

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

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## **Kai Althoff: Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston**

David Rimanelli

Kai Althoff's career seemed to take off in a big way, at least in New York, after his 2001 exhibition at Anton Kern Gallery. In 2002, a suite of watercolors was exhibited to great acclaim in Laura Hoptman's "Drawing Now: Eight Propositions," at the Museum of Modern Art. With the exception of a passel of photographs and one offbeat sculpture at Kern (an agglomeration of two chairs and a sword), both spotlights on this hitherto relatively obscure German artist--obscure stateside, that is--gave the impression that his metier was painting and works on paper. Nicholas Baume, curator of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston's retrospective, "Kai Kein Respekt (Kai No Respect)," does a superb job of rectifying this skewed perspective: The show includes sculpture, photography, video, installations, music, and text pieces. For those who admire Althoff's "traditional" works but remain unaware of his German exhibitions or his jumbled and messy 1997 US debut at Kern, the ICA show was revelatory. It may also have spawned doubts: How, for instance, can one reconcile the Althoff of the often delectable paintings and drawings with the other artist, who seems indifferent to facture, or even legibility, in so many of the works on view? A rift opens between Althoff's mostly two-dimensional "commodity-fetish" art and everything else he does. Comprehending this extreme diversity as a unified practice isn't easy. The displeasing question is whether a detailed, highly nuanced understanding merits the trouble. The answer is yes, but the reward is an evolving picture of the artist that disintegrates at every turn--not Dorian Gray, but his portrait.

Certainly Althoff isn't the first to exploit a radical dispersion through ever-multiplying themes and media. The Dieter Roth retrospective recently on view at MOMA and P.S. 1 amplifies the historical context for Althoff's oeuvre. But with Roth's vast *Gartenskulptur*, 1968-96, in mind, Althoff's installation of a destroyed room at the ICA looks rather meager. (Still, who doesn't love a destroyed room?) Kippenberger's initial reception in the States is roughly analogous, as is his unmistakable non-signature signature style: Love the paintings and hotel-stationery drawings, but why should we endure the insistent drunken boorishness and his exorbitantly contrived persona? What's the point of the spoiled-brat contrarian stance for its own sake? Kippenberger's Cologne-based clique can serve as models for Althoff's musical pursuits, especially his band, Workshop; the same goes for his avowed attraction to "collectives." The abundance of works ranging from 1970s-type homespun stuff (felt banners, clay sculptures, very awkward drawings, virtually scribbles) to many species of eldritch crud counters his reception in the US as, pretty much, a highly marketable new German painter. Indeed, it usually takes more time for a pile of lurching, vaguely anthropomorphic carpeting to achieve the high-dollar visibility of an artwork that can be framed.

Althoff has been praised as a "history painter" delving into the collective unconsciousness of Germany. (And as he's a fashionable artist now, one can already anticipate the backlash that will revile him as aesthetically and politically retrograde.) The argument that Althoff is echt-Deutsche harks back to the worst of 1980s neo-expressionist blather, even as it offers a dicey refuge from the tedium of globalism. Yet not every practice can be so hyperefficiently rationalized as to effortlessly travel from Cologne to Gwangju without encountering a few interpretive speed bumps. That the artist's first large-scale exhibition should be in Boston, not Germany, itself strikes a discordant note; showing his idiosyncratic works on foreign ground further estranges them. There's something dandyish in this gesture of apparent refusal, given that Althoff appears keenly attached to Heimat. Jerry Saltz remarks in his *Village Voice* review of the 2001 "Impulse" show at Anton Kern that "from canvas to canvas, a flawed but exquisite family tree arises, real and illusory ghosts of the fatherland emerge, and the frightful Nazi motto 'Blut und Boden'... is given new meaning." This revamped notion of blood and soil could suggest another interpretation a contrario: Early on, Althoff evinced passionate interest in American music and

the English language itself. As the limited-edition album Ashley's (1989) demonstrates, the artist took inspiration from the Roche sisters' hippiedippy revivalism and sensitive-liberal image. Still, the "How German is it?" strain is inescapable, and ever more pronounced in Althoff's recent work, which, as Baume suggests, assumes characteristics of a quasi-Wagnerian mythology--not quite *Gotterdammerung*, but not the Indigo Girls, either.

Thematically, Althoff doses German history with a sexual undertow, evoking in some of his most frequently reproduced works an authoritarian, homosocial Wilhelmine society. These pictures waver between elegance and awkwardness in their execution; the dissipation of a fluid sensuous line in murky obscurity enhances a certain refinement. A 1993 cutout design for a display window at Galerie Lukas & Hoffmann, deliberately crude yet still mannered, depicts a beer-drinking fat boy with conspicuously rosy cheeks, his round head framed by a sunburst ruff. As he places a fraternal hand on the shoulder of his military companion, their gazes meet in mysterious complicity. (Hans, do you want to blow something up?) Homosexuality comes across either in this creepy, diffuse eroticism--recall and expand on Sylvia Plath's great line, "Every woman adores a Fascist"--or in works more suggestive of sunny, even utopian, '70s idylls. Traversing radically different iconographic realms that often spell G-A-Y, the artist undermines or at the very least strategically complicates his own identifications. He may yet face the accusation that not only is he not your average role model, he's a reactionary kook.

In his essay for the hybrid catalogue/artist's book accompanying the ICA show, Baume spends some time on *Erwachsen werden, Fabio* (Growing Up, Fabio), 1992, "sixteen drawings conceived as a children's book about coming to terms with gay sexuality ... This children's tale format ... suggests once more the dream of a countercultural world, in which homosexuality might become the natural subject of a charming children's book." He concludes this section with a quotation from the artist: "In general I like the past, and how it could have been and become a perfect future." Very well, but the vivid presence of those brutish yet compelling guys wearing peaked steel helmets sticks out awkwardly. The artist becomes ever more interested in "group dynamics," and you know what that means in Germany. In *Modern wird Labmgelegt* (Modernism Is Paralyzed), 1995--a large-scale installation first shown at Galerie Daniel Buchholz but "adapted" for the ICA--three cutout figures made of pen and card on fabric enact a complex, ironic scenario. In the original version, a Nazi officer sits watching two presumably avant-garde actors at their (final) rehearsal. David Bowie's album *Space Oddity* leans on a shelf in the background: The cultural repression of the Nazi era is viewed, so to speak, by the transgressive milieu of the early '70s, and, as Baume underscores, the slender, delicately poised Nazi mirrors Bowie's androgynous glam-rock persona. Althoff twists his own complicated heritage, achieving a queasy balance. Eschewing both radical agitprop and explicitly sexual representations, he suggests another prospect for "gay art" today, one that within his own work operates through discretion and ambiguity, through atmosphere. If anything, Althoff returns to the image repertoire of an aesthete not unlike Wilde's Lord Henry Wotton, Dorian Gray's intellectual "corrupter." Hardly out loud and proud, this posture permits a region of inferred meaning that skirts both the fist-raised-in-anger and the hopelessly stupid penises-I-have-known routines.

Baume extends Althoff's "characteristic blending of memory and fantasy" to the Roman Catholic ambience that permeates Cologne--hence the iconography of saints and sinners, particularly the decadent, deliquescing members of the quasi-Satanic "Urian Brotherhood"--but he stops short of identifying the artist as an actual rebaptized Catholic. This biographical detail further warps the artist's fissured persona. Paintings like *Antonius Eremita* and *Der Heilige Nikolaus von Myra*, both 2002, obviously traffic in Roman Catholic iconography; that the artist does not create them in the spirit of ironic arthistorical pastiche distinguishes his use of religious imagery from that of Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, 1987, to cite a glaring contrast. Liberal and postmodern-approved approaches to faith usually are intended or come off as ironic skepticism and implied faithlessness, not to mention often degenerating into smug bad art.

"Kai Kein Respekt" includes works that Althoff originally showed in exhibitions at the Kunstverein Braunschweig (with Armin Kramer, 2002) and the *Diozesanmuseum Freising* (with Abel Auer, 2003), a Catholic institution. The show in Braunschweig included explicitly religious imagery, such as a model of a monastery traversed by flaming footprints, but abjection and humor remained dominant, e.g.,

the aforementioned "destroyed room" and an altar to the comedians Erkan and Stefan (whose Turkish/hip-hop shtick is the German version of Ali G). For the Freising exhibition, Althoff mixed paintings with obvious spiritual subject matter--for example, some of saints, and *Liebe (Love)*, 2002, which is, appropriately, an abstraction--and works of a more secular nature, like the sordid *Er will alles sehen (He Wants to See It All)*, 2002. He and Auer collaborated on *Die Krippe*, a creche that they populated with store-bought figures and junk (the Freising museum maintains a large collection of nativity scenes). The kitsch funk of *Die Krippe* swerves back on Althoff's hippie sensibility; his interest in monastic life is colored by his attraction to other utopian and homosocial communities.

Nonetheless, it's hard to suppress doubts about the cohesion of his spiritual pursuits. Perhaps one isn't willing to swallow whole Althoff's seeming (or is it feigned?) naivete or his apparent indifference to the actual venues where his work is shown (more likely galleries than diocesan museums). With an excess of spirit, he cultivates an image of the artist/magus as the questing individual who wants to "see it all, feel it all." It's as if we're supposed to take Althoff and his merry collective as contemporary Arthurian types searching for some grail that might unify gay, Roman Catholic, and countercultural lifestyles within an aesthetic (yet still trinitarian!) mystery of faith. Kai plays Parzival, of course.

The intensity (and ambivalence) of these religious concerns further disrupts the reception of Althoff's oeuvre as a whole, as it collides with folk rock and Krautrock, nostalgia for the '70s and utopian longing, childlike or sinister homosexuality, and the Teutonic phantasmagoria. Disruptions like this should be welcome. Recent trend spotting in the art world dwells on modesty of materials and scale, nostalgia and collectivism, the prominence of drawing, a preoccupation with adolescent sensibility, etc. But it would be difficult for the trend engine to absorb the tangled networks of Althoff's practice within a single "on target" description. He elaborates a posture that is purposely and assiduously divided against itself yet not utterly ironic. Even so, the vagaries of the artist's intentions encourage interpretations that derail mere sincerity and authenticity. When so many artists settle eagerly for approved roles in the art world, the virtual focus of Althoff's elliptical narratives remains a moving target worth tracking.

David Rimaneli is a contributing editor of *Artforum*.

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