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# Beauty of a legally questionable nature?

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**Translated by Michel Chevalier**

Based in Hamburg's red-light district, 12-18 presents monthly exhibits, maneuvers, and performances whose production context aims to confront the notions of validity and institutionalization in art. Towards this end, the notion of "material" itself is put to the test.

12-18 occupies an alternative bar in the heart of St.Pauli, away from the city's tradtional gallery circuit. This bar, the Molotow, regularly features late-night concerts in the post-punk, no wave, and primitivist noise genres.
In this sense, the initiative of the curators to invest this space with interdisciplinary and conceptual works, urban maneuvers, and performances reflects a specific challenge: to rally the underground and the art spheres. Ephemerality is a component of the process. The events usually last from noon to six. During this time, the public is welcome to walk through the bar/exhibit space.
Each organizing curator works as an artist as well. Their output all has in common an exploration of the possible modalites of perception via senses and spirit.Let us take, for instance, Michel Chevalier's installations which make use of oscillatory phenomena as they arise in various sound, light, or kinetic set-ups; the

*verbatims* of Markus Binner's name lists, repertoried in a given circumscribed space-time; or the computer based virtual environments which Anja Hertenberger offers us, with their retroactive and corrupted version of reality. It should be added that documents from all previous editions of the series have been archived at http://www.12bis18.de/.

The previous events already raised the question of art's legitimacy within a non-official and non-academic context. The April 8, 2001 edition of 12-18, the eleventh in the series, carried the title "beauty of a legally questionable nature." None of the works or actions featured could be construed as a constructed finality: their foundations were essentially situational,interventionistic maneuvers in the social fabric.

Nine artists or collectives presented works which, in the judgment of the curators, "questioned social, moral, and juridical limits." Non-terrorizing terrorism, bombs rendered inactive via their deployment in the world of ideas-- leaving it up to the public to trigger these explosives-- just where interactivity among visitors could finally unveil this potential stashed at the heart of things. Immaterial explosion.

Explosiveness, by the way, was the theme of Hamburg-based Thomas Thiel's project. A series of bags of powder and objects laid on the ground offered the ingredients for a high-detonation bomb. The premeditated separation of these elements rendered chemical reaction impossible, one is happy to say. Still, the *dispositif* was there, a hibernating bomb, made available to visitors with instruction manual included.

The idea of subversion was a theme of Danish artist Jens Hultquist's action, in which visitors were invited to incarnate the

disguised members of the Superflex collective. The real Superflex, shooting stars of the Danish art scene, were in no way informed of all this. This sort of action actually had certain precedents in Hamburg. A few years earlier, a gang of electronic music aficionados advertised a concert by the Residents. As it has been since the early 70's, the identity of the "Residents" was not revealed on stage, obviously, and the eyeball masks and quality of the Hamburg musicians made the deception perfect. Was Hultquist's Superflex piece a physical ubiquity maneuver, like those of the multimedia artist Nato, who routinely defies space and time by giving conferences at several electronic art festivals at one and the same time? What does maintained anonymity expose you to? An interesting question, no doubt, in our cyberspace age which allows cloning via pseudonyms and alter-egos in about the same way that intestines are filled in a sausage factory. Hultquist's maneuver stressed the problematic of alternative identities without, however, offering a hypothesis. In this sense, the impact of the swindle would have benefited if it had been carried out in a social context in which the real Superflex group were more popular.

Contrary to the above projects which were based in the Molotow, the technical and conceptual undertakings by the Danish collectives Kirsten Dufour/Lene Desmentik, www.bytbillet.dk/, New International Underground/John Stahn, and by the Quebec-based artists Benjamin Muon and César Saëz acted within the complex tangle of urban space. All works made the most of the notion of intrusion as a foundation of artistic production. Airwave intrusion, in the case of Dufour/Desmentik: a pirate radio transmitter was activated in several Hamburg neighborhoods over three days. A conversation between four women immigrants was broadcast, in which they related their experiences with integration in Hamburg. Their testimony could thus be heard by anyone with

a radio; stickers announced the broadcast time and frequency in each area. These stickers thus delimitated the geographical coverage area. A booklet containing the transcriptions and their translation was published a few months later. Dufour also played an important part in the festival by inviting many of the featured Danish artists.

Stickers and textual interventions were also the basis of the projects by New International Underground and by César Saëz, which both subverted  the city's commercial and advertising spaces. We witness here the affirmation of materialism as an illusion: the shadow of the real gets its due as visual elements are disseminated and repeated in the St. Pauli red-light district. Stickers distributed by New International Underground allow one to glue cartoon eyes at any place judged appropriate by Molotow visitors. So then, the looked-at objects in turn look back at you. Reality can on this occasion cast a gaze on our presence. These masquerade eyes may remind us of the presence of an "outer limit ", or organs on account of their ovoid shape, a caricaturistic animism. The eyes are ghosts of the viewer, his/her mirror, and the sum of all the interventions by the public create a hall of distorting mirrors in which billboards' messages are hijacked in a grotesque iconography.

At once complementary and different on account of its technique, César Saëz's systematic graffiti intrusions on advertising spaces, which were episodically carried out over three days, underline the representative potential of billboard icons. His work becomes a humoristic ode to the notion of tolerance, a liberal democratic obsession which often takes on ridiculous dimensions. Frankly illegal in its execution, the graffiti series simply features the words "it doesn't bother me". Armed with a large paintbrush and a pot of white paint, César supplements a good many posters with his message, thus opening the way for a rocky association between the

intervention and the original German message. This chance combination often yields comic effects, sometimes quite radical in their absurd revelation. Thus, a billboard urging citizens to denounce criminals features a photograph of a wall carrying ist *own* graffiti.: "If you were accosted and beaten in the street, don't you think that it would be your duty to call the police? " Then Saëz's answer: "it doesn't bother me". While he may have let aesthetics guide him on the spot, the meaning finds itself renewed for German-speakers. Hit me? Another billboard features youth fashion with the slogan "girls! girls!". The response at the bottom: "it doesn't bother me". On the sidewalk facing a tourist sex shop, whose dispay window is crammed with a kaleidoscopic assortment of dildos--"it doesn't bother me". The Esso gas station providing its clientele with 24-hour lunch, snacks, and cigarettes--"it doesn't bother me". The operetta, right next to the wax museum--"it doesn't bother me". The gleaming stainless steel wall of the AOL building--"it doesn't bother me". No, nothing does... "comfort and indifference" as Denys Arcand used to say...The extreme saturation created by the repetition of this phrase on all billboards in the area creates a kind of suspense. One searches out the next location, curious to see the ever-renewed effect of the phrase, of this obsessive political rectitude exercise unmasking the craziness of capitalism's pseudo-tolerance. If nothing *can* bother you, is it not because you're better off overlooking the complexity of your environment, propulsing it into a virtual world instead? The dialogue-in-writing set up by César Saëz's work reveals the magnificent decadence of the "discreet charms of the bourgeoisie," morphed, at present, into middle class security.

Benjamin Muon took up the tongue/language theme directly, if not idiomatically and literally. Picking up from where he left off a few weeks earlier at the Helsinki *Exit Festival*, he executed series of

situation-based actions linked by their use of raw beef tongues. Quite imposing, they bring to mind any or all of the following: abject sensuality, kinetic still lifes, hygene and disinfection threats, bacterial seduction. From the outset, the maneuver represented an iconoclastic ritual executed by a member of what Maurice Blanchot would call an "unspeakable community ". One action was an intrusive trip down the famous Herbertstrasse, a one-business street closed off to women and children. His audience must split into two groups when it reaches the metal palisades at the street entrance; these are intended to conceal the shop window "displays" from sidestreet passersby. At this point, Muon,who had until then been dragging two horse tongues behind him and the group, gives Anja Hertenberger one of the leashes. The women accompany her on a long detour around the block in order to meet up with the men (who proceed through debauchery-avenue). One pimp orders all cameras turned off: no documentation. Aghast clients view the scene. Sex workers turn a blind eye. The meeting place on the other side of the palisades is where women usually wait for their husbands to be done with whatever services the prostitutes have performed. But here the situation is inverted. The women took the longer way, so the men have to wait. The performance ends when the women join the men and Muon takes the second leash back in order to undertake his other actions.

The contribution made by the group www.bytbillet.dk took as its theme the circulation of goods and people. Personal-vehicle transport being the environmental disaster that it is (see the nice comments made on this topic by one of the characters in Eric Rohmer's film *Le Maire, L'arbre, et la médiathèque* ) wouldn't free access to public transportation be the best way to solve this problem? A collective of students from the Copenhagen art academy, www.bytbillet.dk aims to promote public transportation

by furnishing subway stations with containers in which commuters can leave their used but unexpired tickets (which are valid for two hours). This enables a number of people to use these tickets for their own trips, free of charge. The market-value of public transportation is thereby recycled and, in one stroke of environmental logic, free. This action created a little stir in Copenhagen. The Hamburg version featured interventions at several bus and subway stations (all torn down by officials) and a documentary installation at the Molotow. We would hope that this project finds its way to Quebec...

It is interesting to note that the majority of artists present at this edition of 12-18 managed to transgress as they did without getting into trouble with local authorities. The maneuvers presented by the Danish artists, being most often illegal in nature, rarely incorporated shocking elements or risks sufficiently great to attract the attention of the police. The question of the ramifications of these works in the social fabric is hard to gauge as of yet. Art in action was here inscribed in a series of subversive, yet tolerated, actions. The prudence and scheming of the artists and organizers prevented the collusion of the police against artistic activity. It remains an open question whether these works' artistic merit would have benefited if they had drawn the attention of law-enforcement authorities. Would this have spurred debate on a greater scale? Or, on the contrary, would it have jeopardized 12-18's activity. It's hard to evaluate the consequences. The 12-18 events are an important component of a renewal in the Hamburg alternative art-scene which, according to some, had dozed off a bit these last few years.This "renewal " is perhaps the sign of a renaissance in political involvement in the city's various communities. The previous weeks saw an anarchist and radically anti-capitalist "chaosday " break out in Berlin. Perhaps the political

stirrings in response to our savage brand of globalism will be the trigger for an explosion which, one may hope, will lead to a more equitable distribution of wealth. Nearly all the activities in this edition of 12-18 pointed in this direction. Is triggering the bomb the next step?

For visual documentation of the above exhibit see www.12bis18.de from: ESSE arts + opinions #43: *IMMATÉRIALITÉS* (Fall 2001), (revue@esse.ca, http://www.esse.ca/)