

GALERIE

Hauptstadtrevier

17.04.2015 – 30.05.2015

An Exhibition by Ilja Karilampi

Curated by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung und Solvej Helweg Ovesen

Solvej Helweg Ovesen

Curator of POW,
Galerie Wedding – Raum für
zeitgenössische Kunst,
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Hauptstadtrevier. Capital district. A mixed crowd of workers, students, unemployed people, artists, musicians, as well as merchants all hustling their way through the day in one of Berlin's central districts. Here the streets are busy day and night. On Leopoldplatz in Wedding, Berlin, where the same group of people always have their beer in the sun, is Galerie Wedding as part of the 1928 city hall building. Due to the glass facade of the gallery the inside of the gallery space is just as much defined by the outside. In another way the exhibitions - especially this one - are created to address the audience outside the gallery, who might not even enter, and to mingle with the visual economy on street level. This is the kind of territory that this solo exhibition by Berlin-based Swedish artist, radio host and DJ, Ilja Karilampi, establishes itself within.

As an unorthodox detective Ilja Karilampi ferrets visual markers of contemporary Berlin in its different districts from Wedding, Kreuzberg to Schönefeld, from nightlife to daylight activities, in order to decipher or create dense surreal if not »unheimliche« constellations of urban graphics. A language that has a tendency to »disappear«, but of course ties us in and presets our minds emotionally and mentally sometimes without our knowing. Berlin, just like other cities and even states, has a long trajectory of branding itself.

Karilampi looks at these city visuals as if they were »crime scenes«, graphic codes to break or cases to solve in the city, styles to be observed, tags that literally tag in your memory, graffiti statements to be translated, institutional signage to be remembered, street signage as well as the myriads of brands everywhere to be carefully studied. Looking for patterns and unusual constellations, Karilampi injects these signifiers implementing a pop-aesthetic in his visual artworks. Socialised with pop-music and crimes series, and drawn just as much to the outskirts and 'hearseit' of Berlin as to the centre and its upfront facades, the artist titled the exhibition after the popular Berlin shot crime TV series »Heiter bis Tödlich - Hauptstadtrevier«.

»The detective thing is maybe a romantic lifestyle, but also a break with the expected - I like my friends who push and reject the cliché roles. I'm just obsessed with NYC undercover cop movies and also what roles the detectives have in society – heard about this retired police officer in Sweden who collects art – but he also has a glass window from a bank which some robbers sprayed a machine gun smiley sign into, in his collection.«

(Ilja Karilampi, 2014)

As the foreground part of his exhibition, Karilampi occupies the wide facade windows of Galerie Wedding with a large personal collection of symbols and brands collected in Berlin over the last years. They are plotted in silver foil to shimmer as both a visible and invisible presence towards the street. The complete new window piece is called **Thinking of the Bundestag (New York, Ghana, Fischerinsel, Gate 57)**, and consists of twisted coats of arms of Berlin with the bear and its self-reflective development together with logos and other self-made graphics. The collection reveals a biographical stroll through the city and a series of images that the artist somehow identifies to or feels familiar with.

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Brands are his ›raw material‹ like it was in e.g. Andy Warhol's »Campbells« series as social psychologist and communication theorist Jonathan E. Schroeder rightfully suggests in his essay »The Artist and the Brand« Furthermore Schroeder unwraps the close connection between the competences of visual artists and the skills needed to create or especially interpret a brand, where he states that »artists' use of branding helps articulate cultural meanings and associations that constitute brands. Brand managers do not exert total control over brand meaning. (...) It should be no surprise, then, that artists know a little about branding, which is all about making emotional connections and image management«¹ The question is why Karilampi selected exactly these brands or symbols used for

Hauptstadtrevier?

»I can't call them brands – rather non-brands –, because I use them as images and the tradition they carry as icons or representations. Regarding the motifs with a strong anchor in pictorial depiction and their meaning for the city of Berlin – I think I have an identification with how playful such a symbol can come about, and the small changes throughout the centuries. There is something archaic about the wet wild boar from the 14th century (as in the city arms of Berlin) – in an equal way as a dancing bear or so, from today. (...) Philosophically there's so many things that can go wrong when a state or a city runs a campaign for a symbol (...)«

City branding, which is a key theme, is a branding mechanism that aims to improve the city's or nations standing especially in terms of economical profit. City or nation branding is first and foremost a design activity connecting the local to international commerce including tourism as well as a way of »reinforcing cultural identity« from the party of the city administration or state as Karen Fiss, Professor of Visual Studies, depicts it.² The selected graphics on the gallery's windows serve to immaterialise the local brands we know and create a showdown presence for them, free floating and detached from their product or target, as a refined imagery that is part of our lives.

Inside the gallery space the artist expands on this theme and exhibits mannequins wearing sweatshirts and an old parka with brands embroidered on them, **Plainclothes Poseurs**, – again tapping into a the very important pop-cultural and underground media, street clothing, but combining it with the time consuming and careful handmade stitching of the brands. The works on the wall play with the German map, and lost and found laminated business cards. The floor is divided by heavy white metal chains that mark the shape around a missing object or coming activity, **Veckans brott**, which means »crime of the week« in Swedish. They create the shifting scenography for the different music events that willtake place throughout the exhibition.

Downtown Ilja

As Karilampi is hosting the weekly radio show **Downtown Ilja** on Berlin Community Radio, the main activity in the exhibition space is the live radio transmission of **Downtown Ilja** from Galerie Wedding. »Themed shows with talks on music and the chunes themselves – ranging from Swedish viking trance rap, 90's twostep garage, RnB, instrumentals, and other club hit bangers off the charts« is the official description of the **Downtown Ilja** radio mix. Bringing the presence of select contemporary music into the exhibition format opens the opportunity of a dialogue between pop-music and art. This is essential to the work of the artist.

1 Schroeder, Jonathan E. In The Emerald Research register www.emeralinsight.com/0309-0566, »The artist and the brand«, p. 1300

2 Fiss, Karen, »Design in a Global Context«, 2009 Massachusetts Institute of Technology Design Issues: Volume 25, Number 3 Summer 2009, p.3

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Downtown Ilja will host concerts and conversations with local people, who work on the verge of visual art and progressive pop-musical genres. The kind of musicians that inspire Karilampi are Faze Miyake (GB), to whom he dedicated his last show in Stockholm and who does instrumental club vocalist music; Madi Banja (SE), who he describes as »Dr Alban-Future sounding trance RnB«; Polisen (SE) "inventive deephouse" or Giggs (GB) "Grime".

For the radio program he is looking into the Berlin scene for people who embody the mix of art and music such as Nuzia (DE), a rapper/vocalist with Ghanaian roots; TCF (DE/NO) a norwegian musician and visual arts performer, who composes »algorithmic techno«, and Dan Bodan (DE/CA), an artist creating »crooner dance music«. During the Gallery Weekend in Berlin and 1st of May, an event program with radio broadcast, discussion and DJing with local artists and musicians is set up. Touching upon the question of why the radio program and music styles presented is relevant, Karilampi says:

»Well as with anything else, renewal is key and I´m drawn to all kinds of modern music culture, and per se the progressiveness of it. Techno can be conservative sometimes when the German scene only allows vinyl, or those kinds of parties, because it misses out on things that due to sound quality or format would be disregarded.«

The point being that techno and it's format might exclude contemporary nuanced progressive and international electronic and vocal styles that also come out of e.g. non-western music traditions, which might also mirror the population in Wedding. So what is really the correlation between Pop-music and art that is important here? In a bigger scope Pop-music, or whatever you choose to call it, is part of the socialisation of almost everybody under 60 today. As American social activist Bell Hooks states, »whether we're talking about race, gender or class, popular culture is where the pedagogy is, where the learning is.«³

Along this line the early video work, **h00dumentary**, 2011, by Karilampi, which is also screened in the show, is a good example of how the artist uses a pop-culture icon like the rapper Dr Dre in a semi-fiction to talk about themes as social housing and class. The title **h00dumentary** suggests a new film genre between documentary of a (neighbour-)hood, a mockumentary about celebrity myth Dr Dre, who is fictionally featured as an architect of social housing.

Pop-music is also as we know it one of the first and best forms of orchestrating difference – a field in which the figure of the »Post-Other« is in practise since decades. Wrapped as an officially »powerless«, »non-political« purely aesthetic format Pop-music gains access to the masses and still manages to speak to us individually from all kinds of perspectives. Berlin-based Pop Theorist Diedrich Diederichsen suggests that the craving for aesthetic and cultural progression and unorthodox ways of creation generate very significant cross overs between Pop-music and contemporary art. In his latest book »Pop-Musik«, 2014, he argues that the shared aesthetic goals of installation art and Pop-music is imperfection (e.g. a product made of fragments) and progression.⁴

For Karilampi maybe it is a sub- and meta-musical influence that comes across in his artwork when he researches in the city and creates the spatial imaginary that he adopts from e.g. clubs and neon lights when he stages his objects in his art installations. The light setting – e.g. black light – and fluorescent colours are very important elements.

In **Hauptstadtrevier** he is using stroboscope light to keep the exhibition on at night. From late in the pm to early in the am the exhibition is lit every other second, and the exhibition becomes a mystic stage or pop up territory, which is rhythmically brought out of the dark.

3 Bell Hooks: "On Cultural Criticism, Media Education Foundation, www.mediaed.com, 2005, p.2

4 Diederichsen, Diedrich, „Pop-Musik“, Kiepenheuer & Witsch, Köln 2014, »Absolute Pop-Musik: Pop-Musik als Zeitgenössische Kunst«, p. 346

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