

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Flash Art



Kai Althoff
"Frausus"
Artist Performing





KAI ALTHOFF

GENERAL REHEARSALS FOR A NEW LANGUAGE

Angela Rosenberg

GERMAN ARTIST KAI ALTHOFF channels his wide imagination and feelings into small drawings and complex installations, as well as into music and lyrics for his band "Workshop."

Playfully shifting between styles, from romantic to expressionist to pop, he refers to historical sources, paintings, German history, religion, style, and design issues—or simply to his own roots and personal belief systems. With a skillful touch and dark humor, Althoff's imagery occasionally appears mediievally mystical, as well as chillingly schizophrenic, when dealing with dominance and submission, barbarism or repressed sexual desires.

Althoff's work is about dialect, the historical past, and the confusion of styles and languages that are re-crunched and digested like the occasionally muddled and hybrid words that he uses in his talking. For this interview the artist requested that his statements remain unaltered, to keep every minute aspect of his expression, even if not exactly correct in terms of syntax, grammar, or style.

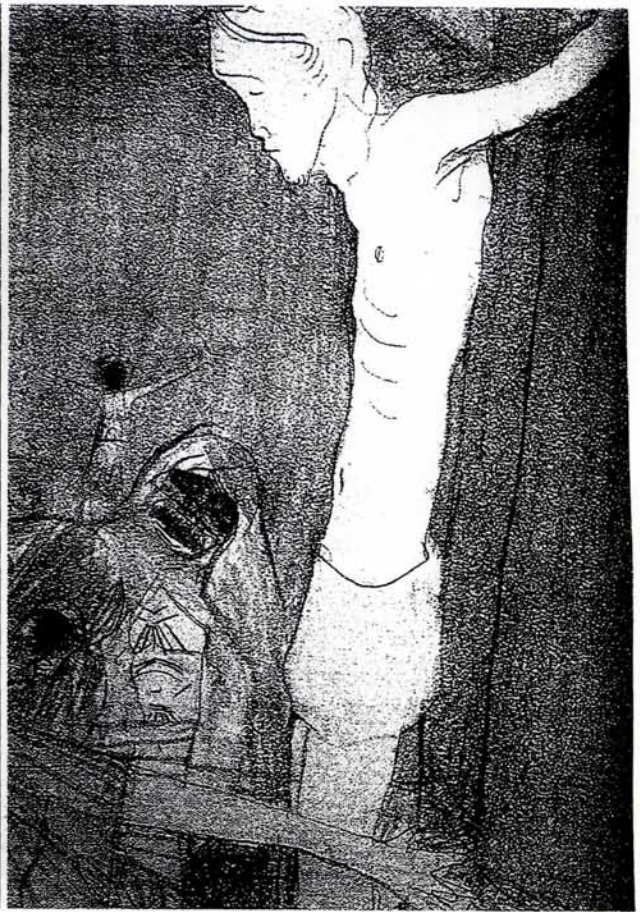
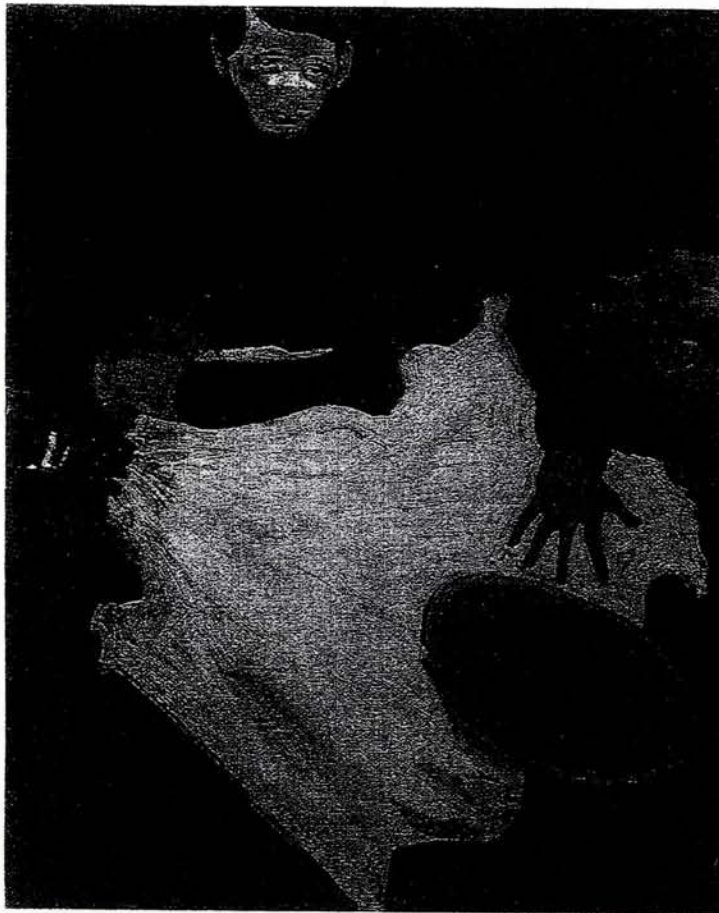
Angela Rosenberg: *You are not only an artist but also a musician with your band "Workshop." Why is it important for you to make a division between your work as a musician and your work as an artist?*

Kai Althoff: When I am all by myself and work on something that has become my only loving concern, it mostly makes its way to turn either into some sort of art or music, or even something else. I often think it's much better not to add to the world, but to give time to let yourself become aware of these wonderful ways the world has. You can be both artist and musician, you can pretend to be professional at one of them. In that moment it allows me to be at least two persons or more, defending each vehemently at its given time. Yes, I may be fed up with it, and know that professionalism kills all that I like about art. Yet I couldn't care less sometimes.

AR: *Your music has often been described as "krautrock." Is this a derogatory term for you?*

KA: No, why? It is music made by Germans in the eyes of foreigners. But I don't think we are too much into Rock. I do love the attempted and promised freedom of the mind that is believed to come with it, and it is fulfilled. Some technically cool players are off to capture their euphoric departure into future in an elaborate guitar solo, others try to plan a tone by listening endlessly to the language of their own bodies: to me

Untitled (Four men red and beige), 2001. Lacquer, paper, watercolor, and varnish on canvas, 27 x 20 inches. Courtesy Anton Kern, New York. Opposite: Ein noch zu weiches Gewese der Urian-Bündner, 1999. Installation view. Courtesy Christian Nagel, Cologne.



they all succeeded anyway, even when they failed, because it is all about finding things out about the people and not about efficiency. I can feel that in some krauty rocky and I'm beaming inside. But now, it can be even more complex, today.

AR: *How important is language for your work?*

KA: I am using language in both music and art. Thus, it is very important to me. I spend a lot of time to find the right words who'd exactly tell me what I want to know, that in themselves carry the preconceived contents that ease all misunderstanding. Or I build sentences that demand slow reading. I try to use easy, good words. I don't use technical terms, unless unavoidable, or foreign words. Often the more educated people are, the more hideous their talking becomes. You can tell something complex in straight words, if you're a good person. I love German dialects of various kinds, they influenced me a lot.

AR: *Is there anything specifically German in your work and the subjects you choose? Are you a storyteller?*

KA: There must be, as I consider it truly "Heimat" to me. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. I am telling stories on it some-

times. I tell them rather to myself in the first place. It happens almost automatically that these stories arise within, and I guess I use them to find out why I feel about something the way I do. Or where this feeling derives from; furthermore, why feelings of the same kind may be apparent in other, maybe fictional people's lives too. Maybe I'm trying to keep something apart from myself. Watching myself from afar and seeing all the others, thank God, amongst whom I live.

AR: *In your installations, paintings and drawings you refer to imagery of the Middle Ages, as well as to icons of popular culture, primarily from the 1970s. Would you compare your artistic strategy to the method of "sampling"?*

KA: Yeah, maybe sampling. I collect things, but I don't go and hunt for them. I see things, and some stir my heart so much, like some photograph in a magazine that tells everything I ever wanted to utter in that moment — or the way somebody has decorated the room he lives in, that kills me, and I watch in awe, stunned and keep quiet, and feel there's no more I'd want to see in life. Once I saw three young police officers on a sunny day, one female in the middle and two male to her left and right, slightly proud of their freshly gained pow-

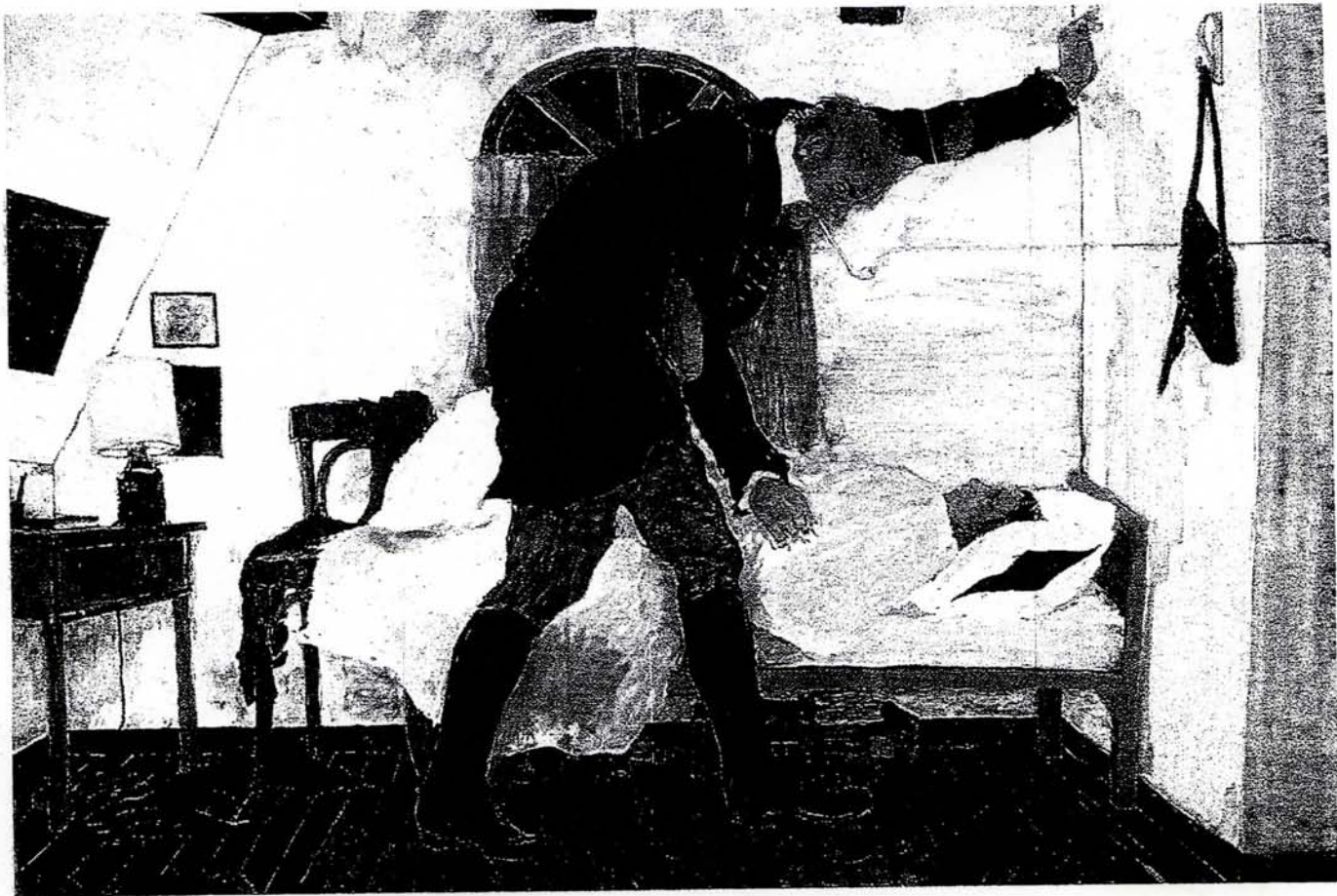
erful position. Yet still a little awkward in their walking and wish and eagerness to be helpful when asked by the public. It said: how beautiful a start in life can be. I keep things like that like an icon in my head.

AR: *Do you consider specific historical paintings or icons as relevant or influential for you? What about found material or news clippings?*

KA: As I said before, all of it may be of importance, also a historical painting that I like so much. It is also influential for me in the sense of "what it stands for to collect old Bavarian peasant furniture or Gothic church-sculpture." But then I look closely into the face of the saint's sculpture and it tells: you do wrong, you make me suffer even more.

AR: *Your installations and drawings refer to historical sources, but switch between times and styles. How important is timelessness for you?*

KA: All really important things in life are timeless. One is often unintentionally timeless, let's say when you love somebody, or when you are in such rage that you beat somebody up really badly. Very good art and music is timeless, but is also limited to only exist some time.



AR: What social and political relevance does "style" have for you? I read you consider "style as resistance?"

KA: Style, to me is what you can do to let outsiders know: I am not like you. I want to be like all of you. I am militant. I know exactly how I look. I am a member of a society which has very strong concepts about how to live and so on. Everything and everyone has got style, and therefore is visible in all the things I do too.

AR: You treat your sources from the 1970s not simply as archival material, but as perceptual memories that go right back into your own childhood. What are the reasons for using these sources now?

KA: That childhood is really a revelation to me. Everything is there already. It is ever so mysterious and all-over powerful to me. Things that happened have become archetypal in my mind, they loom large. The way things were perceived by myself then is something that I try to get back to again and again even I don't realize it happily. I seem to have absorbed something there badly, in the late 1960s and 1970s. Probably it could have been any other time. In general I like the past, and how it could have been and become a perfect future.

AR: Why do you focus on the behavioral codex of monks, as in the exhibition "Aus Dir?"

KA: I respect it deeply to devote one's life to God. I guess it makes you feel really free. You spend time with God and he gives you joyful composure to start to really see his creation, and act according to that, without hindrance. There's so much to say to that, but I'm not worth doing it.

AR: How do you relate to the concept of religion?

KA: I am religious.

AR: How do you want to involve the viewer?

KA: To get to know them through my work, and if they and I want to, became real friends.

AR: You describe the male body as imprisoned between self-destruction and glamour, repressed sexuality and dubious power relationships, especially in your crucifix drawings. Is sexuality an important issue in your work?

KA: Sometimes I thought I was all driven entirely by sexuality, I didn't repress it then, but then I found it a very horrible thought too, and revoltingly boring as well.

Untitled (Scene in room with a bed), 2001. Lacquer, paper, watercolor, and varnish oil on canvas, 40 x 60 x 4 cm. Opposite, from left: Untitled (table scene), 2001. Lacquer, paper, watercolor, and varnish on canvas, 50 x 40 cm. Untitled (Jesus Figure), 2001. Paper, particleboard, plastic foil, photography, plastic, 50 x 37 cm. Courtesy Anton Kern, New York.

But I can't help it, as I am emotionally moved by looking at flesh and how the body moves with hair and skin and bones and I fall in love with that all the time. So this is all in my work, even if I turn to repress it for some reasonable step. ■

Angela Rosenberg is a critic and art historian based in Berlin.

Kai Althoff was born in 1966 in Cologne, where he lives and works.

Selected solo shows: 2001: Anton Kern, New York; Daniel Buchholz, Cologne; 2000: NEU, Berlin; ACME, Los Angeles; 1999: Christian Nagel, Cologne; 1998: Daniel Buchholz, Cologne; NEU, Berlin.

Selected group shows: 2001: "Neue Welt," Kunstverein, Frankfurt; 2000: "Europe: Different Perspectives on Painting," MuMI, Francavilla al Mare (Italy); 1999: "German Open," Kunstmuseum, Wolfsburg; "How will we behave," Robert Prime, London; "oLdNEw-tOwN," Casey Caplan, New York; 1998: "Arsviva 98/99," Portikus Frankfurt/Kunstverein, Braunschweig; 1997: "Time Out," Kunsthalle, Nürnberg; "Home Sweet Home," Deichtorhallen, Hamburg.