



Artists Anonymous: Drugs, afterimage

Courtesy: Artists Anonymous
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Artists Anonymous (english version)

Text: Edmund Piper

Breaking taboos belongs to the everyday life of Artists Anonymous, and not only in their sujets and their performances. The artist group seems itself to be a living critique of the art market and its mechanisms, and yet it still profits from them. Their works are part of important collections with euphonic names such as Saatchi, Sander, and Bastian. In January they staged a great show in the Zurich branch of the Gallery Haunch of Venison belonging to Christies.

Artists Anonymous has been a part of the Berlin art world since 2001. Being a member of the group Artists Anonymous implies renouncing all drugs and declaring oneself an ex-junkie. The anonymity masking the names of all the artists involved is supposed to hinder competitive situations within the group.

The group works with film negatives that they distort or cross with others and then develop as normal negatives so that the motifs appear in their complimentary colours. In this process, they create films and photos that then serve as models for paintings. The results appear in installations that, in turn, are photographed and processed further. Thus, in the works there are ever new depths to be discovered that appear to echo within the eye. In the after-effects, the inner images become outer images.

The brash, garish and scurrilous group works have been shown at many exhibitions, and at art fairs they can scarcely be overlooked. With provocative installations like “Leipzig Must Fall” they attract a considerable amount of attention. The splatter-like work “Kill Your Gallerist” soon came to be reflected in the real world: the artistic group opened their own gallery in London and Berlin. After most of the artists had left the group, Marilyn Manson, the grandmaster of taboo breaking, joined the program of Artists Anonymous Galleries.

Edmond Piper in Conversation with Maya van van Malden, Director of the group and the Gallery Artists Anonymous:

Hello, Maya. Can you imagine why your artistic group is being discussed particularly in connection with the theme of taboo?

Perhaps because we deal intensively with various aspects of human sexuality or because we are not afraid of subjects like fascism or fascist tendencies. But these are things that are easily revealed as petit bourgeois taboos. And as far as our effect upon the world of art is concerned, we have probably broken an entirely different taboo because we are continually reminding people that things just cannot continue to function the way they are running now. And that includes us ourselves. We, too, do not function in this art world.

But is it not rather the case that you survive rather well in this art world?

Well, even if that is how it appears on the surface, as if we were successful, from our perspective it appears entirely differently. To this very day we have not been part of a group exhibit, or a museum, or an art organisation. Since that path appeared to be closed to us, we have had no choice but to sell our works.

So the financial success was your last chance?

Yes, you could say that: our only refuge was to attack because nothing else seemed to be working.

And what do you think – why is that the case?

I think it is due to our subject material, which is as malleable as the spirit of our times demands.

And what drives you to treat such subject material?

The simple fact that we cannot separate art from the reality in which we live, since that would be mere decoration. And, besides that, when we exhibited our performance “Leipzig Must Fall”, the response was larger and there were much more vehement reactions to it than to any other work we have done. The reactions were not even comparable. Openly criticizing the art market is still the greatest taboo.

Since then you have been represented in several collections. How does one continue to operate as a critical art group in such an environment?

With great interest. For, if I don't have any idea of the operating system from that side, if I don't try to find a gallery and don't go to art fairs and exhibitions, I cannot, of course, judge the corresponding mechanisms. Remaining outside of everything and merely claiming that “this is all a crock of shit” seems a little too vacuous to me. Now that we operate two galleries, we can better understand the position of the middlemen.

Are you now mutating from being artists to being gallerists?

If that is true at all, then we are “evolving”. But, basically, for us these externally constructed roles cannot be separated from one another because we view the gallery as part of our artistic project. And most of the collectors we have gotten to know regard that highly because they are not looking for dealers trying to talk them into buying more and more works from one artist or another. The people we deal with buy art out of sheer passion, and not as a pseudo-investment. And in this case, it is obviously interesting to be able to have direct contact with the artists.

But you are now also exhibiting at Haunch of Venison; and there, at least following the fusion with Christies, there will be no more personal treatment...

Always the same old story! I am amazed at the reactions caused by this fusion. Other galleries don't make it as public that they are trading as a publicly listed company, and then it doesn't bother anybody. Ultimately, there are hardly any structural differences. For it doesn't make much of a difference whether some purported “Off-Space”, thanks to the creation of a certain increase in distinction, tries to sell bad drawings to yuppies, or whether Haunch of Venison throws bad sculptures onto the secondary market.

Really? There is no difference ... except for the monetary difference?

No – the big players we have gotten to know are just as nice, or idiotic, or inhibited and petit bourgeois, or generous as the small ones. From the relaxed and nice to the snappish, you find some of each in every scene. And wherever I go I fail to see the glamour of it all: when you finally arrive at the grand private party of some White Cube Gallery big shot, at the opulent cocaine parties, you will soon see that the people there have the same vacuous conversations as those during a stupid and fawning tour of an art college. It's just boring and dumb. And so you have to have a little luck in order to find a few people who are fit and with whom you can have a good conversation.

By the way, on the subject of cocaine parties: aren't you anonymous artists off the drugs?

I think that that is a very important point in our work. Due to the fact that we always have to remain sober, we are not just off the drugs, but also intellectually sober. And that has an affect upon our perception. If you are at one of those parties and you drink water all evening, you have another perception of your environment than if you were entirely inebriated. And that is precisely the perception that ultimately finds expression in our works.

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