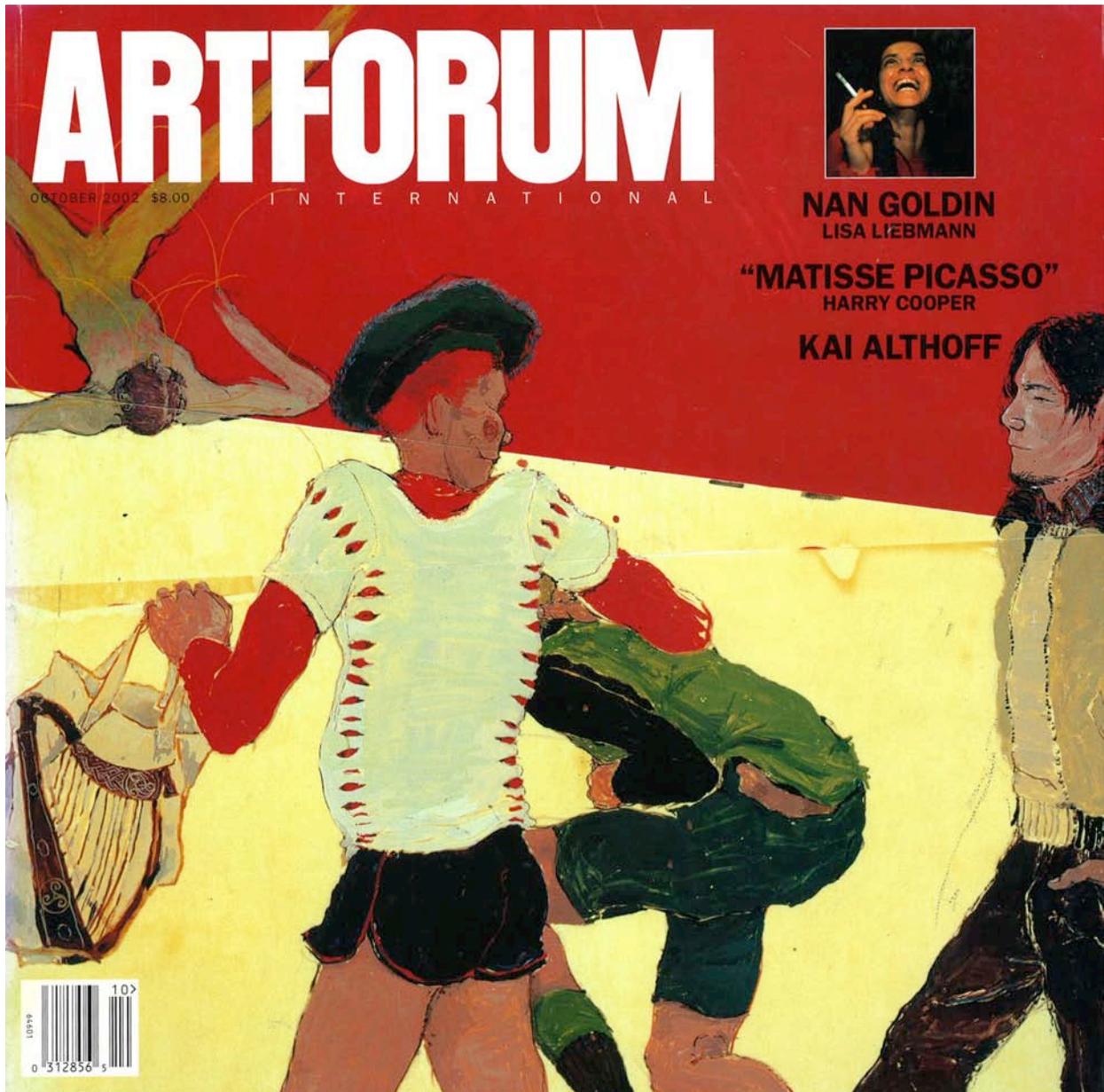


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Cover: Kai Althoff, *Untitled* (detail), 2001, lacquer, paper, watercolor, and varnish on canvas, 27 1/2 x 19 1/2 x 1 1/2". Inset: Nan Goldin, *Joana laughing, l'Hotel, Paris* (detail), 1999, color photograph, 30 x 40".

This page, from top: Adolph Menzel, *Hand Holding a Paint Dish* (detail), 1864, gouache on canvas, 20 x 25". Karen Yasinsky, *Still Life with Cows* (detail), 2000, production still from a color film in 16 mm, 6 minutes. Blinky Palermo, *To the People of New York City*, 1976, installation view, Blinky Palermo studio, Düsseldorf. Photo: Nic Tenwiggenhorn. Martin Kippenberger, *Ohne Titel* (detail), 1961, acrylic on canvas, 118 1/2 x 78 1/2". From the series "Lieber Maler, male mir" ("Dear painter, paint me").



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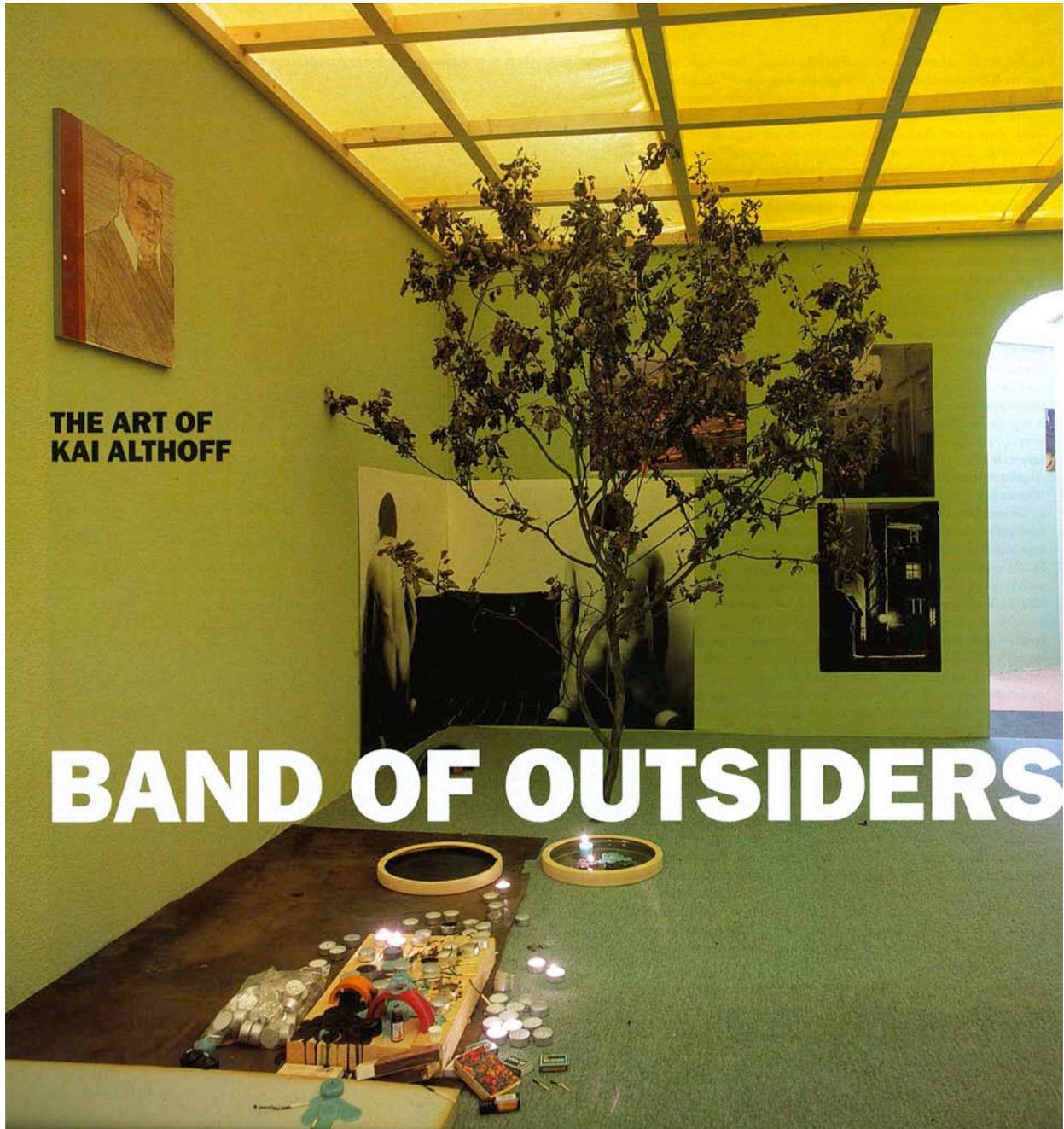
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TOM HOLERT

Kai Althoff neither owns nor rents a studio. Not that his production doesn't merit one—galleries in Cologne, Berlin, and New York all show and sell his work. Althoff simply refuses an extra space, unwilling to divide the spheres of work and life. He prefers that his output, even when large in scale and technically complex, be conceived and, if possible, realized in the privacy and relative autonomy (that is, without the busy appurtenances common to most contemporary artists' places of work) of his carefully furnished two-room apartment in the center of Cologne.

This atelier abstinence may be unusual for a successful artist. But Althoff (born 1966), who avoided art school and instead created a persona based on a number of flamboyant, dandyish refusals and a range of multifaceted productions, doesn't fit today's bill of the artist as hyperprofessionalized international road warrior. He answers even less to the desires of a cultural moment whose main criterion of legitimation continues to be "the now." Althoff's dense and difficult work, which spans several registers (installation art to literary writing, painting to performance, music to pottery), eschews obvious signifiers of "contemporaneity." He systematically undoes the shackles of the present and retreats into pasts both fictional and actual, even biographical, inhabiting hybrid "cultural histories" of heretofore unimagined sincerity, euphoria, and cruelty.

Visiting Althoff's apartment in June, I noticed a drawing leaning against the wall in his combo living room-kitchen, of a man with a twisted leg, the skin and flesh missing around the knee, the bony joint exposed. An uncanny figure of intense pain and passion, rendered uncompromisingly beautiful with sleek features enhanced by a somber palette, it was a close relative to the protagonists in the battlefield and thrasher images that Althoff presented in 2001 at Anton Kern Gallery, New York, and in the 1999 installation *Ein noch zu weiches Gewese der Urian-Bündner* (roughly, "A still too soft comportment of the Urian Fraternity") at Galerie Christian Nagel, Cologne. The works offered insights into traumatic worlds of gang ritual, sacrifice, scapegoating, and torture, which almost seem to have been shaped by René Girard's anthropology of mimetic interaction, violence, desire, and revenge.

A couple of days before I noticed the drawing, a painting had

been propped against the same wall in Althoff's apartment, destined for the exhibition that opened last month at the Kunstverein Braunschweig: a blue-green image of grimacing carnivalesque faces and grisly (or happy?) monster masks, painted in various layers of watercolor and boat varnish, stylistically reminiscent of James Ensor or CoBrA-esque neo-primitivism. The somewhat crude image is a departure from Althoff's always already varied imagery. He imagined it blown up and displayed as a poster—a move that's logical enough in an ongoing process of negating stylistic coherence.

The Braunschweig exhibition, which features new work by Althoff along with paintings by the Berlin-based artist Armin Krämer (whom Althoff invited to show in the same space), is another instance within the artist's repertoire of seemingly self-defeating gestures. Not only the fantasy of unity, stylistic and otherwise, but also commonplace ideals of perfection and virtuosity are under ceaseless attack by Althoff, who is paradoxically well aware that his obvious talent as a draftsman has contributed to his success.

Thinking out loud about his plans for Braunschweig, Althoff insisted on a low-tech, low-everything approach. He intends to exhibit discarded mattresses and other abject material conscientiously plucked from a waste-disposal site, which will no doubt fill the Kunstverein with the sickly sweet smell of decomposing matter. In another section he says he'll present videotaped footage of the comedy duo Erkan & Stefan on simple monitors. Althoff developed a secret affection for this hugely successful German team, whose work recalls the British comedian Ali G. The two comedians impersonate working-class "lads"—one Turkish, the other German—indulging in ersatz ghetto jargon and adolescent sexism and racism.

Opposite page: Kai Althoff, *Aus Dir (Out of you)*, 2001. Installation view, Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne. This page: Kai Althoff, *Dirk Fritthof Waanders*, 1991, stills from a color video, 9 minutes 48 seconds.

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One of their signature syntactically challenged lines—"Do you need problems?"—clearly establishes that this pair of ultimate doofuses, so ensnarled are they in their own idiotic self-referential language games, couldn't get into any real trouble.

Althoff's foray into idiot culture might appear a familiar *épater* gambit, but his interest is of a different order. As absurd and ridiculous as this entertainment is, he nevertheless somehow relates to it. He claims to have no interest in exposing a critical truth about the comedians or their cult following. Rather it seems to be, if not a matter of shared sentiment, then a determinedly noncondescending fascination with these guys who inhabit the very basement of pop culture.

Another project in the Braunschweig show is a new video, *Dirk 2002*, dedicated to Dirk Waanders, a schoolmate of Althoff's who is now an actor in Düsseldorf. Althoff lost contact with Waanders when they were thirteen, but a little over a decade ago they met up again, and in 1991 Althoff, strongly drawn to his rediscovered comrade's personality, made a short video, *Dirk Frithjof Waanders*. Filmed in the old university town of Göttingen, in the vicinity of a turn-of-the-century villa where members of the student corps meet to drink—and to engage in bloody duels—the video opens with a scene showing the students' caps and a saber, accessories of fencing, a nationalist tradition and a rite of passage dating to the nineteenth century. As the film develops, however, another story is pursued: The character played by Waanders tries to persuade a girl who lives in the building to let him in. When she refuses, claiming her parents have forbidden her to see him, the enraged Waanders vandalizes her car, a Citroen 2CV, the archetypal student vehicle of the '70s.

Intimations of ritual violence and the vain entreaties of a spurned lover are hopelessly intertwined.

The new video turns out to be a twisted documentary tribute to Waanders, the continuing object of Althoff's curious fascination and admiration. Not simply a stage (and occasional TV) actor but also a kind of polymath who is shown painting (romantic landscapes), playing music (Mozart on a cheap electric piano), and writing (a self-referential piece of theater on theater), Waanders's all-encompassing creative urge mirrors Althoff's own myriad talents and artistic activities. Despite the fact that the character amounts to an almost unassimilable hybrid, Althoff permits himself to be absorbed by a figure and a type of artistic commitment that belie his own sophisticated disposition.

Waanders's romantic endeavor modestly strives for universality; he desires to make "a contribution," as he puts it in the video. His somewhat anachronistic, Goethean language and dilettantish enthusiasm are as compelling as they are touching. Still, one can't help but be concerned as to how this documentary—filmed by Althoff over the course of a couple of months—will be received. A misinterpretation of the work as purely celebratory documentation, or more likely a cynical send-up of an "intriguing weirdo," is a distinct possibility.

Althoff is conscious of the risk he is running with *Dirk 2002*. Most of his art is about the exposure of the deviant, marginalized, unexpected, incorrect, or inappropriate and its utopian dimension. He is constructing a kinship, a communication with the excluded or neglected, but also with the superior and wicked other (the ubiquitous "you" of his many texts), which veers to a relation located

This page, left: Kai Althoff, *Untitled*, 2001, chairs and sword, dimensions variable. Right: Kai Althoff, *Untitled*, 2001, lacquer, paper, watercolor, and varnish on canvas, 15 1/2 x 23 1/2 x 1 1/2". Opposite page: Kai Althoff, *Dirk 2002*, stills from a color video, 83 minutes.

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outside the social and symbolic order, always bordering on the opaque and the embarrassing. This aspect of his work could not be more programmatically spelled out than in the title of the album released last year by Workshop, the longtime musical collaboration between Althoff, Stefan Abry, and Stefan Mohr: *Es liebt Dich und Deine Körperlichkeit—ein Ausgeflipter* (Loving you and your physicality—a freak). The title implicitly demands—and here moralism is clearly the issue—the total surrender of oneself to another, the acceptance of the physical and psychological force she or he may exert on you, the freak. Communication collapses into a kind of unconditional expression whose effects are hardly predictable.

THE TITLE IMPLICITLY DEMANDS THE TOTAL SURRENDER OF ONESELF TO ANOTHER, THE ACCEPTANCE OF THE PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FORCE SHE OR HE MAY EXERT ON YOU, THE FREAK. COMMUNICATION COLLAPSES INTO A KIND OF UNCONDITIONAL EXPRESSION WHOSE EFFECTS ARE HARDLY PREDICTABLE.

Althoff's drawings and paintings from the last few years in particular display traces of historical "expressionisms"—Schiele, Klimt, Grosz, Dix, even early Northern Renaissance painting. Deploying the stylistic vocabularies associated with these painters and draftsmen, he simultaneously tests the conditions for the possibility of the expressive gesture as such. In fact, he seems to utilize the resources of earlier expressionisms to establish a kind of subexpressionism, downgrading the grandiloquence of these historical models to upload a lower realm of expressive possibility. From this level it may be possible to resist claims to the universalism of human suffering and pleasure and keep the question of expression open—open to idiosyncratic answers as well as ideas of freedom and selfhood incompatible with these values as they are customarily defined.

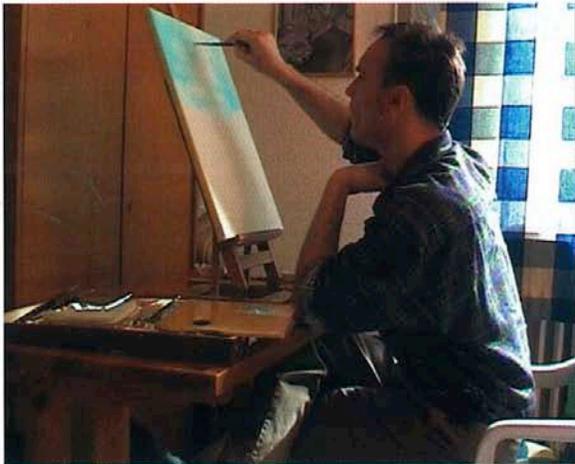
Embellishing the cover of the self-edited *Gebärden und Ausdruck* (Gestures and expression) (2002), a quasi survey of the first decade of Althoff's career as a visual artist, is a silhouette comprising figures with elongated limbs against a faux-futuristic landscape of objects in

motion. Transferred directly onto the cover in traditional book-binding fashion, the image recalls elements of expressionist woodcuts from the early twentieth century, and more precisely a certain immediately recognizable style of graphic design associated with religious publishing in Germany from the postwar period up to today.

Neo-expressionist religious imagery may be completely derivative and may issue from a place far beyond the world of contemporary art, but Althoff's appropriation and variation of this particular visual code forgoes any intentional irony. Instead he primarily seems to be on the lookout for communicative patterns and possibilities—intersubjective, intracollective. Reflecting this quest for seemingly

obsolete though still patent modes of communication was the installation *Aus Dir* (Out of you), 2001, Althoff's investigation into transgressive forms of religious ritual, shown at Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne. The installation set the stage for the virtual performance of an absent fictional drama of exclusion and exceptionalism borne of Nietzschean ideas, further developed in the book *Ja, Herrkenn mich genau. Wo wohnt ihr?—Ab heute bei dir* (roughly,

"Yes, recognize me exactly. Where are you staying?—From today on at your place"). The publication not only selectively documents the installation and adds extra visual material but also provides a textual example of what might be called Althoff's character building. Anticipatory, imaginary portraits of outsider selves (or "channeled" personalities, as Jutta Koether calls them in *Gebärden und Ausdruck*) wander around the mythic borderlands of art and life. Written in Althoff's signature prose style, loaded with lyrical condensations, idiomatic anachronisms, and affected syntax, the text in *Ja, Herrkenn mich genau* tells the story of a timid and fearful fellow who served, in some manner, as a "psychosocial garbage can." Out of his depth and overwhelmed by the demands of everyday life, he fails miserably whenever he is forced to cope with the competitiveness and malice within his social environment. Consequently he gradually slips out of the social structure and into a state of liberating disregard, a condition of independence close to nature, nakedness, and nuttiness. Hence the loser turns out to be truly inspired.



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Resurrected as an almost saintlike figure, he demands the direct, absolute expression and openness so dear to Althoff. As the artist writes in his idiosyncratic prose: "He wants to know you, by all means, what this world is."

Althoff's texts, images, and installations function as meticulously designed models (or ruins) of extremely specific life worlds, furnished by and for fictional individuals or collectives whom the artist imagines and identifies with—often to the point where he actually *becomes* them. It's a tricky game of ethical demands and technologies of the self. For on the one hand everything seems to lead toward an art of pure, unmediated expression; on the other, what emerges is a highly developed sense of the artificial and performative nature of such a project. If Althoff preaches direct and therefore "truthful" expression, he is also a connoisseur of camp "imageologies" with a strong knack for self-stylization and double entendre. Thus alienation leads down the road of utopian unconditionality.

Althoff is everywhere and nowhere, speaking in tongues, drawing as if he were someone else, as if the other, invented (dreamed?) person had taken control of him, if only temporarily. Figures he has created in his drawings and paintings—students, monks, villains, ritualists, folksy types, fictive pop musicians—may later appear outside the image, incarnated by the artist himself. (The beard he currently sports, which might be described as vaguely Abe Lincoln-ish, premiered in drawings from 1998. Hence he has, to a certain extent, become identical with the image he projects.)

"In my family of friends, there is a desire for the intimacy of blood family, but also a desire for something more open-ended," Nan Goldin once wrote about a social world built around a way of life rather than biological kinship. Within his own milieu, populated of course by identificatory projections, by "channeled" individuals, Althoff also seems to look for a family built around a "similar morality" (Goldin).

Fascination with model families and sects, a crucial though underestimated phenomenon within artistic practice throughout the twentieth century, from Stefan George's circle to Fassbinder's

troupe or, for that matter, temporary families in the Cologne art world, is poignantly present in Althoff's installations as well as his musical work and especially his videos. Here, collaboration and the group dynamics that result are played and replayed, with the effect that a kind of cryptic criticism of the normativity involved in the ideas of artistic communities emerges. The status and function of films like *Workshop: Einsicht gewährt* (Workshop: insight offered), 1993, *Grenzen am Rande der Neustadt* (Frontiers on the edge of the new town), 1994, *Jennecken*, 1996, or *30 millions d'amis* (30 million friends), 1996 (made with Cosima von Bonin), are difficult to define, not only in the context of Althoff's production but also in terms of their place in the broader field of film- and videomaking by visual

ALTHOFF IS EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE, SPEAKING IN TONGUES, DRAWING AS IF HE WERE SOMEONE ELSE, AS IF THE OTHER, INVENTED (DREAMED?) PERSON HAD TAKEN CONTROL OF HIM. FIGURES HE HAS CREATED IN HIS PAINTINGS MAY LATER APPEAR OUTSIDE THE IMAGE, INCARNATED BY THE ARTIST HIMSELF.

artists. Not exactly the stuff of black boxes or plasma screens, their home-movie quality goes against the grain of curatorial ambition (indeed, Althoff is determined to avoid the state-of-the-art video installation that has become ubiquitous in galleries and museums).

Showing how the micropolitics of inclusion and exclusion evolve, sometimes even catastrophically, within small collectives, some of the videos address the permeable walls between the alleged self and the character one is meant to inhabit while interacting with other group members. The groups portrayed (and produced in the process) are part fiction, part real. Althoff is interested in keeping the line blurry. Largely the result of collaborations with close friends from Cologne, the videos feature endless rehearsals, discussions, dialogues, and bits of awkward acting, recalling moments in Straub/Huillet, Fassbinder, and Bresson but refraining from any overtly filmic reference.

Cautiously avoiding center stage, Althoff, often in a self-abnegating fashion, slips into unbecoming roles—morons, drunks, babblers.

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Opposite page: Kai Althoff, Michaela Eichwald, Ralf Schauf, and Jens Wagner, *Aus lauter Haut (Out of nothing but skin)*, 1998–2001, stills from a color video, 55 minutes. This page, left: Kai Althoff, *Untitled*, 2001, lacquer, paper, watercolor, and varnish on canvas, 15 1/2 x 15 1/2 x 1 1/2". Right: Kai Althoff, *Untitled*, 2001, lacquer, paper, watercolor, and varnish on canvas, 27 1/2 x 23 1/2 x 1 1/2".

The beauty he and his collaborators are in search of is concealed in archetypal (mis)behaviors, in self-destructive forms of meanness and madness, or in a typical commitment to long conversations about the way the group in question should present itself to the outside world.

Aus lauter Haut (Out of nothing but skin), 1998–2001, a video made collectively by Althoff, writer and artist Michaela Eichwald, artist Ralf Schauf, and social worker Jens Wagner, tells the story of a band of amateur musicians on the brink of minor success. After winning a local prize, the foursome begins to reflect on the direction the group should take at this crucial point. Should they continue working with the female singer, whose vocal style and cryptic lyrics have become an object of dispute and disagreement? One member is scandalized by her new song about lamp shades made of human skin.

Eventually, after several unpleasant encounters between individual members competing for women or arguing over power dynamics, the band discovers the holy grail of improvisation, of ravishing, boundless interplay. The tiny rehearsal room becomes a space of creativity and fulfillment. Transcending its internal psychosocial problems, the group reaches for the next level of expressive communication.

However, the full experience of this breakthrough is hardly trans-

latable. The explosion of dilettantish creativity remains encapsulated within the mental space of the people directly involved. The intensity of the musical adventures is as difficult to grasp from outside their world as are the themes and issues dealt with in the characters' conversations. At the same time, the very opacity of the group's idiom, both musically and in terms of language and gesture, provides the key to a peculiar earnestness—an earnestness not free of doubts and occasional moments of irony and ridicule, but one that nonetheless lends the whole project a characteristic gravity, despite all the absurdity and farce.

As it happens, the group apparently actually exists. Althoff, Eichwald, Schauf, and Wagner play together in the same band that is portrayed in the video. A heated argument among the members prevented their first public concert (meant to accompany the presentation of the video in Hamburg and Berlin in June). Meanwhile the dispute, which almost caused the band to split up, has been resolved. Now the four are planning to release an album of the recordings they made during the production of the video. By which time they also have to come up with a name for themselves. Without a doubt a serious matter—and a subject of relentless debate. □

Tom Holert is a critic based in Cologne.

