, his daily art practice fed on the adverse responses of his public, particularly those close enough to his place in the German art world to recognize the workings and effects of his humor. Kippenberger's jokes, as we have seen, could be highly legible, though sometimes the legibility was constructed specifically for a relatively narrow public. The exclusion of a large part of the possible audience rests on what reception theorist Hans Robert Jauss has

[75] Arthur Asa Berger, "Anatomy of the Joke," *Journal of Communication* 26, no. 3 (Summer 1976), 114.

called the "comic of the counterimage."[76] The comic's "counterimage" enables an act of negation. Jauss argues that the act of "comparing is itself clearly part of the process of reception: the person who does not know or fails to recognize what a given comic hero negates need not find him comic."[77] One can imagine that part of Kippenberger's international appeal derives from the uncertain valences of his jokes; it is not always immediately obvious to the viewer whether he or she has sufficiently grasped the humor.

In the case of Kippenberger's more overtly opaque jokes, especially the series of paintings and the group-motivated in-jokes, he allowed for a great deal of flexibility in interpretation. This is one way of explaining his recent posthumous popularity, since it can hardly be the case that all the collectors currently competing for his works are attuned to the specifics of his humor. Jauss has made a useful point in relation to the history of interpretations of canonical literary works: "If the literary text is taken primarily as an answer, or if the later reader is primarily seeking an answer in it, this by no means implies that the author himself has formulated an explicit answer in his work."[78] Identifying authorial intent in the work of this generation of German artists is certainly a hazardous endeavor; often the works were produced so quickly as to allow little time for reflection on their subsequent reception. On the other hand, any claims for the complete arbitrariness of meaning in their work must be immediately rejected.[79] In the end, the

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[76] Hans Robert Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 191.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, 69.

[79] Wolfgang Iser argues that even in cases of "relative indeterminacy," the interaction between reader and text "cannot be called arbitrary." See *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1978), 24.

artists could continue to produce works with a high degree of semantic playfulness because there were enough loyal critics capable of reading them for an uninitiated audience.

Chapter 6—Alienation and the Hazards of Joking

To laugh at something is always to deride it, and the life which, according to Bergson, in laughter breaks through the barrier, is actually an invading barbaric life, self-assertion prepared to parade its liberation from any scruple when the social occasion arises. Such a laughing audience is a parody of humanity.[1]

Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno

Jokes and *Schadenfreude*

The above rebuke to the laughing audience discounts the notion that one might innocently enjoy a cruel or inappropriate joke. The teller of the joke is not the only party guilty of an ethical offense, of becoming a "parody of humanity." Horkheimer and Adorno's comments, which appear in the context of their critique of mass entertainment in the "culture industry,"[2] shed stark light on the other half of the joke equation: no gag functions without a willing receiving party. Writing during World War II, when members of the Frankfurt School raised questions about the culpability of individual citizens in the crimes of totalitarian regimes, Horkheimer and Adorno examined the extent to which the audience is complicit in any given instance of mean-spirited humor. As Martin Jay has pointed out in his discussion of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the theorists believed that the "only laughter permitted by the culture industry was the derisiveness of *Schadenfreude*, laughing at the misfortunes of others."[3]

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[1] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1999), 141.

[2] Horkheimer and Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in ibid., 120-167.

[3] Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), 216.

To apply their ideas to West German artists of the 1980s may be somewhat anachronistic, but they provide a useful model in moving from the reception of the joke by friendly critics to its reception by a wider audience in this chapter. For a generation of artists who experienced political resignation, the adoption of a frequently aggressive comedic mode must be understood as a deliberate choice in interacting with the public. As I will explain in the following, despite the ability of the artists to develop a sympathetic cohort willing to share in the *Schadenfreude*, others began to express their displeasure as the jokes shifted from arcane insider humor to a more public register. The protests against the culture industry by the Frankfurt School had not entirely disappeared in the 1980s, but some called for a new set of terms. In his preface to *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Peter Sloterdijk declared that it was time to redirect critique toward "temperaments" in order to avoid the "melancholy" of Critical Theory.[4] He wrote, "The critique of cynical reason hopes to achieve more from a work that cheers us up, whereby it is understood from the beginning that it is not so much a matter of work but rather of relaxation."[5] Such a critical stance accords with an artistic practice that places a premium on having a good time while taking humorously critical jabs at the art world and contemporary society.

Having explored the insider humor of the studio conversations, here I want to concentrate on the development of an antagonistic public and the works of art that contained malicious elements. As the reputations of the artists grew, some members of the critical establishment in Germany began to voice protest against the jokes that most

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[4] Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), xxxvii.

[5] Ibid.

obviously relied on *Schadenfreude*. The disputed works were directed at sensitive targets as they left behind the coded language of the in-joke, opting instead for highly legible signs to provoke the spectator. Locating the thought behind the joke appeared to require a less strenuous effort of interpretation, even if the artists did not always agree with the critics' readings. Writing on the effects of jokes, humor theorist Elliott Oring has drawn on Freud's claim that a thought always precedes a joke. Oring agrees up to a point with Freud's position, but there is more to joke comprehension than simply declaring that the thought is the point of origin. Oring builds on Freud's theory by claiming that in the process of dissecting a joke, "we have no choice but to start with the joke and search for the thought."[6] The difference between the in-joke and the widely understood joke centers on this question of locating the motivating thought. When the thought is readily accessible, the hurtful side of humor is difficult to overlook.

"The Artist as Exemplary Alcoholic"

It is a truism that the telling of jokes can quickly lapse into an endorsement of the dominant order. As philosopher and humor theorist Simon Critchley writes, "Most of the best jokes are fairly reactionary or, at best, simply serve to reinforce social consensus."[7] This is an aspect of Kippenberger's practice that certain of his critics perceived to be the sole impact of his work. The laddish, boisterous humor characteristic of the work of Kippenberger and his colleagues was bound, if not always intended, to offend sectors of his public. Indeed, part of his program involved clumsily prodding exactly those places

[6] Elliott Oring, *Engaging Humor* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 29.

[7] Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 11.

that were most sensitive at any given moment. His *Ich kann beim besten Willen kein Hakenkreuz entdecken* (Try as I Might, I Cannot Find a Swastika; fig. 49) of 1984 was produced at a moment when public discussions around the topic of the Holocaust were increasing in visibility and frequency in West Germany, culminating two years later during the *Historikerstreit* (historians' debate) that was conducted in large-circulation newspapers.[8] Andreas Huyssen points out that the *Historikerstreit* must be understood as having taken place in the years following Helmut Kohl's election in 1982, which constituted a second conservative *Tendenzwende* that is one of the defining features of the 1980s.[9] Kippenberger had a fine-tuned sense for engaging topics that were beginning to enter the public consciousness, but which were not yet fully formed and on the minds of the average citizen. Of course, it would be difficult for a German artist to create a work that addresses the topic of National Socialism without it being read as provocative, regardless of current events. Still, Kippenberger's timing should not be ignored. Though references to German fascism appear occasionally throughout his career, it was not one of his primary leitmotifs.

In the context of his *Männerbund*, Kippenberger was the artist who most definitively wanted to have it both ways: to display a healthy skepticism toward art's ability to promote authenticity, yet to leave open enough room for an artist to express himself directly and without apology. This could take place within the image or object,

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[8] This debate emerged in the summer of 1986 after several rightwing historians, Ernst Nolte being the most vocal among them, argued that the Holocaust was not a unique event. They attempted to link it to crimes committed by the Soviet Union under Stalin and thereby "normalize" and redefine it as just one of numerous modern "mistakes." For a collection of essays in English on both sides of the argument, see *New German Critique* 44 (Spring/Summer 1988), "Special Issue on the *Historikerstreit*."

[9] See Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 212.

but his mode of verbal address in public situations was, by all accounts, full of aggression toward others as much as it stemmed from a need to laugh at himself. Despite the reliable and ongoing support of his and Oehlen's work by a core group of critics, their quasi-collaborators could not prevent a growing number of other writers from taking exception in the late 1980s and early 1990s to the artists' tightrope walk between light-hearted wit and belligerent insult. Especially after Kippenberger and Oehlen definitively established themselves as key players in the West German and international art scenes of the 1980s, voices of resistance began to be raised toward the end of the decade.[10]

In a 1988 issue of the German art magazine *Kunstforum* dedicated to the "artistic reception of national-socialist symbols and aesthetics," the editors placed Oehlen's 1984 "portrait" of Adolf Hitler (fig. 69) on the cover.[11] Heinz Schütz, a regular contributor to the publication, wrote the issue's title essay, which seeks to situate what the editors claimed was a resurgence of fascist imagery in West German art of the 1980s.[12] One section of the article is dedicated to the history of the swastika, a symbol that has appeared in numerous cultures around the world. This fact, the author argues, is unknown to many Germans, who seem to have absorbed the National Socialist myth that the sign was adapted directly from the Aryan culture of India.[13] He then posits that the younger

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[10] Though Büttner was also targeted, Kippenberger and Oehlen were the most visible of the three, so I focus on a few specific texts that questioned their work. Herold, for his part, kept just enough distance from the bullying tactics to remain relatively immune to charges of insensitivity.

[11] See *Kunstforum International* 95 (June/July 1988).

[12] Heinz Schütz, "Transformation und Wiederkehr: Zur künstlerischen Rezeption nationalsozialistischer Symbole und Ästhetik," *Kunstforum International* 95 (June/July 1988), 64-98.

[13] Ibid., 69.

generation of artists does not treat "real fascism" as a theme, but rather its "mediation" in public.[14] For Schütz, this represents a dangerous development: Oehlen's Hitler portrait is described as occupying a "cynical-aggressive balancing act."[15] His *Morgenlicht fällt ins Führerhauptquartier* (Morning Light Falls in the Führer's Headquarters; fig. 66) of 1982 and Kippenberger's *Ich kann beim besten Willen…* are also mentioned by Schütz as examples of the artists' "naïve-blind" gaze that allows them to deal with political reality without having to be concerned with its political implications.[16]

Schütz's comments on Oehlen and Kippenberger appear amid commentary on several other German artists, somewhat blunting the impact of the critique. Furthermore, a closer look at their work would suggest that their "balancing act" and political ambiguity are carried out as conscious strategies. This does not remove the taint of cynicism, but Schütz's remarks do not rise to the level of a vicious personal attack. A far more vocal and focused critic of their group was the writer and curator Wolfgang Max Faust, whose essay "The Artist as Exemplary Alcoholic" appeared in the magazine *Wolkenkratzer* (Skyscraper) in 1989.[17] Here Faust accused Kippenberger and his colleagues of being misogynistic and homophobic, particularly in their work of the mid-to-late 1980s. Although his critique takes up only two pages of the magazine, Faust's remarks are pointed and more thoroughly based on the artists' public personas. Since so much of Kippenberger and Oehlen's work from the 1980s was reliant upon self-

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[14] Ibid., 70.

[15] Ibid.; "zynisch-aggressive Schwebelage."

[16] Ibid.

[17] Wolfgang Max Faust, "Der Künstler als exemplarischer Alkoholiker," *Wolkenkratzer Art Journal* 3 (May/June 1989), 20-21.

promotion through photographs in art magazines and physical appearances in bars and exhibition spaces, Faust chose a vulnerable target.

Faust begins by looking back to the "New Cynicism" of the early 1980s, a time when the sarcasm of Büttner, Kippenberger and Oehlen could still possess a "liberating energy."[18] It must be remembered that Faust was well known in Germany as a supporter of the late-1970s return to painting by the *Neue Wilde*; his book *Hunger nach Bildern* (Hungry for pictures) attempted to include Kippenberger, Oehlen and Büttner within this newly receptive environment for figurative painting.[19] For Faust, Kippenberger is the single artist who most rapidly and completely descended into the tired repetition of weak ideas, leading the writer to conclude that all cynics are ultimately "cowards."[20] Kippenberger is compared with his friend Günther Förg, whose own work frequently flirted with the iconography of fascism, though without making use of humor as a distancing mechanism. Faust accuses Kippenberger of attempting to justify in the press Förg's notorious drunken play with fascist gestures and slogans in the bars of Cologne. Like Förg, Kippenberger's superficial radicalism belies his conservatism: "Behind Kippenberger's shrill, anarchistic façade, a reactionary who repeatedly displays the same prejudices becomes visible. Cynicism changes suddenly into boredom, which clings from gag to gag, dirty joke to dirty joke."[21] Faust is uninterested in exploring the paintings and

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[18] Ibid., 20; "befreiende Energie."

[19] Wolfgang Max Faust and Gerd de Vries, *Hunger nach Bildern* (Cologne: DuMont, 1982).

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid., 21; "Hinter Kippenbergers aufgekratzt anarchistischer Oberfläche wird ein Reaktionär sichtbar, der immer wieder dieselben Vorurteile vorführt. Zynismus schlägt um in eine Langeweile, die sich von Gag zu Gag, Zote zu Zote hangelt."

sculptures that Kippenberger was producing at the time; by the late 1980s, his public persona loomed so large in the West German art world that it was enough to take him to task for utterances recorded in interviews.[22]

As much as Faust's critique is justified, it is typical in its dismissal of the formal qualities of the works themselves in favor of the same anecdotal approach adopted by the artist's supporters. In his usual manner of translating life into work, Kippenberger quickly replied to Faust with his 1989 self-portrait sculpture series, *Martin, ab in die Ecke und schäm Dich* (Martin, Into the Corner, You Should Be Ashamed of Yourself; fig. 102). In each version, a life-size statue of the artist stands with his hands behind his back facing the corner of the room. Six versions were produced, each with a slightly different look; in one, the face and head are colored red to indicate his shame, in another the head is formed out of translucent resin in which cigarette butts have been suspended (they vary in material from cast resin to wood to bronze). The artist presents himself as someone whose own worst habits form a permanently visible feature of his physical makeup. At the same time, he has co-opted Faust's critique and treated it as just one more inspiration that derives from the press, leading to another round of in-jokes.

Another critical attack on Kippenberger was carried out in the more directly confrontational form of a face-to-face interview. In 1991, the critic and curator Marius Babias met with Kippenberger and probed the artist about his and his cohorts'—again, Förg received much of the attention—play with the symbols and gestures of German fascism (as a representative work, consider Kippenberger's *Heil Hitler, Ihr Fetischisten*

[22] Faust specifically mentions an interview with Kippenberger in the April edition of the Viennese city magazine, *Wiener*, in which the interviewer excitedly discusses some of the artist's offensive remarks about a women collector from Switzerland and his defense of Förg's distasteful actions.

[Heil Hitler, you fetishists], 1984; fig. 103).[23] Throughout the interview, Babias frames his questions in a direct fashion, using clear and unambiguous language that is the antithesis of Kippenberger's circuitous manner of speaking. In spite of its brevity, the interview takes a rapid trajectory that sees the conversation moving from a comedic exchange between two unlike positions to Kippenberger evidently feeling trapped and responding finally in more explicit terms. Babias gradually reveals his own critical agenda in questions and rejoinders ("Does art today still have the ability to shock or preach to anyone?"; "But why this aggressiveness?"[24]) that seek to break down the distance between Kippenberger's evasive language and the direct impact of his past actions. By the end, having taken on a more defensive tone, Kippenberger can only ask Babias, "What's your interest? I really don't understand."[25] Rather than an attempt to dodge the criticism, Kippenberger's confusion appears to be genuine. The reader is left with two diametrically opposed positions with no moment of dialogical convergence.

The periodic, but increasingly persistent, attacks on Kippenberger's practice led to a phase in the early-to-mid 1990s in which he had alienated large segments of the German art scene. By the time of his death in 1997, the sore feelings were still strong enough to warrant a number of unfriendly obituaries among the many paeans. Similar to some of the shortcomings associated with humor, there is an inherent problem at the heart of the ironic mode that was identified by Friedrich Schlegel in 1798 as the "Ironie der

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[23] Marius Babias, "Martin Kippenberger: Clean Thoughts" *Artscribe* 90 (Feb./Mar. 1992), 41-47. The original interview, conducted in German, was published eight years later as "Heil Hitler!: Martin Kippenberger", in Marius Babias, *Ich war dabei als…Interviews 1990-2000* (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2000), 211-219.

[24] Babias, "Martin Kippenberger: Clean Thoughts," 45.

[25] Babias, "Heil Hitler!", 219; "Was ist dein Anliegen? Verstehe ich gar nicht."

Ironie" (irony of irony).[26] This entails the inevitability of the audience becoming weary through its excessive use, thereby rendering its critical powers ineffective. Kippenberger was notorious for telling exceedingly long jokes at his post-opening dinners, subjecting his guests to the torments of his digressions and interruptions, and never bringing closure through the delivery of the anticipated punch line. Some members of his audience found the technique itself to be amusing and effective as performance, but to this day one frequently encounters people in the German art world who have highly unfavorable recollections of Kippenberger's public persona.

Rosemarie Trockel: Laughter and Malice

From the perspective of the critics, Rosemarie Trockel has not appeared to deserve the type of ethically driven accusations leveled against her male peers. Although she has not been subjected to such attacks, critics have recognized a degree of stubbornness at the heart of her work, what the poet Barrett Watten referred to as her "poetics of resistant objects."[27] I would like to pursue this aspect of Trockel's practice by analyzing a body of work that she has built up since the late 1980s. The *Tierhäuser* (animal houses) that Trockel has constructed, both on her own and in collaboration with the German artist Carsten Höller, run the gamut from partially realized concept to tightly orchestrated installation. Despite the fact that most of these objects were produced in the 1990s, i.e., outside the timeframe of this dissertation, the series continues with themes already developed throughout the 1980s; in particular, the works play on the idea of incompletion

[26] See Friedrich Schlegel, "Über die Unverständlichkeit," in Hans Eichner, ed., *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, vol. 2, *Charakteristiken und Kritiken 1* (Munich, Paderborn, Vienna: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1967), 363-372.

[27] Barrett Watten, "As Objects Of," *Parkett* 34 (September 1992), 48.

that had emerged with the earlier "unrealized proposals." The diversity of forms and the varied states of realization make it difficult to gather the houses together into singular body of work, let alone an easily defined conceptual system. Several of them exist only as models, yet Trockel's attitude toward completion allows for a great deal of maneuvering room between initial sketch and finished product. Adding to the difficulties of categorization is the fact that a single model can occupy several points along the spectrum at once without actually changing its physical makeup.

While Trockel often lumps the animal houses into the category of "model," they each have a distinct relationship to the term. For instance, even in the model stage they can be capable of performing the function for which they were first designed. As propositions for dwellings, they invariably touch on questions of usefulness. Even those that appear to be unlikely abodes must be thought of in relation to the needs of animals. In contemplating their possible functionality, one inevitably enters the tricky terrain of the artist's responsibility toward the creatures she engages. The line between conceptualization and actualization plays a strong role in how one interprets these objects. There is more than enough room for imaginative construction and activation of the housing prototypes for them to stand alone as works, regardless of whether they are actually occupied by bats, pigs or chicken.[28]

In order to consider Trockel's varying degrees of sculptural fulfillment, one should start at the two extremes. Her first attempt at creating an animal house is the *Erdloch (für Fledermäuse)* (Hole in the Earth [for Bats]; fig. 104) of 1989, a small, floor-

[28] For an expanded discussion of Trockel's animal houses, see my "Split Nature: Laughter and Malice in Rosemarie Trockel's Houses for Animals," in Barbara Engelbach and Rosemarie Trockel, ed., *Rosemarie Trockel: Post-Menopause*, exh. cat. (Cologne: Museum Ludwig and Walther König, 2005), 54-65.

based object made from plaster and fake moss. Though it gives the appearance of being ready for occupation, a gallery setting is hardly going to be a big draw for animals that prefer darkness and free-ranging flight. The piece goes beyond a mere sketch, but it does not bear the look of functionality. By contrast, the *Haus für Schweine und Menschen* (House for Pigs and People; fig. 105) that Trockel and Höller created for Documenta 10 in 1997 far exceeded the model stage to involve live pigs, streams of human visitors, a complex set of negotiations with scientists and farmers, as well as the usual administrative hassles of operating within the parameters of a large-scale exhibition. What the two projects might share in terms of a concern with animal habitats is heavily outweighed by the differing degrees of seriousness that seem to adhere to the finished results.

There is no question that, as an experience, the *House for Pigs and Animals* is more multi-layered and, in a sense, generous than the *Erdloch*. Visitors to the site below the Orangerie at the Documenta grounds were treated to a spectacle of human-animal relations, or lack thereof, depending on how one deciphered the piece. The pigs spent their time residing in the comfortable, well-maintained stall on the one side of the two-way mirror, the temporary human visitors reclining on floor mats on the other, gazing at their neighbors: the distance between the species appeared to grow rather than shrink the longer one sat in the room. Along the lines of what Giorgio Agamben has called the "anthropological machine," Höller and Trockel's *House* brought up issues of inclusion and exclusion, of shared and unshared traits and qualities, within animal-human relations.[29] Agamben writes of historical attempts within the sciences to separate the two

[29] See Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

into biological categories that ultimately held them more firmly together in spite of their specific levels of evolutionary development, leaving behind "a life that is separated and excluded from itself—only a *bare life*."[30] In Agamben's view, the goal today should be to remove the traces of the animal from the human, countering centuries of misguided attempts to uphold, often unintentionally, their union. For exhibition visitors feeling trapped in a controlled environment, Höller and Trockel's artificial site of pseudo-communication between pigs and people erred on the side of permanent interspecies division.

Even the inherent contradiction in terms that comes with labeling these projects "animal houses" (animals might make nests, hives, or burrows, but not houses) points to one of many categorical separations that Trockel cultivates. The rift that defines the most relevant point of contrast between the *Erdloch* and the *House* comes down to the question of functionality. The earlier work appears at first to operate more on the level of a gag, the inadequacy of the plaster hole for bat inhabitants patently obvious, a play on the link between bats and mice (more likely to be residents in a museum) in the German word *Fledermaus* giving the sculpture its humorous edge. Moreover, the role of scale relations in both works affects the extent to which each projects an image of "seriousness." The small object hugs the floor of the gallery, looking anything but natural enough to fool a bat, and we pass from it to the next work on display. It is one item among many that compete for our attention. By contrast, the *House* is a self-contained structure that offers a shifting series of images from the animals' daily rhythm, the artists stepping back to allow whatever is natural in the process to develop its own pace. Of course the overwhelming impression is one of artificiality, but the viewer can be that much more

[30] Ibid., 38 [his emphasis].

grateful for the sheer time and effort put into the installation's conception and fabrication. In other words, the *House* did a lot more than mimic a science experiment that toys with the edification of its audience; it also provided plenty of opportunities for the kind of pleasure associated with smaller, more modest, pieces, such as *Erdloch*, that compel viewers to laugh without appearing to make heavy demands on their time.

Yet there is more to *Erdloch* than what can be taken in by a quick glance. Trockel produced the plaster form by casting a balaclava, the knit head-and-face cover with eye and mouth slits worn by soldiers in the Crimean war and motorcycle riders today; of course, the reference to terrorism cannot go unnoticed. Trockel had already made use of these masks in 1986 for her edition *Balaclava* (fig. 106), ordering them to be knit in different patterns (e.g., hammer-and-sickle, swastika, Playboy bunny) with the mouth holes missing. Known in 1980s West Germany as *Haßkappen* (hate caps), they were regulated by federal laws passed in 1985 and 1989 that attempted to ban demonstrators from hiding their identity. The so-called *Vermummungsverbot* (ban on covering the face) came in stages in the second half of the 1980s as the government sought to gain better information about who took part in the violent demonstrations that had carried on from the 1960s and 1970s under the banners of rotating causes.[31] The *Erdloch* thus takes on another set of connotations as a terrorist hideout, the cozy cave of a bat morphing into a different type of underground refuge. There is something clearly menacing about this clash of references, as a place of retreat and sanctuary competes for the attentions of innocent animals and alleged criminals. At the same time, this internal conflict has all the attributes of what makes a good joke. The back-and-forth motion between the differing

[31] See Sabine von Dirke, *"All Power to the Imagination!": The West German Counterculture from the Student Movement to the Greens* (Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

readings of the sculpture recall Wolfgang Iser's description of the comic as a "*Kipp-Phänomen*" (*kippen* is to topple, or fall over): one interpretation continually displaces another in a process of mutual negation.[32]

In attempting to comprehend what holds together such seemingly distinct works of art, a common denominator can be located in their specific capacities to register a comedic impact. Though writers have often identified a particular "strangeness" or uncanny aspect in Trockel's aesthetic—especially in the awkward items that fill her vitrines (fig. 107)—it is less typical to encounter descriptions of what it is that makes the work funny. This is not surprising, since a thorough analysis of why a great number of Trockel works inspire laughter can easily become blocked along the way by counter-indications. Just when a sense of amusement seems appropriate or necessary when standing in front of one of her sculptures, resistance is put up by equally strong elements that re-direct the interpretation toward more sober analyses. Furthermore, there is frequently a pendular movement within individual pieces between humor with a light touch and irony that takes a more aggressive turn. This attraction/repulsion effect is especially present in the models for animal houses, where object and title establish a set-up/punch line relationship that leads to a laugh. However, the joke does not merely expire at this point. Since most of these models need little effort to be realized, they serve more as conduits to larger issues, inspiring thought rather than fading in an empty chuckle (consider her 1987 multiple, *Kunstwitze* [Art Jokes], for the standard variety of everyday jokes found in magazine cartoons; fig. 108).

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[32] Wolfgang Iser, "Das Komische: ein Kipp-Phänomen," in Wolfgang Preisendanz and Rainer Warning, ed., *Das Komische* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1976), 398-402.

The real potential for aggression at the core of these works only becomes clear when live animals are introduced into the system. Certainly, a part of what makes the houses so compelling is the slightly giddy thought of all the things that can go awry when animals are used as fodder for art works. Although Trockel and Höller are known to have consulted experts in designing their environments, art galleries and museums often have enough trouble maintaining audio-visual equipment that frequently breaks down or freezes up. To make sure that the pigs and chickens are fed and kept warm requires a different level of responsibility. The question as to whether the chickens did not perform their task properly in Brussels due to sheer chance or nervousness is left unasked. Trockel's well-known comment on her use of irony is apropos here: "Irony appears when I have to get malicious. It's a vice that keeps me from ending up a cynic."[33] Applied to the houses, this claim might indicate that Trockel had to realize at least some of her animal-based proposals in order to avoid the charge that she was cynically flirting with ethically complicated ideas without putting them into practice. Her ironic play with the languages of art and animal husbandry, occupying the space between aesthetics and functionality, could not be fully expressed without exposing chickens and people to a direct encounter with each other in unusual circumstances. For the animals in the houses, the new and unfamiliar surroundings pose the distinct possibility that they will not easily adapt, risking discomfort or even worse. The numerous moments of disjunction in these projects remind us of what the scholar Denise Riley has written about irony's potential:

[33] Jutta Koether, "Interview with Rosemarie Trockel," *Flash Art* 134 (May 1987), 42.

"That irony is not an effect of any leisurely distance, but of the strongest and most serious engagement with hurt."[34]

What ultimately distinguishes the models from the working houses is the temporality of the humor. By taking the idea from the drawing board to the testing site, what once operated more as a joke now moves onto the expansive terrain of ironic address. As Paul de Man has argued, "Irony possesses an inherent tendency to gain momentum and not to stop until it has run its full course…."[35] The sequence of events in the houses is unpredictable and seemingly unstoppable—Trockel's humor is a springboard into the uncharted depths of irony. Yet all inclinations toward cruelty that her irony might imply do not mean that the animals will inevitably reject their houses. It is entirely possible that their needs can be accommodated and the transaction with the public will be either harmless or even beneficial. Trockel's malicious side is held in check by her capacity as "curator" of these installations, with emphasis on the original meaning of the word as one who cares for someone or something else. The chickens in her coop will likely fare better than those trapped in the inhumane conditions of large-scale egg-factory farms (fig. 109).

It is in the bipolar attitude toward the treatment of animals that one might note a rough correspondence with Kippenberger's many paintings and drawings that toe the line between charm and ridicule. While the dissimilarities between them are certainly unmistakable, both artists endeavor to challenge the viewer's sensibilities through a

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[34] Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 162.

[35] Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd rev. ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 215.

reliance on jokes that often border on the obscure or inscrutable, not to mention a shared capacity for aggression. One difference that especially sets Trockel apart from Kippenberger is the *tempo* of her humor. Kippenberger tended to capitalize on the quick joke as the only credible way of obliquely referencing the political without making any commitments. By contrast, Trockel's humor is protracted and uneven, overlapping with the extended play of irony. The houses signal a type of humor that Simon Critchley has described as "a change in our situation which is both liberating and elevating, but also *captivating*, showing all too clearly the capture of the human being in the nets of nature."[36] This element of being trapped means that for Trockel politics is submerged, even hidden, within the social environments that she creates or merely hints at.

Without wanting to downplay the pleasure principle on which many of the animal houses are based, I cannot see past the more macabre references. But this is, of course, completely within the tradition of the comic, as Henri Bergson argued when pointing out the inevitable link between laughter and humiliation: "By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness."[37] On this count, Trockel indeed performs a sort of therapeutic role for her audience. Her humor, tainted with irony, provides a release valve for some of the minor and not-so-minor ethical dilemmas people are forced to confront on a daily basis.

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[36] Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 41 [his emphasis].

[37] Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (Copenhagen and Los Angeles: Green Integer, 1999), 176.

Posthistory, Timing and the Audience

The critical reception of the work of Kippenberger and Trockel diverges on the point of biography. Although Trockel's early agoraphobia is occasionally mentioned in essays, most writers tend to stick to the objects themselves in evaluating her work. The opposite is true of Kippenberger. Like his apologists, Kippenberger's critics have often relied on anecdotal information in justifying their positions. Wolfgang Max Faust and Marius Babias refer loosely to instances of Kippenberger's offensive public behavior without specifying a particular time or place. The assumption seems to have been that it was simply known that Kippenberger was an "exemplary alcoholic," and the critic could rely on word-of-mouth tales of debauchery in assessing the artist's practice. Yet, like jokes, the anecdote has suffered in an age when oral history traditions are obsolete as primary transmitters of information. Walter Benjamin recognized this development already in his 1936 essay on the figure of the storyteller, whose position was jeopardized in the aftermath of the first World War, a time when "experience [had] fallen in value."[38] Jokes and anecdotes are at their best in verbal form, with all the facial tics and bodily twitches lacking in the textual or pictorial version. It is thus not surprising that so many writers have been drawn to the original scene of spoken exchange in the studio or pub, where the joke was first told.

I want to suggest that the temporal distance, the lack of access to the joke's original comedic timing, is something that can contribute to the alienation of the audience that Kippenberger's work occasionally provokes. The uncertainty of the work's location in time is, I believe, one of the reasons that segments of the public do not "get"

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[38] Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 83-84.

Kippenberger's jokes. This is the flipside of the apparently high degree of legibility that his work is also capable of supporting. The open-ended, unresolved temporality of his work shares affinities with the notion of *posthistoire*, a term that was widely discussed and analyzed around the same time that his career got underway. Occurring alongside postmodernism, the general connotation of posthistory is that we live in a time beyond history, when traditional historical categories and assumptions have been rendered obsolete. Yet by most accounts, the very two-sided nature of the term is what makes it useful to my discussion: history as we know it is said to have come to an end while a preoccupation with the historical is more alive than ever. Peter Brückner, a left-wing professor of psychology and alleged supporter of the Red Army Faction,[39] employed the term soon after the tragic events of the "German Autumn" of 1977, writing, "The layering of epochs is still reproducing itself…in the coexistence of history and *posthistoire*."[40] The outcome of this overlapping of two historical phases was not yet in sight, according to Brückner. As artists who mined the soil of modernism while being freed up and ungrounded by the postmodern, Kippenberger and his colleagues provide examples of how these epochs can coexist within a single artistic practice.

The historian Lutz Niethammer describes the main characteristics of posthistory as involving "a mortal life lived without any seriousness or struggle, in the regulated boredom of a perpetual reproduction of modernity on a world scale. The problematic of

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[39] For a brief description of Brückner's loose ties to the RAF, see Stefan Aust, *Der Baader-Meinhof-Komplex* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1985), 128-129.

[40] Peter Brückner, "Überlegungen zu Geschichte und 'Posthistoire': Veränderungen im Begriff der Revolution; Ein Fragment," in *Psychologie und Geschichte: Vorlesungen im "Club Voltaire" 1980/81* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 1982), 267; "Noch reproduziert sich die 'Überschichtung von Zeitaltern'…in der Koexistenz von Geschichte und Posthistoire."

posthistory is not the end of the world but the end of meaning."[41] Lifting images from art history and popular culture without regard for their vastly different sites and moments of origin, Kippenberger and his peers instigated explosions of meaning that appeared to extend infinitely in all directions. A single painting by Kippenberger from later in his career could almost stand in for the entire approach. His *Portrait of Paul Schreber* (1994, fig. 110 and 111) features a small likeness of the son of Daniel Gottlob Moritz Schreber, the 19th-century physician and exercise guru who strapped his children into "educational" devices (his *Geradehalter*, or straight-holders) that kept them sitting up straight while they wrote. His son Paul would later become the subject of one of Sigmund Freud's studies on paranoia.[42] Represented as a boy, the young Schreber appears to float in the center of an egg form while the entire canvas is covered in colorful, overlapping shapes. A portion of the composition is also overlaid with the painted pattern of what could either be an enlarged fingerprint or wood grain.

What makes the work relevant here is that evenly distributed throughout the surface of the painting are Plexiglas strips with printed phrases. Resembling museum wall labels, these texts turn the act of viewing the painting into a reading-based experience that competes with the pictorial side of the work. The texts take the form of aphorisms, such as "Just don't forget that eternity has no boundaries"; or, "What will become now of the *cursed* history."[43] These phrases have the look and feel of serious

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[41] Lutz Niethammer, *Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London and New York: Verso, 1992), 3.

[42] On Daniel Paul Schreber, see Eric L. Santner, *My Own Private Germany: Daniel Paul Schreber's Secret History of Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[43] "Vergessen Sie nur nicht, daß die Ewigkeit keine Grenzen hat"; "Was wird denn nun aus der *verfluchten* Geschichte."

statements or bits of wisdom that might hold together. But they are offset by other phrases—"Because I'm so dumb, for instance"[44]—that imply a comedic attitude meant to undercut the potential seriousness of the whole. The two sides of Kippenberger's practice are forced to merge: on the one hand, the work can be seen as a parody of art as an educational device, with Kippenberger suggesting positive messages only to contradict them. At the same time, the image does encourage a close, active process of reading, as one must approach the canvas in order to make out the text labels. The clarity of the Schreber portrait and the legibility of the labels contradict the opacity of the aphorisms. Here again, the impulse is to identify the anecdotal moment at which these phrases were either invented or found, but the viewer inevitably comes up short. One returns to Paul de Man's conception of the ironic past tense as "pure mystification."[45]

The split nature of much work by this generation surely affects its capacity for critical commentary. In a 1982 essay published in *Artforum*, Benjamin Buchloh had identified the dangers of parody as a possible critical tool in the early work of Sigmar Polke. Buchloh wrote, "Parodistic appropriation anticipates the failure of the attempt to subvert the ruling codification and allies itself in advance with the powers that will ultimately make its deconstructive efforts abort in cultural success."[46] Such either/or theories are characteristic of the posthistorical position, yet they again bring up a question raised earlier: Is Buchloh assuming that Polke and the next half-generation were unaware of the predicament in which they found themselves? In their best works, it would seem

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[44] "Weil ich so dumm bin etwa."

[45] De Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," 222.

[46] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Parody and Appropriation in Francis Picabia, Pop, and Sigmar Polke," *Artforum* (March 1982), 30.

that Herold, Kippenberger, Oehlen and Trockel happily, or at least knowingly, occupied this place of apparent conceptual and political "bankruptcy." Here we might return to Faust's critique of what he saw as the corrosive cynicism defining the attitudes of 1980s artists. Doubtless, some of his charges are well placed. Yet can we not also see the political resignation of the members of this generation as stemming partly from an honest look at themselves and an acceptance of their pessimism? At the very least, the functional pessimism of the 1980s is a far cry from the truly defeatist pessimism encountered in Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.[47]

In the Federal Republic of Germany, the crisis mode of the 1970s gave way throughout the 1980s toward a greater acceptance of depoliticized art; however, as we have seen, the political edge in the work did not entirely disappear. Although the sense of urgency that characterized the various social and political crises identified and fostered by the historical avant-gardes was by then a thing of the past, artists of the 1980s frequently drew on these earlier moments as both sources of inspiration and ripe targets for parody.[48] The irrelevance of Bürger's critique for Herold, Kippenberger, Oehlen and Trockel shows that the artists' allowance for failure and miscommunication is still dependent on the comic failure of modern greats like Karl Valentin or Samuel Beckett. If anything, there was a profound compulsion in the 1980s to highlight failure as a condition that connected the modern with the postmodern, posthistorical period. As Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit have written about failure in postwar literature, art and film,

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[47] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

[48] On crisis, failure and the avant-garde, see Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), 147-148.

"Surely nothing is more dangerous for an artist, or for a critic, than to be obsessed with failure. 'Dangerous' because the obsession we are speaking of is not the common anxiety *about* failing, but rather an anxiety about *not* failing."[49]

In the aftermath of the politically motivated cultural practices of the 1960s and early 1970s, failure and pessimism can be understood as having a paradoxically liberating effect. Adorno's concept of hibernation is to some extent still relevant, but now the artists sought to move beyond the state of immobility that came with such a retreat from social engagement. Jochen Schulte-Sasse has proposed an alternative to Bürger's pessimistic view of a post-hibernation phase within the arts by looking to "the possibilities that inhere in the slippage between society and language."[50] Humor was the primary tool that the artists employed in their attempts to locate such flexible spaces. With an emphasis on acting in the here and now, this generation moved according to the skewed temporal logic of posthistory. Above all, the artists wanted to avoid paralysis, to "go immediately," as Kippenberger put it.

The Joke after Political Correctness

The traps and foibles that are inevitably associated with an artistic practice based on the rule of the joke became more obvious in the early 1990s in Germany. Following on the heels of its more potent and lasting appearance in the United States, the debate around "political correctness" arrived in the aftermath of the latest "Wende," in this case the

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[49] Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 1.

[50] Jochen Schulte-Sasse, "Foreword: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde," in Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, xxxii.

collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. In many ways, the fall of the Wall marked a point at which the joke had seemingly run its course; the decadent decade was over and now the time had come for a new seriousness. The breakdown of long-stable boundaries accelerated the trend toward pluralism in the new Germany. At the same time, "political correctness" was heavily resisted from the moment of its first appearance in Germany in late 1991. Looking back on the previous seven years, in 1996 Diedrich Diederichsen wrote a book, *Politische Korrekturen* (Political Corrections), which attempted to capture the breadth of the "PC wars" that had emerged in Germany during the tumultuous years of national reunification.[51] His summation of the general receptivity toward the changing codes of speech and public behavior identified a gap between *Tabubruch* (breaking of taboos) and *Tugendterror* (the terror of virtue).[52]

The book jumps quickly from one segment of German culture to another, taking in everything from the revival of rightwing political thought to the ongoing importance of "theory," but what is most useful here are Diederichsen's remarks at the end on what he calls the *Witzakt-Problem* (joke-act problem).[53] Defining humor as the third most precarious "arena"—next to sex and violence—among all the various PC debates, he dispels the claim by certain humorists that their satire is directed at a randomly selected mix of targets.[54] All satire confirms a specific perspective and builds "hierarchies,

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[51] Diedrich Diederichsen, *Politische Korrekturen* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1996).

[52] Ibid., 7.

[53] Ibid., 185.

[54] Ibid.

consensus, subjugations."[55] Diederichsen uses the example of the German television entertainer Harald Schmidt, whose interview and variety show is modeled heavily on the format established by David Letterman, to describe the use of questionable joking tactics. Gags that deliberately appeal to the lowest common ethical denominator, such as racist or sexist jokes, are delivered in order to speak both to the audience that regularly partakes of such humor, as well as a more "critical" audience that would seem to know better. Schmidt's example allows Diederichsen to discuss Kippenberger's provocative and offensive public appearances in the context of this double-sided process. While it is true that much of his behavior was "incorrect," Kippenberger knowingly subjected his audience to ridicule as a means toward exposing ideologies held by its members. According to Diederichsen, this has the effect of aligning his and Schmidt's approach with the aims of political correctness: "Similar to PC, it is a question of revealing the unspoken in conventions and their resulting behavior by making use of these very conventions and others."[56] Although Diederichsen's defense of Kippenberger is not surprising, one would not normally expect it to be carried out via an analogy to the discourse of political correctness. Then again, he was one of the few German critics who never wavered in his vocal and public backing of the artist, even when other former supporters had fallen silent rather than express their misgivings.

Looking back on the 1990s in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, the decade can appear to be marked by innocence, a time of naïve calm before the storm brought by terrorism's arrival in Western capitals. Yet in spite of numerous attempts to

[55] Ibid., 186; "…Hierarchien, Konsensus, Unterwerfungen…."

[56] Ibid., 187; "Ähnlich wie bei PC geht es darum, Unausgesprochenes in Konventionen und ihnen folgendem Verhalten offenzulegen, indem man sich derselben und anderer Konventionen bedient."

define the period as primarily a *Spaßgesellschaft* (entertainment society),[57] the early 1990s in Germany witnessed the emergence of numerous counter-developments: the founding of the theory-driven, critically oriented art journal *Texte zur Kunst*; the rejection within the art press of Kippenberger and others who were seen as emblematic of the previous decade; the decline of the art market; and the broader questioning of social behavior and ethics that came with "political correctness." Writing in 1993, Donald Kuspit bemoaned the loss of sincerity during the 1980s: "To give up even the social semblance—cosmetic pretense—of sincerity, and with that the last vestige of the ideal of authentic experience, is to be existentially bankrupt—totally decadent."[58] Kuspit, who in the early 1980s had championed the work of Anselm Kiefer as a properly cathartic response to Germany's fascist past,[59] was disturbed by what he saw as the complete loss of "depth of experience" in the United States and Germany.[60]

By the early 1990s, Kuspit considered even Kiefer to be guilty of fostering the process by which "the avant-garde culture industry became part of the entertainment industry."[61] Again, the culprit is the widespread dominance of the *Spaßgesellschaft*. A similar critique has come recently from Jost Hermand, who is ready to leave behind the

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[57] On the German *Spaßgesellschaft* and the art of the 1990s, see Wolfgang Ullrich, *Tiefer hängen: Über den Umgang mit der Kunst* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2003), 49-65.

[58] Donald Kuspit, *Signs of Psyche in Modern and Postmodern Art* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 279.

[59] See Donald Kuspit, "Flak from the 'Radicals': The American Case against Current German Painting," in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 136-151.

[60] Ibid., 275; Kuspit focuses his remarks on artists operating in New York (Schnabel, Koons, etc.) and Germany (Baselitz and, to a lesser extent, Kiefer).

[61] Ibid., 276.

Warenästhetik (aesthetic of goods) of the last twenty-five years and see postmodernism as a thing of the past.[62] Hermand argues that postmodernism's "'free-floating'" ego, postulated by numerous theorists in the 1960s and 1970s, is "mostly a truly 'disposable ego.'"[63] What was initially promoted as a liberating break with historical "grand narratives" and the productive destabilization of the authorial subject turned out to leave a gaping lacuna.[64] In other words, we still do not seem to have escaped the condition of posthistorical pessimism.

After Kippenberger

In an interview with Diederichsen in 1991, artist and former Kippenberger assistant Michael Krebber referred to the cycles of taste and style within the art world. Asked what is left behind in the wake of art fashions that have been cast aside, Krebber replied, "I think that, when fashions disappear one after the other, what remains are the good jokes."[65] To my mind, Krebber's faith in the continuity of humor can be understood as support for the longevity of modernism, despite claims for a shift in priorities and possibilities under postmodernism. The archeology of modern art that appears in the work of Polke, Kippenberger, Oehlen, Krebber and others consistently relies on humor

[62] Jost Hermand, *Nach der Postmoderne: Ästhetik Heute* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2004).

[63] Ibid., 171; "…dieses 'freischwebende Ich'…'disponibles Ich.'" These terms are set off in quotation marks within Hermand's text.

[64] On this topic in general, see Slavoj Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology* (London and New York: Verso, 1999), especially chapter 4, "Political Subjectivization and Its Vicissitudes," 171-244.

[65] Diedrich Diederichsen, "My Material Is the Parrot: A Conversation with Michael Krebber," in Michael Krebber, *Michael Krebber: Artist—Painter*, exh. cat. (Munich: Silke Schreiber, 1991), 17.

and jokes to make the references more palatable and identifiable. The allusions to canonical modernist gestures are almost always made in terms of conflict, with two seemingly contradictory methods forced to share space on the canvas. This clash of signs is, of course, the terrain of the joke.

I want to begin my concluding remarks with a comparison that, I think, illustrates both the continuity and the shift in emphasis of modernist joking in the posthistorical era. In 1923 Francis Picabia published the following in an essay entitled "Thank you, Francis!": "What I like is to invent, to imagine, to make myself a new man every moment, then forget him, forget everything. We should be equipped with a special eraser, gradually effacing our works and the memory of them."[66] The stress placed here on the regular reinvention of the artistic self is typical for the modern, or better, avant-garde, obsession with renewal, with shedding the skin of precedent. Picabia was one of the key avant-garde artists who used irony and humor as instruments for change within his practice; the "Thank you, Francis!" of the title lends the statement a characteristically comedic edge. Sixty years later, Kippenberger produced a similarly self-referential work on paper that consisted of pasted-on lettering in the style of a ransom note (fig. 112). Addressing himself, the artist wrote, "Dear Martin, I think often about whether it is true that you should become a famous artist now. But one thing I know for sure: That you will always remain our Martin."[67] The frame of reference has changed from an inward-

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[66] Francis Picabia, "Thank you, Francis!", in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, ed., *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 272 [originally published as "Francis Merci!" in *Littérature*, new series no. 8 (January 1923)].

[67] Published in *Premieren '84*, exh. cat. (Cologne: Die Galerien, 1984), 70-71. During the 1980s, *Premieren* was the title of an annual catalogue published collectively by Cologne galleries of work they were showing at the time; "Lieber Martin, ich denke oft ob es denn

looking assessment of the artist's production process over time to a self-awareness that craves public notoriety in the present moment. Taking the format of the note into account, Kippenberger pictures himself as being held hostage to his own ambition. At the same time, there is a down-to-earth acceptance of a lack of control over career-related events. The potential for failure is always there, at once posing a threat and offering comfort that perhaps the status quo is not so bad after all.

Within a few weeks of Kippenberger's death in 1997, the editors of *Texte zur Kunst* had begun to conduct a series of interviews with friends, former colleagues and others who had been associated with the artist.[68] Their aim was to gather a variety of recollections that would give an accurate account of what they described as "The Kippenberger Complex." As the editors explained in the introduction, they had experienced a complicated relationship with Kippenberger since the journal's founding in 1990, when he had produced the first commissioned artist's multiple. After acknowledging the gradual separation that had taken place between the artist and the editorial staff, they summarized the difficulties presented by Kippenberger's work: "The apparent lines of conflict (between the poles of art and politics, or 'drastic presence' versus 'reflection') mirrored, however, a polarization that had been established in recent years in wide areas of the art world. In connection with this polarization there had been attacks against Kippenberger—in which the person and the output were equated, and his

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wohl wahr ist, daß Du jetzt ein berühmter Künstler sein sollst. Aber eins weiss ich bestimmt: Du bleibst immer unser Martin."

[68] The editors at the time were Stefan Germer, Isabelle Graw and Astrid Wege.

works were reduced to content-driven slogans—which we avoided to a great extent."[69] Although the editors had maintained a distance from the unnamed critics who assailed Kippenberger, they had also not opted to publish articles defending his work. Now that he was gone, the journal finally demonstrated its sympathy toward him by giving voice solely to his supporters in the extracts from the interviews they published.[70]

As Kippenberger's most consistent and ardent defender, Diederichsen wrote in the issue that the artist was subjected posthumously to the tendency among German critics to explore the role of "personal guilt and responsibility."[71] He decries such writers and their "clueless, grotesque and cheap reactions."[72] This was the same material that Kippenberger had examined, re-worked and incorporated into his art, essentially nourishing his practice with his detractors' vitriol. Diederichsen rightfully points out that Kippenberger consciously made fodder out of all the elements of the conversation that surrounded his work, whether it consisted of jokes told among colleagues or critical remarks from an unfriendly writer. Yet Diederichsen's attempt to use this knowledge to render invalid the attacks on Kippenberger's practice is only partly convincing. He

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[69] "Der Komplex Kippenberger," *Texte zur Kunst* 26 (June 1997), 45; "Die sich andeutenden Konfliktlinien (zwischen dem Kunst- und dem Politik-Pol oder 'Drastik' versus 'Reflexion') spiegelten jedoch eine Polarisierung wieder, die sich in weiten Teilen des Kunstbetriebes der letzten Jahre etablierte. Im Zuge dieser Polarisierung kam es zu Angriffe auf Kippenberger, in denen Person und Arbeit gleichgesetzt und seine Arbeiten auf inhaltliche Botschaften reduziert wurden, aus denen wir uns weitgehend heraushielten."

[70] The writers included Gisela Capitain (Kippenberger's primary dealer in the 1990s and current administrator of his estate), Albert Oehlen, Roberto Ohrt, Jutta Koether, Thomas Grässlin (a major collector of Kippenberger's work), and Michael Krebber, among others.

[71] Diederich Diederichsen, "Das Prinzip der Verstrickung: Kippenberger und seine Rezeptionen," *Texte zur Kunst* 26 (June 1997), 75.

[72] Ibid., 79; "…Ahnungslose, groteske und billige Reaktionen…."

correctly argues that most of the criticism is directed toward Kippenberger the person, a problem that is exacerbated by the frequently inaccurate dating of works, which leaves the impression that the most overtly "bad-boy" works of the early-to-mid 1980s were produced more recently.[73] On the other hand, he discounts writers who did manage to concentrate their remarks on the objects and paintings, despite the difficulty of separating them from the social context of their making.[74]

Today there is one point on which most interpreters of Kippenberger's legacy seem to agree: it is only through recourse to the anecdote that we are capable of gaining any significant purchase on his work. From the earliest days of his career, his critical reception has, for good reason, relied heavily on the background story. Few contemporary artists have pursued the idea as persistently as Kippenberger that social context and group conversation form the crux of the art-making process. There is no question that in order to understand the paintings and sculptures, one must explore the self-constructed subjectivity for which he is known. Yet nine years after his death, the objects themselves have settled into the art market as singular commodities with individually assigned value, making it difficult to keep them attached to their narrative of origin—whether it took place in the bars of Cologne, the piazzas of Florence, or the punk clubs of Berlin. The innumerable tales that have proliferated and morphed into legend have had the effect of erecting a screen behind which the pictures can appear to remain inaccessible.

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[73] Ibid.

[74] For an insightful critique—written during Kippenberger's lifetime—of the artist's sermonizing critics, see Gerrit Gohlke, "Retrospektive Ironie," *Texte zur Kunst* 15 (September 1994), 177-180.

As it evolved out of the 1980s, Kippenberger's work seemed to become symptomatic of more general oppositions that had come to define mid-nineties art production and reception (between theory and practice, critic and artist, seriousness and irony, etc.). Three major projects he carried out between 1993 and 1997 countered the notion that he was only capable of macho shock tactics: his *Metro Net* of 1993-97 (fig. 113) envisioned a global subway system; his Museum of Modern Art Syros (MoMAS, begun in 1993; fig. 114), located in an unfinished cinder-block structure on a Greek island, poked fun at the proliferation of regional museums of modern and contemporary art; and his *The Happy End of Franz Kafka's "Amerika"* (first exhibited in 1994; fig. 115) involved the arrangement of dozens of pieces of office furniture on a tennis court as a potential "happy end" to Kafka's unfinished novel *Amerika*. Late in his career, Kippenberger firmly occupied a position that both highlighted and took advantage of the tensions perceived by the editors of *Texte zur Kunst*. Indeed, his entire career can be understood as a sustained attempt to keep these tensions in play and to foreground them in a programmatic fashion.

If it were not for the ongoing presence of humor and linguistic games in the later work of Kippenberger, one might almost believe that he took an active role in the gradual abandonment of irony throughout the 1990s. The art historian Boris Groys declared in a 1993 interview that our era is still marked by irony, but irony and jokes are becoming extinct in the current state of Western pluralism. Groys argued, "Because in a pluralistic society everyone thinks that everyone else is dumb. There is no shared hermeneutic background against which a joke would be meaningful."[75] Kippenberger and others of his

[75] Brigitte Franzen and Michael Scholz-Hänsel, "'Die Welt in der wir leben ist viel, viel ironischer als alle Witze, die wir denken können,' ein Interview mit Boris Groys,"

generation reveal in their works the lack of shared codes that make jokes function. At the same time, they retreat into the microcosmic world of the in-joke, thereby preventing the extinction from running its course. For Groys, however, the difficulty of maintaining the collective power of the joke under pluralism does not ultimately spell the end of irony. Quite the opposite: the world, life itself, has become ironic to the extent that ironic individual subjectivity will always lose in the competition with society: "The world in which we live is much, much more ironic than all the jokes we can think of."[76] Perhaps Kippenberger had a similar insight as he produced his late, large-scale projects. Developing at a slower, considered pace, they tend to dispense with the hastily invented joke in favor of tapping into the macrocosmic ironies of current social and cultural patterns.

Kritische Berichte: Zeitschrift für Kunst- und Kulturwissenschaften, vol. 21, no. 1 (1993), 11; "Denn in einer pluralistischen Gesellschaft denkt jeder vom anderen, daß er dumm sei. Es gibt keinen gemeinsamen hermeneutischen Hintergrund, vor dem ein Witz überhaupt sinnvoll ware."

[76] Ibid. This quote is used as the title of the interview.

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