

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Diedrichsen, Diedrich, "House Style", *Artforum International*, N. 3, (November 1996), p. 32/33.

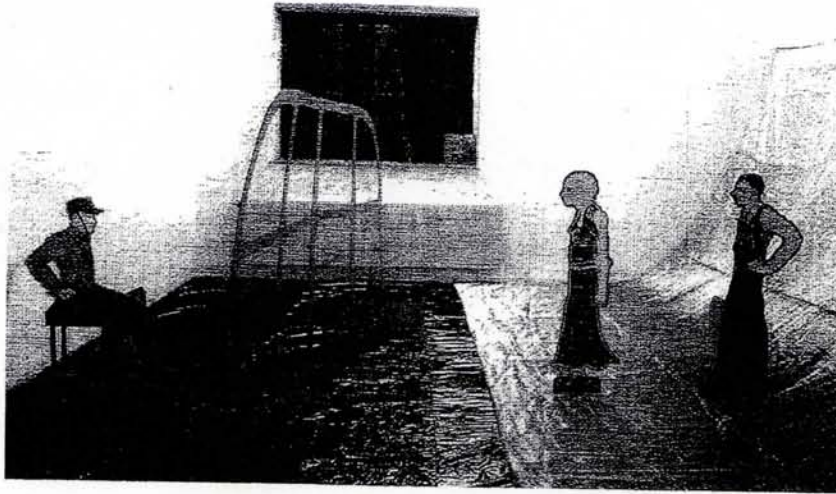
## **DIEDRICH DIEDERICHSEN ON KAI ALTHOFF**

# **HOUSE STYLE**

**EARLY 1996 AT the Galerie Daniel Buchholz: Kai Althoff sits on a mattress, stripped to the waist, and smokes. On a turntable spins his as-yet-unreleased disk predating his founding of the band Workshop, one of the leading electronic/dance-music groups in Germany today. With its excessively monotonous and unrelated patterns within a limited range of timbres, the music sounds like an experimental adaptation of Can, Cologne's most important contribution to music since Stockhausen. Althoff's chest is painted in eccentric violets, browns, and reds, the colors of wild berries, as are two candles in the background. In the foreground lies the album cover of the record he presents without uttering a sound. Done up in the same Hawaiian-Punch tones, its felt-marker illustrations show scenes of political, social, and sexual liberation, but in a glamorously fashionable style, a bit like Heinz Edelman's late-'60s illustration and animation.**

**If contemporary German art seems to be irreconcilably divided into camps (e.g., those who privilege a factographic aesthetic of information versus those who cling to an autonomous private sphere of contemplation; or one that champions a nonreferential play of "styles" versus an engaged art dedicated to cultural politics), look again. Althoff is one of a number of young artists collapsing these easy categories. Like**

Kai Althoff, *Modern Wird Lahmgelegt*  
1995, mixed media.  
Installation view.



Arno Schmidt and Hans Wollschläger's well-known (if awful) German translation of Edgar Allen Poe, which rendered the vernacular of the American South with the Bavarian dialect, Althoff's approach is his uneasy transposition, stripping away and adding on to the peculiarities of a language endemic to a given medium—whether it's a house record, the construction of a bar (complete with bottles he designed and even cocktails he concocted) as the centerpiece of a performance with Cosima von Bonin at the *Kunstlerhaus* in Stuttgart, or the pilgrim-style peaked cap and kilt he and von Bonin made and wore (as part of the Stuttgart show). Bringing into play the social contexts of club music and discotheques as well as long-forgotten pop-cultural practices, Althoff's strategic embrace of codes of "taste" and "style" proposes a new sort of "elite" culture—that is, a subcultural "elite"—inside the gallery (and on its terms). But it's the emphasis on the aesthetic that's new here, one that simultaneously works *against* the gallery to the very extent that the practice trades on markers that remain baffling to those outside a subcultural elite.

Somehow it all holds together. Althoff's dialectical "multimedia" work is at once attentive to the politics of social contexts and committed to the aesthetic as a practical disruption of the uninterrupted flow of transparent "truth" and unmediated "plainspeak." The invitation to his March 1995 Buchholz exhibition (featuring cardboard figures representing members of "the glamorous film world of 1931" and an SA man observing them through the stylized window of their "studio day room") used affected but precise prose: "Here one can see that—a) they acted with more individuality than one had expected. b) in such moments of collision there's rarely much to laugh about: they become leaden." The almost Brechtian didactic goal assigned to a show largely described by critics as hermetic—setting aesthetically heretical plain text against an aestheticized treatment of the sociopolitical—reveals much about the thin line Althoff's transposition treads. Althoff works his slippery dialectic, somehow reconciling DJ culture, artistic hermeticism, and scenarios of utopia, all in the midst of debates about cultural politics and the gallery system. And with a good groove to boot. □

Diedrich Diederichsen is publisher of *SPEX* in Cologne and a frequent contributor to *Artforum*.

Translated from the German by Diana Reese.