

“Love is Hate.”¹

Merlin Carpenter’s exhibitions, his paintings and readymades, often express a critique of the excesses and blind spots of both art institutions and the art market. This is articulated via theatrical displays and actions that destabilize the viewer, combining direct confrontation via objects with an obvious appetite for intellectual discourse in the accompanying texts.

Born in 1967, Carpenter studied at Central Saint Martins in London (1986-1989) before moving to Cologne for several years. Cologne in the 1990s has attained legendary status on account of its many galleries, institutions and project spaces, and the number of international artists who came to the city to exhibit and sell their work and to position themselves within the art scene. This legend has been reinforced by several attempts to historicize the period in museum shows, including *Make Your Own Life: Artists In and Out of Cologne* at ICA, Philadelphia (2006) and, more recently, *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age* at Museum Brandhorst, Munich, and MUMOK, Vienna (2015/2016). In a section of *Painting 2.0* exploring links between painting and social networks in early-1990s Cologne, one of Carpenter’s picture titles was used as a heading. Questioned by curator Achim Hochdörfer, however, the artist distanced himself from this. With its shit-brown gestural brushstrokes, *Fantasy of Cologne* (2006) was actually made to protest against the *Make Your Own Life* show and its attempt to package the Cologne scene: “My work ... is concerned with the situation in New York in 2006, not the situation in Cologne in 1990. ... And that means it remains a criticism of those who market this fantasy now.”²

In Cologne, Carpenter was associated with the activities of the art magazine *Texte zur Kunst*, with Galerie Christian Nagel and with the project space Friesenwall 120. All three were founded in 1990, the latter by Stephan Dilleluth, who was soon joined by Josef Strau and Nils Norman as co-organizers. Carpenter was part of their social milieu, collaborating on the occasional exhibition and, in 1991, delivering a joint lecture with Nils Norman on the conditions for students at CSM. Referred to as a “project shop”, Friesenwall 120 was intended as neither a gallery nor an artist-run space but rather, according to Dilleluth, as a deliberate contrast to Cologne’s established galleries, a place driven by specific interests where no one cared about authorship or value creation. Initially, it had the status of an extended living room where materials were collected, information exchanged and films screened. “Selecting, compiling, and commenting on material and preparing it and making it accessible whilst also updating it and considering its presentation replaced good old artistic expressivity for us back then. However, our method was not strictly historical,” says Dilleluth, looking back: “Together with Roberto Ohrt we created a Situationism exhibition, and with Michael Krebber and Uwe Gabriel we organized *Wahrheit ist Arbeit: Wie es wirklich war* (Truth is Work: How it Really Was). These exhibitions did not have any clearly defined authors; they were made up of “waste” – that is, of peripheral materials, posters, invitation cards, documents, books, photos of photos, or faked originals. Some ideas we came up with were based on anecdotes or rumors. ... The eighties were over; the showing off, that over-inflated swank laid on heavy with authenticity in giant formats, had become boring and the market had given up the ghost. But the new poverty was no stigma; instead it fostered aesthetic decisions, and you could go about dealing with that with a focus on pleasure. ... What was exhibited was the bohemian atmosphere surrounding artists and the byproducts of their work rather than artists and their work as such.”³

Public reflection on the artist’s own role in the art world runs through Carpenter’s work, too, but he also mirrors forms of artistic machismo. As an assistant to Martin Kippenberger,

¹Merlin Carpenter, “RELAX IT’S ONLY A BAD COSIMA VON BONIN SHOW”, exhibition catalogue, Galerie Bleich-Rossi, Vienna, 2007, back cover.

²Merlin Carpenter, quoted by David Joselit in “Reassembling Painting” in Manuela Ammer, Achim Hochdörfer, David Joselit (eds.), *Painting 2.0. Expression in the Information* (Munich 2016), p. 181.

³Different Experiences. Different Socialization. Martin Beck in conversation with Stephan Dilleluth” in Matthias Michalka (ed.), *To Expose, to Show, to Demonstrate, to Inform, to Offer: Artistic Practices Around 1990* (Cologne 2016), p. 216. And in English here: <http://societyofcontrol.com/outof/sdwiki/pmwiki.php/FW120/BeckDilleluthEn/>.

Carpenter worked on the well-known installation *Heavy Burschi* that was shown at Kölnischer Kunstverein in 1990. For this piece, Kippenberger commissioned Carpenter to make a series of “remix paintings” with motifs drawing on Kippenberger’s own works but also weaving in portraits and logos from invitation cards and catalogues that happened to be at hand. The finished paintings were photographed, printed original size, and framed – a dig at the success of the large-format work of Düsseldorf photographers like Thomas Ruff, Andreas Gursky and Thomas Struth. The paintings were then destroyed, thrown into a dumpster and exhibited with the photographs. Achim Hochdörfer refers to this exhibition as a “curated retrospective” because Kippenberger delegated it to an assistant, offering an outside view of his working methods and means of expression. Carpenter was commissioned, Hochdörfer argues, to cynically celebrate the death and resurrection of painting as part of a “strategic integration of painting in a dramatic analysis of the social dynamics of creative processes. This task was then taken up and established by Michael Krebber, Carpenter, Stephan Dillemath, Cosima von Bonin, Heimo Zobernig and Stephen Prina, whose painting practices could thus be described as parergonal; that is to say, they are by-products of, commentaries on, and critiques of what Isabelle Graw once called the ‘institution of painting’.”⁴

On the one hand, then, Carpenter participated in a playful and masochistic manner in the debate on the significance of painting and on artistic hierarchies and friendships. On the other hand, in 1990 he commented explicitly on this role in the first issue of *Texte zur Kunst*, stating that assistants create a kind of ersatz creativity, temporarily adopting the other artist’s approach in a kind of mimicry, postponing their own production until the day they can return as someone new.⁵ Dillemath confirms this view today when he says: “... most of my new friends and acquaintances worked in the art business as assistants or support staff on temporary contracts. Some of them had deliberately given up their own art production to make a clear break, for themselves, with object production in the nineteen-eighties tradition.⁶ That was not a generalized refusal or subversion but did give rise to a shift in perspective vis-à-vis precarious workers in the system, turning attention to the system itself.”⁷

In 1994, Carpenter returned to London and, with Dan Mitchell and Nils Norman, founded the project space Poster Studio. The group was joined soon after by Josephine Pryde. They ran the space for two years, a commitment that can certainly also be seen as an aftereffect of the Cologne years. Poster Studio conducted political analysis, combining projects in public space with discussions on urbanism that were typical of the period. Whereas Dillemath created a comprehensive archive for Friesenwall 120, with video documentation and texts making it accessible even to those (like me) who weren’t there at the time, when Carpenter, Mitchell, Norman and Pryde dissolved their project they opted, with an uncompromising approach that is typical of Carpenter, to forego any attempt to communicate their activities.⁸

Ten years later, having arrived at “mid-career”, Carpenter continued to reflect on the potential and questionability of artistic production. Whereas in the 1990s, he used political themes or collaged them into his works, in the context of an exhibition at Bleich-Rossi in Vienna in 2007 he noted that “the re-enactment of political art as kitsch as political intervention had become apolitical”⁹ and asked himself “to what extent [failure] becomes a strategy which ultimately guarantees quality and financial value”.¹⁰ He refers in this context to the project “Relax It’s Only A Ghost” (Petzel Gallery, New York, 2006), a collaboration between his friend Cosima von Bonin and Hamburg-based electro-pop band Phantom/Ghost fronted by Dirk von Lowtzow. At this time, Bonin was performing a surrender to the market with what amounted to mass production, presenting herself as the exhausted full-time manager of her own output. Carpenter’s approach was different. In the Vienna show, he tried to subvert his own position by doing something with “a

⁴Achim Hochdörfer, “How the World Came in” in *Painting 2.0*, p. 21.

⁵See Merlin Carpenter, “I was an assistant” in *Texte zur Kunst* (Issue 1, 1990), p. 119-122.

⁶Josef Strau was also an assistant. Working for Georg Herold, his tasks included numbering individual granules of caviar in certain pictures.

⁷“Different Experiences. Different Socialization”.

⁸ Carpenter’s exhibitions, reviews and writings are listed in detail on his website.

⁹ Merlin Carpenter, “RELAX...”, p. 1.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 2.

heartfelt, regressive and ‘genuine’ quality ... annoyingly retrograde”, settling on pastel drawings of medieval English sculptures. In keeping with his tendency to extremes, he turned this work into nine large paintings and sabotaged his appropriated motifs by overpainting them with old-fashioned easels, completing the effect by obscuring the view of the work with actual easels, displayed as readymades and robbed of their function, remaining empty. Almost inevitably, he called the exhibition: “RELAX, IT’S ONLY A BAD COSIMA VON BONIN SHOW.”

Carpenter is alert to the marketing of critical positions, in both institutional and commercial sectors, and he is unforgiving, for example, towards fellow artists who show their work at Tate Modern, an institution he has often attacked. Last year, he offered “Donate to Tate (The Beatles)”, a series of portraits of the individual band members, to the museum as a gift on the devious grounds that it would be a great addition to its collection and a good match for its audience. With this approach, Carpenter effectively prompted the museum to refuse his gift. Elsewhere, he built a copy of the Tate Café at Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York (2012), exposing a populist agenda in which the museum becomes a consumer space and theme park. Reena Spaulings was created in 2003 as a pseudonym by a group of artists who henceforth situated their commercial work within a context of fashion, activism, anti-capitalist critique and theoretical reflection. The gallery is only part of the group’s activities, and Carpenter is not a member of Reena Spaulings itself, but only represented by the gallery. This is more than a mere working relationship, however, with the gallery acting more as a programmatic partner.

With „Heroes”, his 2011 exhibition at the MD 72 gallery in Berlin, he highlighted the market’s elitist mechanisms of exclusion, preventing the public from viewing the show of fourteen paintings of personal favourites from David Bowie to Stefano Pilati to George Sand. Instead, visitors to the opening were confronted with the demand to pay a 5000 euro entrance fee, a sum that could be redeemed against the price of any work purchased. Three people are said to have treated themselves to a look at the exhibition, while those with an interest in art but little cash had to content themselves with a set of cards for 20 euros which at least allowed them to put together the motifs in the exhibition.¹¹

Finally, the recent “Poor Leatherette” show, also at MD 72, had an almost nihilistic feel, presenting a tableau vivant of luxury products. For a long time, Carpenter has used motifs and terms from the world of fashion, referring to the “look” of the paintings and readymades in his exhibitions. His works “pose”, offering themselves up to the viewer. Visitors to the gallery saw an ensemble of a Ducati motorbike, a retro-style pram, a DJ controller and a SMEG fridge. These same items appeared in each of a sequence of four rooms, the only variation being the arrangement of the individual objects.

In the press release for this show, Carpenter rejected any fascination with the potential for the animation of technical devices, made possible by the Internet, as naïve fantasy. In this sense, the objects in the show are not futuristic but outmoded. The show deconstructs Mark Leckey’s talking fridge and its interpretation as a subject with agency in the sense of New Materialism. Unlike in the 1980s, rather than understanding the readymade in terms of its own fetish character, here Carpenter shows capitalism itself as a fetish that essentially forces the artist (and the viewer, of course) to dance around objects – as around the golden calf.

I met Merlin Carpenter during the Frieze Art Fair in 2004. I had a cheap chequered umbrella from a flea market in Amsterdam, and in London I needed it straight away. When he put up his own umbrella, I was amused by the similarity and commented on it. “Yes,” he replied, “but mine’s a Burberry.” As I recently found out, his Burberry was actually a fake ...

Kathrin Jentjens, 2016
translated by Nicholas Grindell

¹¹ In a self-critical text “The Tail That Wags the Dog” (2008) Carpenter sees no possibility to counter current developments in the art market with critique, suggesting instead, as a possible artistic strategy, that it is “better to feed the art world to the art world”. <http://www.merlincarpenter.com/tail.htm>.