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THE NORDIC ART REVIEW

VOL. II NO. 6/00

FRANCESCO VEZZOLI
GABRIELA FRIDRIKSDÓTTIR
LARS NILSSON
THE RETURN OF MARIMEKKO
IKÉ UDÉ
DIANE VON FURSTENBERG
OSLO OPEN
CHARLES ESCHÉ
VISION AND REALITY
NET ART

ISSN 1404-207X



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Francesco Vezzoli, *The Life of Silvano Mangano*, 1999, metallic embroidery on laserprint on canvas (work composed of 36 embroideries). Courtesy of Galleria Franco Noero/Anthony d'Offay Gallery.

THE NORDIC ART REVIEW

INTRODUCES Gunilla Klingberg

By Karen Diamond.....2

A Lonely Utopia

In his new film *Shadows and Magic* the Danish artist Søren Martinsen takes a look inside the art world.

By Rebecca K. Engmann.....8

Global Art

At the conference *Das Lied von Erde: Biennalen im Dialog* the phenomena of the ever-expanding new international art biennials was discussed.

By Heidi Fichtner.....10

Mix and Match

Oslo Open presented over 250 artists showing their work to the public in their own private studios, independent spaces, commercial galleries and museums.

By Andrea Kroksnes.....12

Video Art and Political Change

In the early eighties video art functioned as an artistic and cultural link to Ljubljana's revolutionary subculture.

By Natasa Petresin.....14

Bridge over Troubled Water

With more than DKK 60 million in the cash box, *Cultural Bridge 2000* manifested the completion of the Øresund Bridge between Denmark and Sweden.

By Peder Jansson.....16

Selling Suburbia the Myth of Urban Refinement

The US has numerous discount ventures that hawk the cheap and tawdry, but it is only IKEA that offers structured and stringent decorating guidelines.

By Jenni Sorkin.....18

A Monumental Spectacle

The *Elia* structure resembles a volcanic crater, a factory, an Inca temple and a nuclear power plant.

By Søren Andreasen.....20

INTERVIEWS Charles Esche DO IT!

By Lars Bang Larsen.....22

CRITIQUES

HUMLEBÆK Vision and Reality.....80

UPPSALA Magnus Wallin.....81

OSLO Piotr Uklanski.....83

ANTWERP Wim Delvoye.....84

BRISTOL Duchamp's Suitcase.....85

PARIS Vibeke Tandberg.....86

REYKJAVÍK Tumi Magnússon.....87

BERLIN Jonathan Meese, Santiago Sierra.....88

HELSINKI Katarzyna Kozyra.....88

COPENHAGEN Tommy Stöckel.....89

BARCELONA Art in Central Europe 1949-1999.....90

NEW YORK Børre Sæthre.....91

PICKS Net Art.....92

OLAV WESTPHALEN.....94



Iké Udé, *Cover Girl*, 2000, digital montage.

Embroidered Divas

Francesco Vezzoli sews fragments from '60s and '70s Italian cinema and television with portraits of glamorous stars into a decadent and over-emotional repertoire.

By Caroline Corbetta.....50

Against Art

Gabriela Fridriksdóttir is more of a handyman than an artist. She believes that comic strip is the most powerful and the most popular visual art form today.

By Halldor Björn Runolfsson.....56

Ready, Steady, Go

Gaming is no longer an anti-social event, and it's not only for pubescent youths. Playing computer and video games has followed a now adult generation.

By Cecilia Andersson.....60

Made-to-measure

The love affair between art and fashion has been going strong for some years now. Lars Nilsson has a passionate relationship with clothes. Now his art is on display at the British clothing chain DAKS' new store at Bond Street in London.

By Milou Allerholm.....64

Talking Looks

A conversation between fashion legend Diane Von Furstenberg and art dandy Iké Udé at Von Furstenberg's town house in the West Village, New York City.

By Iké Udé and Diane Von Furstenberg.....70

Hacking in Cha-cha-cha

Germany's digital soul has been hacked! Uwe Schmidt (aka Señor Coconut) takes classic Kraftwerk tracks into cybernetic Cumbia, Baklan and Cha-cha-cha.

By Krystian Woznicki.....74

The Return of Marimekko

Lately the famous stripes of the Finnish design label Marimekko have made a comeback in fashion.

By Tomas Tråskman.....76

"I think we are moving past the nation state definition of what is happening... therefore there is little meaning in a British, Scottish, Danish or whatever art scene – that was only ever national propaganda." —Charles Esche, page 24

Hacking in Cha-cha-cha

BY KRYSTIAN WOZNICKI

Germany's digital soul has been hacked! Uwe Schmidt (aka Señor Coconut) takes classic Kraftwerk tracks into cybernetic Cumbia, Baklan and Cha-cha-cha. His genre is electronic art, while his vehicle is computer music.



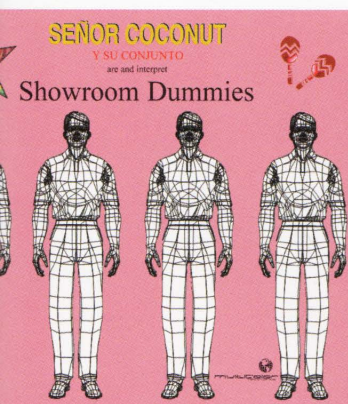
Señor Coconut live at Stadtgarten Cologne, Germany, 4 September 2000. Photo: Jörg Hejkal. Courtesy of Good Groove Music.

A CHAMELEON is a small lizard that can change colour according to its surroundings. This adaptation best describes Uwe Schmidt's working style and method. It is almost impossible to trace all his 60 plus albums produced in the last decade, as this hyperactive workaholic usually changes pseudonyms, bends genres and constantly switches contexts. If you still wanted to classify him, you could say that his genre is electronic art, while his vehicle is computer music. Although it is less complicated to talk about his vita, it is equally discontinuous.

After decades of being based in Frankfurt, Schmidt moved to Chile in 1997. Santiago is now his home and the centre of his various activities. It is where he runs the Mira Musica Studio and Del Haze Entertainment, an organisation which co-ordinates his music, design and communication projects. But it is also the place where his source of inspiration is located. In the last few years, the artist, who is better known as Lassigue Bendthaus and Atom Heart, studied Latin American music styles and retranslated them into new tonal concepts such as "Future Lounge". He collaborated with Electronica legends from Tokyo including Hosono Haroumi (ex-YMO) and also

found some time to rediscover his interest in cover versions: his delicate 2.0 rendering of James Brown's *Superbad* is already a classic in the pantheon of millennial electronic music.

As a founding member of MACOS, a worldwide network of artists fighting against the copyrighting of samples, his work also includes activist aims and claims. During the summer of 2000 these often interconnected projects converged in an unprecedented manner. Critics and listeners alike seem to agree: Germany's digital soul has been hacked! As Señor Coconut, our favorite chameleon managed to render classic Kraftwerk tracks in cybernetic Cumbia, Baklan and Cha-cha-cha. No mere parody, Schmidt's album *El Baile Aleman* combines tight and cool computer aesthetics with a warm, soulful and, above all, humorous charm. While congenial producers all over the planet – most notably Towa Tei – are hooked on the sound, the *Tour de France* single mesmerised clubbers as a dance floor hit. But for Schmidt, this is no reason to get overtly excited. While already working on projects defining the next level, he is even relaxed enough to answer some questions.



Left: **Señor Coconut**, *Showroom Dummies*, 1999, CD-cover. Digital collage by Uwe Schmid, 1997.
Right: *El Gran Baile*, 2000, CD-cover. Photo by Peter Voigt. Courtesy of Good Groove Music

KRYSTIAN WOZNICKI: On the new Señor Coconut album *El Baile Aleman*, you revisit the concept of the silicon band. What made you decide to give this rather abstract and disembodied construct a palpable face?

UWE SCHMIDT: The entire project started when I came up with the idea to cover Kraftwerk. However, at that point the concept lacked a formal frame. To render Kraftwerk in Cha-Cha-Cha was actually a joke in the first place, but I soon realised that this joke would be an ideal starting point. So I decided to look for a Latin combo, to teach them the German techno tracks and to record their interpretations. Yet, the longer I thought about it, the more palpable these versions were realised in my own head, which is why I abandoned the initial idea and decided to do everything by myself. Then I was faced with the problem of how to realise these plans. Emulation and simulation seemed to be the only adequate approach, but it did not convince me at the beginning. Later, I realised that this was actually the point – a meta-joke so to speak – a German, based in Chile, programmes Kraftwerk in Latino!

kw: What are the parameters for such a simulation?

us: Programming a simulation is a tricky matter as it must be coherent. You can't just start programming, you need to consider real arrangements, e.g. how musical notes are distributed, arranged and 'sedimented'. Subsequently, you have to imagine the band as it is: the number of trumpets, the role of percussion and how a composer would arrange all these elements. It is impossible to use a cello in the fourth minute of a five-minute track, as it would sound too abrupt. After all, what had the cello player been doing earlier on? Just sitting around? No composer would handle his resources in such a way. After I programmed the first track, the Latin combo had a concrete consistency (one vibraphone, one marimba, etc.) which I also wanted to be reflected on the cover. This is how the typical Kraftwerk constellation featuring four uniformed members came about.

kw: It is quite striking that you care a lot about creative control. You are even in charge of the cover design. One gets the impression that music is a multimedia artwork and not just a matter of sound. In this sense your work also hinges upon contemporary codes of product design and fetishism. One of your virtues is the subversion of slogans, logos and brands. This type of – well, let's call it brand activism – also provides the agenda for your current projects, including Señor Coconut. Tracks, as covered on the best-selling Lassigue Bendthaus album *Pop Artificielle* and groups such as Kraftwerk are treated as brands. Could we say that there is a shift of appropriation from the visual to the musical level?

us: It doesn't matter whether it is music or design/art work, I am always concerned with codes and discourses. 'Latino' or 'Kraftwerk', 'Jesus' or 'porno' – logos, styles and those perceptions connected to them are the elements, which need to be studied, experimented with, juxtaposed and questioned. I am not very fond of articulating answers to music, I rather generate a net of codes which stimulate questions on the part of the listener. At times, such *nets of codes* confront even me with far-reaching questions. I am interested in confronting and overcoming these questions, since it leads me to new horizons.

kw: Do you use a computer to design your covers?

us: Yes. However, the Señor Coconut cover consists of real photographs. The bodies of the Latin combo, not the heads, are all me. The heads were sampled. For other releases, the process is entirely one of sampling and constructing with the computer.

"It doesn't matter whether it is music or design/art work, I am always concerned with codes and discourses. 'Latino' or 'Kraftwerk', 'Jesus' or 'porno' – logos, styles and those perceptions connected to them are the elements, which need to be studied, experimented with, juxtaposed and questioned."

kw: Hence, to call you a musician seems completely outdated. In that sense, it is also quite telling that the German music press has compared your Rather Interesting label to a magazine digging with its monthly releases into techno-aesthetical questions. This would be journalism as a model. If you fluently switch codes on the aesthetical plane, I wonder whether you are able to do this with your areas of work in general. Could you for instance imagine working in the advertising industry?

us: Well, I actually do consider myself a musician, simply because I think that it is music as a form that I really do know inside out. Talking about design, artwork and video, I guess I found my own style of realising projects within these confines. But generally, I consider my way incompatible with conventional working forms in the respective fields. I am not trying to imply that I am not interested in the classical profession of a director or designer, but I feel sorry for most of them as they have to make so many compromises. As long as everything is in accordance with my concepts, I am happy as a designer. But I would never want to exchange this freedom for the slavery of the advertising business. There is, however, a standard answer I am prepared to give when people ask me about my profession: I usually say that I am a programmer, which would hold true for both music and design.

kw: The programme of the Señor Coconut album is our Eurocentric mem-

ory. Kraftwerk is generally considered the most canonical and – as some people hinting at the Teutonic elements argue – the most German techno act of the last century. Señor Coconut seems to endow it with new life, full of crispy exoticism. It is music that could be played in South and Latin American fast food outlets. The sound seems to confuse our sense of location, which is odd, taking into account that ethnic music is coded according to place.

us: Exactly. In the first place it was just a musical undertaking to convert Kraftwerk into their musical opposite. But then suddenly there was this simulation approach, which generated endless questions: notions of 'authenticity' and 'realness' had to be reconsidered, just as 'First World' and 'Third World'. At the same time, it is extremely important to me that people can listen to this music without the heavy weight of conceptual references and frameworks. I wanted it to be at once enjoyable and fun. My favourite description of this album is, 'It is an absurd question mark.'

—Krystian Woznicki



Señor Coconut, *El Baile Alemán*, 1999, CD-cover. Digital collage by Uwe Schmid, photo by Peter Voigt. 1997. Courtesy of Good Groove Music