



"Everything is Pop"— Gurus under Fire

Michel Chevalier's take on Pop-Culture

In January 2004, Hamburg's Westwerk hosted a two-part exhibition whose core was an analysis of and riposte to the ideology of an expanding pop terrain. Under the banner *target: autonopop*, artist and musician Michel Chevalier initiated a project which involved friends in the fields of art, music, and theory. The publication of the same name, recently presented at Hamburg's *Buttclub*, offers us a chance to look back at the show.

"Everything is pop": German pop-guru Dierich Diederichsen's consensus-friendly diagnosis of our times is put to the test in the first half of exhibition. A large installation, which the viewer walks into upon entrance, demonstrates that the pop thesis is quite valid, not to say hegemonic, in the field of contemporary art. It consists of a sea of laminated invitation cards, exhibition brochures and magazine excerpts, all hanging from the ceiling at eye-level, and structured by floating catch-terms such as 'Colorful Conceptualism', 'Happy, Fun', '60s Forever', and 'Curves and Curves'. At first glance, the titles may appear rather crude: the depiction of a group of smiling people stands for 'Happy, Fun'; a conceptual work by the artists Dejanov & Heger is taken as an example, on the basis of its backdrop, of 'Colorful Conceptualism'. But this print output by artists and institutions is being 'judged by its looks'. The categorization is the result of an exclusively visual surface evaluation of the many flyers and invitations which are used to advertise exhibitions of contemporary art to potential visitors—and all too many of them actually *do* show happy people or ad-style snappy color backdrops, even when their explanatory texts guarantee an artwork in the 'institutional critique' genre. To this extent, the concentration on the visual serves the debunking of art ambitions and much-touted critical potential, and renders visible the art-field's insidious adaptation to a mass-media iconography.

The unusual directness with which the exhibition names and treats representatives of (auto)pop, the artist Michael Krebber for example, is a surprise. A video documents Chevalier's visit to a Krebber exhibition at the *Gallery Nagel* in Berlin last year; a spartan show of cir-

cles and curves which, doubling as (high) artwork for Cologne-producer Justus Köhnke's second solo album, is just what the gallery scene wants. Questions to the young gallery assistant about the painter's artistic approach elicit references to his contacts to painter-icons such as Polke and Kippenberger, as well as to the electro-pop scene. There seems to be little to say about the works themselves. Apparently, the fact of the artist's network-existence with good contacts to pop culture already makes him worthy of interest and exhibition (not to mention: good for sales).

Critical outside views unwelcome

Dierich Diederichsen, progenitor of the "Everything is pop" thesis, is taken to task in just as concrete a way. Chevalier's installation "*Quadrophonischer Kunstlopf: the Dierich Diederichsen Listening Room*" clearly shows what discursive power the pop/art theorist has and the extent to which the latter's taste-habitus and value system exemplifies a particular segment of the art field. A Diederichsen-playlist, based on his book *2000 Schallplatten 1979-1999*, is to be heard on headphone #1, and is confronted with a playlist compiled by the artist Chevalier for the same period, on headphone #2. The latter's musical counter-history writing is underpinned by biting and humorous commentary about the music-journalist's selection criteria. And the proof is there to hear and read: Diederichsen's cementing of artificial dandy-irony to a denigration of notions related to authenticity follows a clear method.

The figure of Diederichsen brings us to the heart of the exhibition's critique, which is to be read in great detail in the *target: autonopop* magazine.⁽¹⁾ Chevalier sees a connectionist ideology at work in Diederichsen's thesis as well as in New York artist John Miller's text *Burying the Underground*.⁽²⁾

This ideology holds only relations within the system to be possible, thereby ruling out critical outside positions and accordingly declaring oppositional stances to be obsolete. Chevalier exposes these authors' ongoing project of discrediting underground- and counter-culture as an instance of art-market logic, even more, as a support for network-capitalism.

Art-become-autonopop is based on exactly this movement of simultaneous discrediting and co-optation. In order to be able to maintain appearances of autonomy (a promise that has been hollow since the late nineteenth century), or even to update them, art raids the formal repertory of countercultural/autonomous movements. Once revamped, it appears radical and more sellable in one stroke, especially if the terrain has been ideologically done up beforehand. Chevalier points to the subcultural theory practiced in and around the *Birmingham School* as a source of legitimation for this process, insofar as it teaches that, yes, consumption can already be subversion and resistance. Questions of production, which were so central to the political art theory of a Walter Benjamin, fall increasingly out of view. An example of this is the Paris exhibition *Hardcore*, which provided a central (negative) impulse for the exhibition-project. The fact that commercial-gallery artists, who can't exactly be considered prototypes of self-organized production, are labeled hardcore—the epitome of small self-run distribution/manufacturing structures and micro-economies in the music field—just goes to show that all imaginable terms are prone to do headstands in this art field. In other words: only when terms which used to distinguish affirmation from resistance have been blunted is it possible to savor the symbolic subversion of gallery artists as the spearhead of struggle; one must ask, by the way, which struggle?

The pop universe loves network-capitalism

Chevalier sets Miller and Diederichsen's maxim, according to which any underground separate from pop is irrelevant, in the context of a poststructuralism-inspired critique of the authentic, and gets ammunition from the French theorists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello. They analyze the relationist philosophy which underlies this critique, and see in it a hegemonic dictum of network capitalism. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, which is also the title of their book, demands connectionist beings that are flexible enough to endlessly create new contacts within their respective projects.⁽³⁾ The reference to values such as permanence, being true to oneself etc.,

appear in this context to be rigid or pathological, a refusal to connect. Central values in the pop-universe, such as ironic distance, fluidity and flexibility suit the network-capitalistic subject far better.

To deliberately oversee this similarity between pop-demands and job market-demands in order to sell pop values as being left/progressive is, against this backdrop, extremely ideological. Chevalier warns. Pop leftists such as Diederichsen play into the hands of current market conditions and value-norms when they explain that the insistence on authenticity—or the critique of the unauthentic—is politically right wing. They provide an attractive vocabulary for the affirmation of so-called reforms and lend support, with their high-power terminology, to a social (class-) struggle of 'winners' against 'losers'. A struggle over classificatory schemes and terms that is worth getting involved in: such is the credo of *target: autonopop*.

Beyond analysis, *target: autonopop* also wants to provide alternatives to the no-alternative message of pop theory, and to encourage a self-empowered way out of the pop universe. In the second half of the exhibition Chevalier passes the baton to the artist Jean-Baptiste Farkas, who in turn passes it on to the viewers. Taking Chevalier's analytical model and autonopop categories as a point of departure, the exhibition is transformed into a *Target Studio*. The request to viewers is as follows: find your own target; correct and supplement what you see in front of you. And, as a matter of fact, for a few days the rooms of *Westwerk* resemble a large analytical laboratory in which categories are developed and discussed before being printed up by Farkas. The motto seems to be: the more merciless, the (descriptively) better.

In the 1920s, Walter Benjamin already described good criticism with the following words: "real polemic takes a book as lovingly as a cannibal embraces a toddler."⁽⁴⁾ This demand for unyielding analysis of one's own artistic field and a clear positioning with regard to production conditions apparently played an important supporting role in the course of the entire *target: autonopop* event. Indeed, the uninhibited categorization and polemics—truly in the spirit of

hardcore music fanzines—proved to be a first and simple step in taking seriously Benjamin's theory of an organizational function of art, or at the very least a help in identifying common friends and foes.

"No alternative?"

That polarization doesn't automatically lead to the formation of groups is obvious. And so the aggressions of *Westwerk's* willful visitor/critics were finally aimed less at the pop-consensus than they seemed to proliferate anarchically in various directions—quite consistently with the Farkasian art-programmatic, which aims to foster open, collective, and experimental activity. The chance for a deepening or questioning of Chevalier's critique and theses was only taken up by a few. The question, for example, of how autonopop maintains itself in the face of the current revival of painting and 'truly artistic values' will have to be delved into some other time. But this other time will come: Chevalier is, as before, industriously sifting through the contemporary art field in order to sharpen his categories and verbal weapons, with an emphasis fit to make any professional critic turn green with envy.

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English translation: James Hasler.

Notes:

- (1) The magazine features transcripts of the opening night speeches by Franco Koschewski, Tobias Still, and Rahel Puffert, as well as a theoretical text by Chevalier. Furthermore, the magazine presents a glimpse at both parts of the exhibition, with artistic works by Jean-Baptiste Farkas and Jérôme Guigüe. Contributions from the musicians and bands Tumorchester, Chad Popple, für diesen abend, and Dunkelheit round it all off in paste-up fanzine quality. The *target: autonopop* magazine can be ordered directly from: stummmedia@yahoo.de
- (2) Dierich Diederichsen, *Alles ist Pop — Was bleibt von der Gegenkultur?* in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* Nr. 181, 8/9 August, 1998. John Miller, *Den Underground Begraben* in Marius Babias, ed. *Im Zentrum der Peripherie. Kunstvermittlung und Vermittlungskunst in den 90er Jahren* (Dresden/Basel: Verlag der Kunst, 1995).
- (3) Luc Boltanski/Eve Chiapello, *Der Neue Geist des Kapitalismus* (Constance: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 2003).
- (4) Walter Benjamin, *Ankleben Verboten!* [1928] in *Einbahnstraße* (Frankfurt/Main, 1955) p. 52.