

Ueli Alder, David Raymond Conroy, Lilly McElroy, Cecile Weibel

Curated by Aoife Rosenmeyer

Dienstgebäude Zürich

14 – 29 Mai 2010, 14-18h

Eröffnung 12. Mai ab 18h mit Performance von Cecile Weibel um 19h30

www.dienstgebaeude.ch

The artists in this exhibition are interested in popular culture and apply it directly to their work. This is common in contemporary art; crossovers, collages and samplings from popular music and film are all familiar. It is even fashionable for high art to have an interest in low culture – a recent frieze.com editor's blog, for example, saw Jörg Heiser cast a critical eye over the state of the music video today.ⁱ Yet when these crossovers occur, popular culture is rarely unqualified – it is used and abused, or viewed through a lens of superiority. This picky attitude is after all practical; the thing about popular culture is that there's a whole lot of it, and we need some selection process to find the things we should be devoting our time to, i.e. the proper, lofty, worthy culture.

*The derisive attitude that accompanies the blurring of the cultural boundaries can be seen not just as selectivity, but also as an absence of sincerity. The latter is most definitely not fashionable; instead artists and critics hide behind strategies of, at best, self-referential or self-depreciatory glibness, or, at worst, irony and cynicism. The straightforward attempt to be sincere, honest and open whilst leaving something at stake is rare indeed. Literary critic Lionel Trilling gave a series of Harvard lectures in 1970 in which he unpicked the origins and recent unpopularity of sincerity.ⁱⁱ The trait of sincerity, (whether it is used or not being another matter), only came about with an evolving sense of self in relation to society; one can only be true to one's own self if that self is an individual. But society and the city, with their tumult and mores and constraints would in turn lead to a devaluation of sincerity. By the time Hegel wrote his *Phenomenology* he judged the communication of one's actual feelings directly and unequivocally as a regressive act relating only to the selfhood of a past, unenlightened time.ⁱⁱⁱ This remains true: 'To praise a work' writes Trilling '...by calling it sincere is now at best a way of saying that although it need be given no aesthetic or intellectual admiration, it was at least conceived in innocence of heart'.^{iv}*

Graduating from the Zürcher Hochschule der Künste in 2008 Ueli Alder (b.1979, Urnäsch, Appenzell Ausserrhoden) showed a series of photographs that pay homage to rural Appenzeller traditions while interweaving their visual motifs with those of westerns and other filmic genres. Alder himself is the protagonist of each of these images, which are combinations of found historic photographs and staged scenes, an elaborate and solitary process of location shooting and digital montage to locate himself in a made-up era that seems marked by romance and authenticity despite its reconstruction. In this exhibition Alder is showing a new body of work - images of vast explosions. These are fictional collages that exaggerate already exceptional events. The resulting new, stunning images are difficult to place between reportage and Hollywood special effects; the suspended moment of the blast allows both eventualities. The push for ever clearer images of conflict, be they fantastic or factual, has created a currency of images so sharp they lose their connection to any true or possible reality.

*David Raymond Conroy (b. 1978, Reading, UK) creates work that is restrained in form but which uses sources in which he has complete confidence. Conroy frequently quotes or even employs works by other artists, as readily referring also to writers, filmmakers and musicians; each work that inspires him is outstanding, no matter what form of expression it takes. His work is measured enough to acknowledge the danger and temptation to co-opt their voices, but nonetheless muddies the distinction between cool admiration and fandom. That is not to say that his work consists of collecting cultural greatest hits, it is much more about linking the truth of their expression to everyday experience. Indeed sometimes the expression comes from the quotidian, as in the 2009 work *Sometimes I wish I could just disappear*, a collection of photographs of mirrors sold on Ebay by their owners; in each the vendor is attempting to be out of the shot but their hand remains holding the camera, signalling their absence and their presence.*

*The context of her upbringing is a recurring presence in the work of Lilly McElroy (b. 1979, Arizona, USA). Southern Arizona is a landscape of grandeur and of cliché; its people are as traditional and as raw as in stereotypical America. Country and western music is a further point where reality and fiction collide. McElroy's work deals with this legacy with gestures that resist as much as they embrace, and her struggle is played out directly and physically, not at a safe distance. The video *Pushing Cowboys*, 2005, records her encounters with Stetson and denim clad cowboys in a bar in her home town of Willcox where couples are dancing. Rather than harmoniously allowing herself to be led, McElroy attempts to push her partners into retreat, with limited success as the men stand fast. This and her other endeavours to personally come to terms with the culture are ham-fisted, but affecting.*

midibach is a video and performance created for Dienstgebäude by Cecile Weibel (b. 1984, Zürich). In his frieze.com blog, Heiser writes that 'The form of the music video somehow evolved in a manner that gave license to bands/directors to indulge in whatever kind of cod-Surrealist image making they liked'. Among Weibel's inspirations for this new work were Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio* and music videos, seeing this aforementioned creative license as an offer of a breadth of possibilities. A form without a set structure or intent can be used to do anything, though there are certain gestures that video makers return to with gusto, such as the ham-historic scene. With this in mind *midibach* is set to an excerpt of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto in a midi version, the corrupted baroque score enhanced at one point with a hip-hop beat. The video's figures are clad in the masks akin to wrestlers and costume elements such as garters, hooped skirts and wings that suggest a vague imagined past. Their movements imply different attitudes, which, like the childish yet menacing style of the lyrics, fall somewhere between aggression and subservience. Whether they are acting under duress or with confidence is unclear, making for uncomfortable watching.

Accepting the compromises entailed in living in the modern world, is sincerity possible in art without the artist having to cover their embarrassment through any of the contemporary strategies of dissembling? The artists shown here attempt to do this, what is more borrowing and being inspired by popular culture. They are not uncritical, nor are their expressions immature, but they also embrace the adolescent experience of pop culture, the discovery of something that is exciting or that directly communicates the intensity of an emotion. Their direct usage of popular culture makes works that are in the world, not at a remove.

Aoife Rosenmeyer

There will be an Art & Argument debate on 21st May at 7pm on a topic relevant to this exhibition. For more information see artandargument.blogspot.com

www.alderego.ch

www.davidraymondconroy.co.uk

www.lillymcelroy.com

www.itsoundslikerita.ch

ⁱ http://www.frieze.com/blog/entry/the_gaga_end_of_music_video/

ⁱⁱ Later published as *Sincerity and Authenticity, The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures 1969-70*, Lionel Trilling, Harvard University Press, 1971

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid.* P.43 in 1807

^{iv} *ibid.* P.6. Even in popular culture sincerity is regarded as abnormal, see the film *The Invention of Lying* (2009, d. Ricky Gervais, Matthew Robinson), while mainstream films with autistic characters such as *Punch Drunk Love* (2002, d. Paul Thomas Anderson) or *Adam* (2009, d. Max Mayer) often make use of these characters' atypical habit of saying what they think as a narrative device.