

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Diedrich Diederichsen, "Kai Althoff," *Artforum*,  
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## ARTFORUM

### Kai Althoff



Left: View of "Kai Althoff: and then leave me to the common swiffts," 2016–17. Photo: Kai Althoff. Below: Kai Althoff, untitled poster for a school bazaar, 1974, tempera and felt-tip pen on paper, 15% x 11%.



## Kai Althoff

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

Diedrich Diederichsen

**AN ART MUSEUM** is a public place. Yet this status is often challenged by the argument that it excludes vast sections of the public and ultimately serves only a narrow—even elite—audience. In response, museums mobilize an army of educators, organize participatory programming, and deploy endless wall texts in their efforts to engage a wider public, as if didacticism alone could improve class relations. In this contested climate, the measure of an exhibition's success often becomes, by default, the breadth of its appeal, the sheer number of visitors it can draw to the museum.

From time to time, though, someone sets out on the opposite path, as if striving to make the museum not more but *less* accessible, to *repel* visitors rather than attract them. They may even proclaim that art's ability to remain inaccessible within a public arena is one of its fundamental prerogatives, demanding, as Édouard Glissant put it in an entirely different context, a "right to opacity." This strategy is only self-contradictory at first glance. The point is not just to make art inaccessible but to use this very inaccessibility to promote its appeal, to seduce and impress. The public is not merely rebuffed, in other words, but offered a glimpse behind the scenes—although not an actual invitation into the chamber of secrets. (It's a tried

and true formula, the *modus operandi* of many organized religions and any number of countercultural groups.) In the 1970s, for example, Harald Szeemann coined the phrase *individual methodology* to describe the approach of artists like Joseph Beuys, Michael Buthe, or Antonius Höckelmann, who individually behaved as if they were a tribe or a multitude.

Many of those artists were from Cologne, and a similar strategy has been adopted by the Cologne-born, New York-based artist Kai Althoff, a fact made abundantly clear by his current "retrospective" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. After waiting in a line that moves at the speed of economy check-in at a major airport, visitors are treated to a host of strategies of obfuscation. Taken as a whole, Althoff's exhibition grandly proclaims: You'll never understand this! But at the same time: How beautiful it would be if you could! And: How beautiful it is, too, precisely because you don't! (Many of the subcultural groups that Althoff depicts in his work—ranging from German journeymen of a distant past to Hasidic Jews from contemporary Brooklyn—also operate like this, and in fact seem to have attracted the artist via an element of danger or exclusivity.) In other words, what Althoff offers us actively and passively (and as the literature around him often claims) is a new variant on the historical type of the dandy. The artist is cultivating a certain image of himself—showing the public, in public, that he doesn't accept their standards. Althoff says as much in a discussion with Laura Hoptman (who cocurated the show with Margaret Ewing) published in the exhibition catalogue: He doesn't even really see himself as an artist; the most that could be said is that he has occasionally wanted to impress someone with his art.

In the same conversation, Althoff remarks that in many ways he is simply continuing to play as he did when he was a child; that what makes him different from other people is that he never stopped. This concept of the child-like artist, creating work just for himself and his friends—without any adult responsibility, without decisions, agendas, ideas, principles, precursors, successors, models, or worldviews—embodies an alternate reconciliation of art and the world. This is not the political collapse of art into life advocated by the early-twentieth-century avant-garde, but one that is more narcissistic and petit bourgeois.

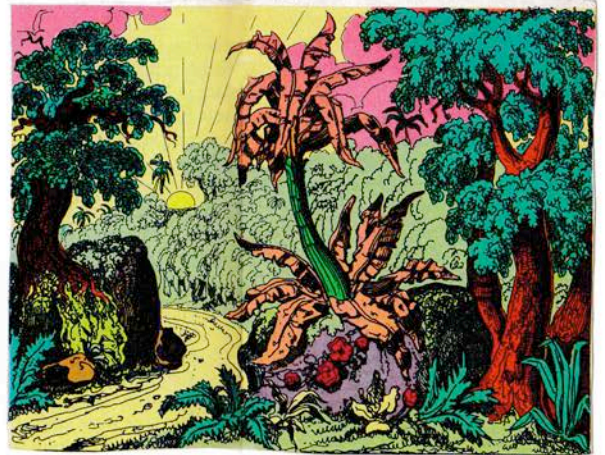
Indeed, one way of understanding what Althoff has done would be to see it as the installation of an imposingly obsessive, outsize teenage bedroom on MOMA's sixth floor. The artist abducts us into an attic-like architecture that is still as white as the eponymous cube but infinitely more eccentric, eschewing ninety-degree angles and bursting with a surfeit of objects, pictures, assemblages, display structures, and supports. There seems to be more on view here than in all the other galleries of this huge museum combined. The checklist features more than two hundred items, including numerous nested "environments" that are, in turn, made up of countless individual parts—some found objects, some made by the artist.

But Althoff does not simply overwhelm through sheer density; he mounts a more subtle and subversive attack on comprehension. Every forking branch of his hermeticism, every nuance of his private aesthetic sensibility, in fact explicitly promises legibility—and in so doing, speaks clearly and emphatically about the precarious and social nature of the act of understanding. All of the drawings, the vases, the seemingly random strips of fabric, the collections of tableware, the chandeliers, the posters, the fragments of

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Left: View of "Kai Althoff: and then leave me to the common swifts," 2016–17. Photo: Kai Althoff. Below: Kai Althoff, untitled, 1978, offset lithograph, 6 1/4 x 7 1/2".



music that rise up from stylishly designed speakers recessed in the wooden floorboards, the musty piles of dirt, the paintings—all of this immensely virtuosic, perennially astonishing, and allusion-rich work is so effective because it reminds viewers of a specific culture, albeit one that is more sensed or implied than attached to a specific place. Even though he never makes direct quotations and is rarely unambiguous in his references—which range from the fluid graphics of Swinging London to quixotic picture books from a childhood that never existed to posters in the contrasting colors

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of an earlier era more optimistic about the communicative potential of printed matter—Althoff creates a mixture that is simultaneously enigmatic and oddly familiar.

Ultimately, the relative inaccessibility of his work is less a consequence of his esoteric elitism than a kind of anti-modern anachronism. His sources stem from the applied arts such as illustration, interior design, and advertising, favoring styles and techniques that have disappeared or been forgotten and are always more quirky than straightforward—the unlikely record sleeves he has invented for the Bee Gees and Eminem are prime examples. There are strains of nostalgia, too, in his magical world, which bring to mind the romanticization of rubble and vacant lots in "magic realist" West German postwar literature (by the

likes of Hans Erich Nossack, Oskar Loerke, and Elisabeth Langgässer), as well as in Berlin's underground music and art scenes after the fall of the wall. There are also references to an idyllic, quasi-mythical past in mostly male (and mostly religious, or at least monastic) social groups, communicated through figures in traditional dress with exaggerated body language and depicted with stylistic tropes of typically masculine representation. Yet there is always a darker side to Althoff's language, a looming threat of violence—here, a face distorted into a grimace; there, a menacing gesture. In contrast to the romantic topos of ruins, this rubble has a real history; it really stinks, and the guys swaggering around it have real fists.

In Hoptman's interview with the artist, she turns this tension into a stark dichotomy, arguing that on the one hand he makes "work that is implicitly, or explicitly violent . . . physically repellent" and that on the other she sees "beauty" everywhere in his art. Althoff, of course, doesn't agree and responds aggressively: "I think you are blind." Indeed, this hostility is part of a larger anti-institutional gesture. The catalogue partially excludes art-world academics (despised by Althoff); a selection of the artist's nonprofessional friends takes their place. Instead of a foreword, MOMA's director wrote a sensitive and thoughtful letter that begins "Dear Kai"—reading it feels like listening in on a mediation session between a teacher and a difficult student. And the eccentric layout of the catalogue exudes the desire of the most famous museum in the world to permit (even embrace) an exception to its usual practices. But MOMA isn't alone in this wish. The entreaty "Please deconstruct me" or the tender query "Do you want to be my institutional critique?" have become standard refrains of institutions themselves.

Ironically, Althoff may have shown us that only a romantic who has no truck with critical discourse can satisfy this masochism, by breaking with the conventions of critique altogether. Yet his absolute (and thus nondialectic) negation of the museum is too romantic and too reactionary to move beyond the aporias of earlier attempts at institutional critique. And his predilection for dangerous subcultures fails politically when he includes the neo-Nazis of the Viking Youth (one of their propaganda posters is printed on a mirror in the galleries) as if they were just another one of his charming outsider groups. Or is this just semantic dirt, to be understood on the same level as the real debris in the exhibition space? The power of the artist's cabinet of wonders, the panorama opened up by his restless and impatient spirit, the installation-as-battlefield of which he remains so powerfully in control, lies in a different dialectic, one that he has created between the stubbornly elusive *gestus* of the exhibition as a whole and the endless teeming of its constituent parts, which forges not the synthesis of easy resolution but rather an overwhelming sense of self-reinforcing chaos. The tension of this total inclusion brings the artist's dedication to creating a documentary record of so many intense fictional lives, an effort tragically given over to entropy, right back to a concept of art that—neither romantic nor idyllic—resolutely refuses the reconciliation of sense. □

"Kai Althoff: and then leave me to the common swifts" is on view through Jan. 22.

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