

ARTFORUM

DIARY

COMPUTER LOVE

May 08, 2021 • Berlin • Kristian Vistrup Madsen at Gallery Weekend Berlin

ON A WEDNESDAY NIGHT, during Berlin Gallery Weekend’s mostly digitized preview days, Hannes Schmidt of Schiefe Zähne and I were about thirtieth in the queue for chili cheese fries, which we were to bring back to the gallery where Richard Sides was putting finishing touches on “The Matrix,” an exhibition he made about being immersed in a technological world of uncertain boundaries. The show includes a crude cardboard homage to Spot, a robot dog offered by Boston Dynamics to the tune of \$75,000. Killing time during the long wait for provisions—facing a 10 p.m. curfew, most of the nearby restaurants had run out of food or closed early—we watched videos of people abusing the creature for fun. “I’m not sure who’s worse,” I mused, “humans or machines?” Screen-fatigued from a series of Zoom tours, Schmidt perhaps was inclined toward the latter. “I had to borrow a selfie stick from a ten-year-old,” he said. “Only cool thing is, it comes with a fish-eye camera.” So there are perks, after all. The following evening, I was knuckles deep in mango-infused mayonnaise when Julian Stalbohm graciously complimented my advanced dipping skills. We were with Loretta Fahrenholz in the rain watching the clock over the Mehringdamm U-Bahn entrance approach curfew. Fahrenholz is showing a new video at NBK comprising iPhone footage from 2012 and 2020, aptly titled “A Decade that Exploded.” At first, the mobile portrait mode seemed to offer a new horizon, but by the video’s latter half, the rectangle had become a cluttered container for the feelings of disappointment, doubt, and lonesomeness that gather over the years, and in that last year especially. Stalbohm’s exhibition at the Volksbühne pavilion, meanwhile, features enlarged William Hill gambling tickets, each betting on when a given volcano will erupt. Sitting in the glow of fifteen minutes to ten, it seemed our doom would not be blessed with such high drama, but unfold, like Fahrenholz’s decade, as a quieter explosion, dispersing into the night.

We were on our way home from Noah Klink’s gallery, where Gerrit Frohne-Brinkmann had infected a group of old computer towers with the ILOVEYOU virus—an early dot-com disaster that spread in 2000 as millions received an email with a message telling them to “kindly check attached LOVELETTER.” “It exploited the weakness of humans,” said Frohne-Brinkmann to my immediate, trembling protest: “Not weak, but beautiful! In fact, I’d open that document any day, just on the off-chance.” Everyone sipped crémant. It struck me then that although Fahrenholz’s video seemed broken—its relationships fractured, its narrator absent—it was, more than anything, very human. By comparison, Frohne-Brinkmann’s machines opened a void into which viewers could pour their own humanity, be it in the form of vintage hopes, or generalized nostalgia. The pack of ecru computers filled the room with their heavy breathing, the sound of affection promised and undelivered, yet again.

Art Forum, May 2021

Tanya Leighton

It seems technology is making a comeback in art. Not just as NFTs, nor in the way of the post-internet turn of yore (thematizing alienation by accelerating it), but with an acute interest in how it operates relationally, emotionally. At Klemm's gallery, Geumhyung Jeong presented a robot workshop complete with tools and wires and videos showing the artist nonchalantly yanking away at nuts and bolts. Hers is a charming process of trial and error that makes the resulting automata, if not sentient, then at least (and unlike the Bostonian dog) worthy of sympathy. Jeong is not making a monster, or stealing fire from the gods, but, like most of us, using technology to make friends, pass time, and learn things. In a new series of hybrid image-objects by Aleksandra Domanović on view at Tanya Leighton, science likewise folded in on private interiority. On rotating LED fan displays, Covid stats from worldometers.info mixed with Domanović's personal associations: psychedelic mushrooms and photos of a young Rainer Maria Rilke dressed like a girl because his mother wished he were one. Must have been quite something for him to untangle in psychoanalysis, I thought, as will this—the pandemic—once it's finally over.

At Galerie Neu, Manfred Pernice's sculptural assemblage was described as a caesura. This nonthingness—the sublime way in which Pernice's half-shit objects appear at once negligible and carefully, crucially arranged—is an aesthetic response to the world's depletion. Long central to contemporary art in Germany, it's the logic by which art keeps a foot in the door of its own existence. "I think this is what troubled me about last year's Berlin Biennial," I said, holding a slice of pear and gorgonzola pizza at Barbara Weiss on Friday. "It was actually there." The thought had been stewing in my mind since seeing Mariela Scafati's exhibition at PSM earlier in the week. Scafati, who featured prominently in the biennial, showed a group of blue canvases hovering below the ceiling like a kind of wonky sky, hoisted up by an intricate rope contraption, a literal yet poetic portrait of connectedness, or maybe of power, or strength. The work was beautiful, not very German, but perhaps somehow related to that of this new, sincere crop of relational-tech-aestheticians. It could be the context of the Jannis Marwitz paintings at Weiss that made me think of it then, since they too are "post-" in the way of Pernice: serious, but with a thrilling lack of center. By then, I think, I was drunk.

When Kreuzberg turns into a war zone on May Day, it is easy to understand why the healthy rich people all live in Prenzlauerberg, where toddlers roll in artisan ice cream and tumble through streets roofed with blossoming cherry trees. To counter the creepy utopia vibes, Övül Ö. Durmusoglu and Joanna Warsza had invited artists in the neighborhood to exhibit from their balconies. In one memorable instance, a particularly idyllic street scene came to a halt under the apartment of Susanne Sachsse and Marc Siegel. "When was the last time you thought: no more children's clothing stores?" asked a voice from above, and I answered to myself: literally two minutes ago. "When was the last time you realized your building was owned by some company abroad and thought: shit?" I felt compelled to add my own questions: When was the last time you ate chips for dinner every day for a week? Or puked inside your FFP2 while riding an Uber? Or opened a love letter only to realize it was a virus? Is every love letter a virus? Or every virus a love letter? And which is worse?