

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

Michel Majerus

Press Packet

Wilson, Michael. "Michel Majerus." *Time Out New York*, March 15–28, 2017, p. 60.

Doran, Anne. "Michel Majerus." *Art in America*, April 2, 2014, pp. 110–11.

Pechman, Ali. "Critics' Picks: Michel Majerus." *Artforum*, March 25, 2014.

"Michel Majerus." *The New Yorker*, March 10, 2014, p. 9.

Halle, Howard. "Michel Majerus." *Time Out New York*, March 6–12, 2014, p. 31.

Russeth, Andrew. "Michel Majerus." *The New York Observer*, March 3, 2014, p. B4.

Saltz, Jerry. "See this Art." *New York Magazine*, February 24–March 9, 2014, Special Insert.

McVey, Kurt with Daniel Birnbaum. "Thoroughly Modern Michel Majerus." *Interview*, February 7, 2014.

Spears, Dorothy. "Galleries as the Art World's Leading Indicators." *The New York Times*, October 27, 2013, p. 20.

Schlaegel, Andreas. "Half Pipe, Half Painting." *Frieze*, Summer 2012, pp. 30–32.

Stange, Raimar. "Frenetic Stasis." *Mousse*, September 2007, pp. 50–52.

Lissman, Christina. "Pop Goes the Easel." *Sleek*, Spring 2006, pp. 50–57.

Eichler, Dominic. "Back." *Frieze*, April 2006, pp. 156–57.

Birnbaum, Daniel. "Search Engine: The Art of Michel Majerus." *Artforum*, February 2006, cover, pp. 168–73.

Allen, Dave and Fricke, Harald. "Michel Majerus." *Neue Review*, October 2003, pp. 28–29.

Birnbaum, Daniel. "Michel Majerus 1967–2002." *Frieze*, January 2003, pp. 60–61.

Stange, Raimar. "Adventures of Uncertainty." *Modern Painters*, Winter 2002, pp. 98–101.

Birnbaum, Daniel. "The Power of Now." *Frieze*, May 1997, pp. 54–55.



Michel Majerus



LUXEMBOURG-BORN PAINTER Michel Majerus died in a plane crash in 2002, at just 35 years old, but his influence continues to resonate through the practices of artists who acknowledge the critical role that digital technology plays in our lives. Majerus was among the first painters to make extensive use of Adobe Photoshop in preparing his work, using the program to layer and combine iconography sampled from video games and commercial graphic design in a way that has since become de rigueur. He borrowed from art history, too, dropping references to a range of abstract subgenres—as well as to Pop Art master Andy Warhol.

This show of compositions on aluminum sheets features a striking series of five panels from 1996. Monochromatically lathered in a distinct acid-colored enamel, each is silk-screened with the identical image

of the plucky Italian plumber Mario, protagonist of the seminal *Donkey Kong* game and its numerous spin-offs. Other works in the show feature Buzz Lightyear and Woody from the *Toy Story* movies, as well as abstract and typographic elements.

The visual impact of Majerus's works against the white interior of the gallery is undeniably vibrant, and like Warhol's painting–screen-print hybrids before them, they seem to flit restlessly from one aesthetic realm to another. They make the act of looking as fun as playing a Game Boy.

■ *Michael Wilson*

→ Matthew Marks Gallery, through Apr 15

Art in America

MICHEL MAJERUS

Matthew Marks

ON VIEW THROUGH APR. 19

This sprawling exhibition of work by Michel Majerus, who was born in Luxembourg and lived in Berlin, was the first in the U.S. since his death, in a 2002 plane crash, at the age of 35. His only other solo show in this country opened at New York's Friedrich Petzel two months before he died. It featured big paintings that combined brushwork with photo-silkscreen and juxtaposed abstract passages with images taken from art history and mass culture. These in turn were incorporated into a gallery-filling matrix that included colored beams, mirrored panels and printed vinyl banners. Not quite appropriation art, not quite Pop, the work seemed fresh and important, mimicking the speed and fluidity with which images and information were coming to circulate in the world.

Taking up three of Matthew Marks's four New York galleries, this survey of some two dozen pieces made between 1994 and 2002 was more conventionally installed. For the most part it comprised works on either canvas or aluminum honeycomb panels that sampled and remixed visuals from advertisements, product packaging, computer games, record albums, animated movies, and paintings by Warhol, de Kooning and Basquiat.

Dominating a long wall in Marks's main gallery was *a.T. (69)* from 1994, a spectacular, over 15-foot-long acrylic-on-cotton diptych. An enlarged catalogue caption along the bottom reads, "Anselm Kiefer, *The World Ash*, 1982." But Kiefer's dour, history-laden painting of a muddy field has been replaced by a reproduction of Warhol's *Raphael Madonna, \$6.99* (1965). The work's right-hand panel is a hand-painted blowup of a promo for German techno DJ Marusha's 1994 album *Raveland*. Clad in combat boots and leathers, Marusha is depicted dancing ecstatically through a swirl of rainbow colors. Running across both panels is the logo for a flavored oral sex cream. In Majerus's irreverent worldview, a Madonna of the past and a Madonna of the moment might hook up with cheerful abandon, perhaps at Berlin's Love Parade.

From the late 1990s are two silkscreened copies of a painting made jointly by Warhol and Basquiat; they are placed slightly to the left on the canvases to accommodate



a single vertical brushstroke (blue in one work, pink in the other), applied by Majerus as his "collaboration" with the two artists. By this time, in addition to appropriating existing images, the artist had begun to channel certain commercial and artistic tropes. The blue, green, red and yellow abstraction *MoM Block Nr. 31* (1997) might almost be a detail from a Warhol camouflage painting, while an untitled 1998 piece, featuring a digitally produced green sphere around whose equator runs the word "motivation," looks like something from a corporate training film.

Sometimes the found and the improvised are combined in one painting, such as an intensely expressionist untitled piece (ca. 2000), in which de Kooning-esque brushstrokes provide a backdrop for the word "Scratch!," executed in an ugly faux 3-D font. But Majerus also created many small, single-element works that could be arranged and rearranged in groups. Covering one large wall was a grid of 24-inch-square canvases, some of them bearing silkscreened images from newspapers or magazines, others hand-painted words or phrases. Still others are scruffy abstractions, with affinities to those being made now by the likes of Josh Smith, Joe Bradley, Richard Aldrich and Matt Connors.

At the time of his death Majerus was still evolving as an artist, making ever-more ambitious installations, including a painting that served as a giant half pipe for skateboarders. His work was unmonumental art executed at monumental scale, and it still looks fresh.

—Anne Doran

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS

New York

Michel Majerus

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY | 522 W. 22ND STREET

522 W. 22nd Street

February 8, 2014–April 19, 2014

The most recent presentation of the late Michel Majerus's work takes over all three of Matthew Marks's New York spaces. The smallest gallery presents his 1999 "Tron" series, in which monochrome wall paintings have been overlaid with identical silk screens from the titular movie's poster. Majerus understood the power of repetition of commercial images, but in a far less sardonic way than his Pop forbears. He would have reveled in memes, blogs, and social media: that is, the non-ironic appreciation for vociferously sharing and putting one's mark on what everyone else is looking at.

Majerus produced work with nearly electronic speed, creating over 1,500 paintings and silk screens by the time of his death in 2002 at age thirty-five. A quickly identifiable color palette of snack-food orange, cereal yellow, Barbie pink, and video-game green unites the show. Majerus sources from Basquiat and Warhol with equal fervor as from Gameboy and Nintendo. The tone of such sampling remains ambiguous, giving the works an added heft decades later. In two untitled 1996 works, Majerus silk-screened images of *Toy Story* characters and Super Mario, respectively, onto monochrome-painted aluminum. By giving these technologically produced characters an effective spotlight, he highlights how rapidly they would become obsolete images. The quick, ironic joke also reads as superior prescience for how image and humor would come to be so entwined in the digital age.

On view at Marks's midsize location is work made between 1994 and 2002, all of which toys with the desperate language of cheap entertainment: In one gallery we find PORNOGRAPHY NEEDS YOU in billboard type, MOTIVATION in corporate sanserif, and NEW COMER in a faux-galactic font. But the come-ons aren't always so concrete: The largest of Marks's galleries presents large-scale work in which the results unravel. The phrase NEW COMER reappears in an untitled 2000 work, competing with motivational speak, graffiti, and painted blurs. And sometimes thoughts collapse into half-formed texts, floating between actualization and paint, as in *Ding On*, 2000, in which unformed text searches for a surface. Here, even as paint should bring figurative definition to disposable pleasures, it only makes their flimsiness more pronounced.



Michel Majerus, *depressive neurosis*, 2000, acrylic on cotton, 102 1/4 x 88 1/2".

— Ali Pechman

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

THE NEW YORKER



ART GALLERIES-CHELSEA

Michel Majerus

This three-space show memorializes the inventive Luxembourg painter, who died in a plane crash in 2002, at the age of thirty-five. Majerus expanded on precedents set by Sigmar Polke and Martin Kippenberger with ultra-Pop imagery from then-emerging digital mediums, including video games. (Super Mario capers in the corner of one handsome monochrome.) Savoring head-on collisions of cool and hot styles, Majerus also boldly cribbed motifs from Warhol's collaborations with Basquiat. He infused his often architecturally scaled formats with Apollonian design and Dionysian color. He was well launched on the track of a millennial Baroque, fit to be shared, elbow to elbow, by connoisseurs and skateboarders alike. Through April 19. (Marks, 502, 522, and 526 W. 22nd St. 212-243-0200.)



Michel Majerus

★★★★★

Matthew Marks Gallery, through Apr 19 (see Chelsea)

As the examples of Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat attest, there are few things that can put an artist more firmly on the path to mythological status than an early death. Michel Majerus may be another case. This show is the Berlin artist's first here since 2002, the year he died in a plane crash at age 35.

Employing an exuberant mix of Pop Art, Minimalism and gestural abstraction, Majerus, who hailed from Luxembourg, plumbed postwar art history and the youth market of the late 1990s and early 2000s, a time when the Internet's impact was just beginning to be felt. That moment, perhaps, accounts for the uncanny quality of his appropriative paintings, which look like they were made yesterday, while speaking of a recent past that already seems oddly distant.

It also may figure in the way Majerus peppered his work with pop-cultural referents that were both worldwide in their familiarity (*Super Mario Bros.*) and not (flyers for Berlin raves), suggesting a tech-enabled melding of global and local. The same may hold true for his trio of paintings alluding to the movie *Tron* and also to a German hacker known as Tron, who was supposedly killed by government authorities.

Art history provided another sort of lingua franca for Majerus, who channeled other painters in various ways, from straightforward Warhol borrowings to abstractions complied from a visual archive the artist kept of De Kooning's blown-up brushstrokes. Though cut down in his prime, Majerus created works that still resonate with the possibilities for reinvention he found in our continuously recycling, Web-connected culture.—Howard Halle

THE BOTTOM LINE Pop Art from the turn of the millennium still looks fresh.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

NEW YORK OBSERVER



Installation view of Majerus' show at Matthew Marks Gallery.

MICHEL MAJERUS

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

"Somebody wants to buy all your paintings!" shout the block letters in a small, sketchy black-and-white canvas that Michel Majerus made in 1994, updating Andy Warhol's mid-'80s painting *Somebody Wants to Buy Your Apartment Building!* It opens the largest section of this rich three-venue show of Majerus' work and could be read as both an invitation to celebrate (collectors bearing cash!) and to worry (what are they planning?).

That's a very contemporary mixture of excitement and anxiety, just the sort of thing that Majerus, who was born in Luxembourg and worked in Berlin, savored during his short career, which ended in a plane crash in Europe in 2002, the same year as his lone U.S. solo exhibition. He was 35. Relentlessly, restlessly, he welcomed into his work up-to-the-minute imagery from the digital realm, galleries and the streets. Graffiti tags, billboards, rave flyers, PowerPoint-esque logos ("Motivation," reads

one bit of dull clip art he silk-screened), recent art and Nintendo and Pixar characters pop up in his paintings. Super Mario leaps in a white square in the corner of an otherwise slick red monochrome from 1996; *Toy Story's* Buzz Lightyear and Woody stand at the edge of a blue field that looks as though it is about to envelop them.

Majerus favored quick strokes and free-floating images over solid, fixed compositions, lighthearted cribbing over serious appropriation (he collaborated with Basquiat and Warhol in 1999, well after their deaths, by silk-screening one of their paintings and adding a few strokes of his own). Like those of his contemporaries, his painting surfaces often have a provisional quality to them, taking on the feel of computer screens, as John Kelsey and Daniel Birnbaum argue in a wag-gish chat in the show's catalog. They seem to hold and store images and text only temporarily. A grid of 32 canvases, with simple abstractions (some elegant, some tossed off), text and photos (a prison cell, pills), each 2 feet square,

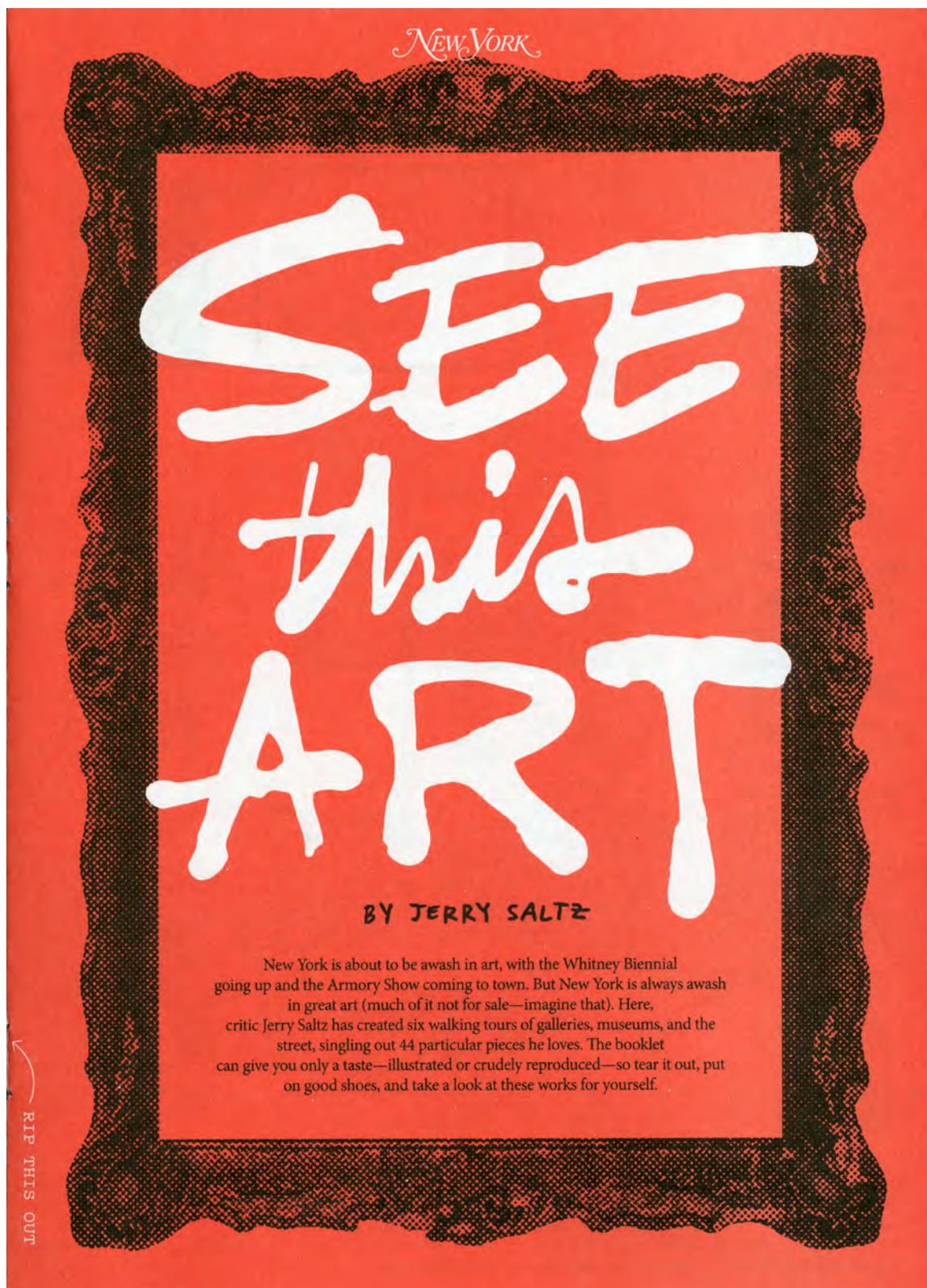
looks like a desktop of icons waiting to be clicked open.

As in the work of Pop artists like Andy Warhol and James Rosenquist, locating the pitch of Majerus' pictures is a tricky business. Is he being ironic? Critical of a media environment that was switching into overdrive? Or is he reveling in its mad tangle of styles? He looks conflicted—clear-eyed but clearly enjoying himself.

What would Majerus have made of today's social-media networks, overflowing with images generated on computers and mobile devices? Being an artist who favored graphics that were set to expire or already goofily dated (*Tron* posters feature in a 1999 series), he would likely have delighted in the vagaries of taste these networks foreground and the participation they solicit toward ends both personal and corporate. A year before his death, he made a painting that suggests he was ready. Like a lot of his best work, it looks unfinished. Big black letters cascade down between a pink field and a white one: "Pornography needs you." (Through April 19) —A.R.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047



Saltz, Jerry. "See this Art." *New York Magazine*, February 24–March 9, 2014, Special Insert.



**Michel Majerus, *Pornography
Needs You* (2001)
Matthew Marks Gallery,
522 West 22nd Street**

A much-needed survey of this Luxembourgian artist, killed in a 2002 plane crash, whose shaped, graphic canvases and use of text, collage, and installation predicted much of what was to come. This one's a recruiting poster of desire.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

Interview



THOROUGHLY MODERN MICHEL MAJERUS

On November 6, 2002, German Pop artist Michel Majerus died in a plane crash at the age of 35 over Luxembourg, the city where he was born. In the 10 years prior to this tragic accident, Majerus produced an extraordinary, eclectic oeuvre that solidified his name beside the legends to whom he was already being compared: Willem de Kooning, Frank Stella, Sigmar Polke, Mark Rothko, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Gerhard Richter, Walt Disney, Andy Warhol, and the list goes on. His name has also been immortalized alongside some of his greatest teachers: K.R.H. Sonderborg, Heike Föll, and of course, the essential Joseph Kosuth, who in many ways is considered to be the father of conceptual art.

On Friday, February 7, the Matthew Marks Gallery, in conjunction with the Michel Majerus Estate, will deliver the most comprehensive solo exhibition of the artist's work in the United States and the first in the country since his death in 2002. Majerus was instrumental in curating his own shows, often altering the architecture of the space itself to suit his aesthetic needs—meaning this show will provide an opportunity not only to discover new Majerus works that have never been shown before, but also

McVey, Kurt with Daniel Birnbaum. "Thoroughly Modern Michel Majerus." *Interview*, February 7, 2014.

to see how some of his more famous works are displayed. Taking up three Matthew Marks spaces, the show promises to be a brazen feast for the eyes as well as a commentary on enduring the relentless barrage that is the 24-hour modern cultural zeitgeist.

Esteemed art critic, professor, and director of Stockholm's Museum of Modern Art, Daniel Birnbaum, who orchestrated the monumental (no pun intended) installation piece Sozialpalast with Majerus in Berlin in 2002, spoke with us on the phone from Stockholm about the evolving definition of Pop, the somewhat cryptic textual narrative left by Majerus himself, and the death and inevitable rebirth of painting. Birnbaum also contributed a conversation with art critic and gallery director John Kelsey to a fully illustrated publication that will accompany the show at Matthew Marks Gallery.

KURT MCVEY: Majerus was interested in repurposing recognizable images from Pop culture, as well as images used by classical painters like Dürer. He was also known for conspicuously recycling images previously used by his peers, idols, and former professors. This "sampling" of aesthetic information has led to this idea of the artist as DJ. Being that you knew Majerus personally, I was wondering if you were aware of any direct musical influences on the artist. I know he was interested in Kraftwerk and Atari Teenage Riot.

DANIEL BIRNBAUM: You know, I've been at parties with him, I remember, after the fall of the Berlin wall—this was '89, '90—all of Europe seemed to look at Berlin as the new capital, particularly for art. In Germany it was formerly Cologne, but suddenly Berlin became the capital for new exciting art, ideas, and music. It was out with the old and in with the new and Majerus was an example of this. In the early '90s, there was lots of techno music in Berlin and I know it influenced him quite a bit, but I cannot be too specific unfortunately, it's all a bit of a blur. [laughs]

MCVEY: The word "Pop," now, seems to be less about being popular, or existing as eye candy, and more about making something old, new again.

BIRNBAUM: I do like this comparison to DJs because there are many theoretical ways to talk about art, but it's interesting because Michel was not really a theoretical person. He was an intuitive, clever, and somewhat officially learned person, but what he did was create a presumption that everything seemed to happen now. It could be art from 100 years ago, but it could also be the latest ad campaign for cigarettes or sneakers. I do know that he was involved in the techno scene in Berlin, but one can see it was on a graphic level, with all the invitation cards, flyers and posters—there was a new graphic language that accompanied this scene, and he was a big part of it.

MCVEY: Let's jump forward a few years and talk about the very ambitious 2002 exhibit, Sozialpalast, where Majerus covered the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin with a to-scale image of the notoriously run-down housing project of the same name.

BIRNBAUM: Though I knew him for some time, that was actually the only thing I ever curated for him, in terms of helping him put art out into the world that is. I did write about Michel in the first international text for Frieze Magazine and then sadly, I wrote an obituary for him. That was the only time I've ever written an obituary for somebody younger than myself.

MCVEY: Sozialpalast was not only impressive in terms of concept, but also hugely ambitious in scale. Tell us a little bit about that phone call you received from Majerus: you both laughed about CNN becoming angry after spending quite a bit of money on a hotel room opposite the Brandenburg Gate, assuming that it would provide a rather scenic backdrop to a series of interviews, only to have it substituted with a rather dilapidated image of this derelict housing project.

BIRNBAUM: It's something we could not have planned, you know, because I understood that this was a big deal, the Brandenburg Gate is a national symbol. It would be like doing this on the Eiffel Tower in Paris or something like that. They had been renovating the Brandenburg Gate, so there were time-sensitive commercial, financial, and political reasons as to why it could actually happen. It didn't occur to me, though maybe it did to Michel, that this most important, very official hotel in Germany, The Adlon, was right behind it. It really confused not just CNN, but BBC World and many other news organizations, which found it strange to say the least. Michel thought it was hilarious.

MCVEY: We have to talk about that piece and how it exists within the context of what we now call a post-9/11 landscape. It seems, looking back on Majerus' body of work, that you would have to search for a project that has such heavy-handed economic and political overtones. I am curious as to whether or not Sozialpalast was an indicator of where Majerus was going as an artist. It brings to mind Voina Group, a Russian art collective that has recently been executing large-scale guerilla art pieces with hard-hitting social commentary. Are you familiar with Voina?

BIRNBAUM: Well, I know of them. I think they were involved in one of the big Biennials in Berlin a few years ago [the Seventh Berlin Biennale, 2012] and they are actively working with provocation and political confrontation, perhaps a little bit like Pussy Riot, but in a more direct way than someone like Michel, who was political in the sense that he was very much a part of his own moment while also being interested in affairs taking place outside of the commercial art scene. I do think that the piece he did with me, or that he did for Berlin rather, was a huge political statement about multiculturalism, unemployment, how the government spends its money, what's to be remembered culturally, what's to be taken away, and also, and this remains important in Germany, what deserves to be rebuilt.

MCVEY: It's difficult when speaking about an artist like Majerus—someone with so much talent and promise—without succumbing to pure speculation about where he was going creatively. That being said, can you perhaps touch on where Majerus seemed to be mentally after the success of Sozialpalast? Was he becoming frustrated with the “white-box” format?

BIRNBAUM: He was a young guy when he passed away, but I can say that he was a very expansive kind of guy, and the formats of the paintings became more and more insane, actually. I should mention, though, in 2000 he was invited to the Kölnischer Kunstverein, a public space in Cologne, and instead of bringing art outside, he introduced the street to the gallery by building a skate ramp indoors. He was already breaking down boundaries. So in many ways, I think your speculation is totally relevant.

MCVEY: Not long before you worked together, he famously declared, “You can no longer make art that is just art.” It seemed like painting was becoming more like a compromise, or a link to the past, or perhaps simply a link to the gallery, than something he actually wanted to continue pursuing.

BIRNBAUM: We cannot know, of course, where he was going. I'm not sure he would have left the medium of picture-making, because in the end, he was, maybe not a painter, but something more like a painter in an expanded field. He did produce images. I don't think he's ever done performance, or body art, but I could see him working in contexts that were perhaps even further beyond the gallery space.

MCVEY: It was interesting to be able to look back on such a succinct yet heterogeneous body of work, just a brilliant barrage of pop imagery, but what surprised me the most, interestingly enough, were these amazing quotes and phrases, often broadcasted in bold text directly onto the piece. A great example of this is the title of the Kunstverein skate ramp show, *If We Are Dead, So It Is*. Beside all this impressive visual stimuli, there is in a way, this poetic and somewhat cryptic narrative spelled out for us in text.

BIRNBAUM: Somehow they were contagious because he found these very smart sounding things from

advertising campaigns, where he got many of his ideas. I remember *What Looks Good Today, May Not Look Good Tomorrow* (1999) being such a clever mixture of interesting language and also being overwhelmed by the graphics of it all.

MCVEY: There was an almost aggressive directness behind the quotes, perhaps geared to art critics and people like myself. “Fuck The Intention of the Artist” is a personal favorite. [laughs]

BIRNBAUM: I sometimes wonder; he was a student in Stuttgart, so on one level he was coming out of this painterly tradition with all these quotes from German heroes like [Sigmar] Polke, but on the other hand his teacher was the American artist Joseph Kosuth, who is one of the first conceptual artists, and often seen as the founder of that whole movement, which was really language-based in many ways. Michel wasn't that far away from what conceptual artists were doing in the '60s, he just doesn't always come off as intellectual, I suppose. [laughs]

MCVEY: Kosuth seems to have had an extremely profound and lasting influence on the eternally young artist. I love the story of Michel handing out the dog masks at Kosuth's installation, *documenta IX* (1992) soon after graduating. Really an appropriate bookend to what seems like one of the most inspiring student-teacher relationships in the history of modern art.

BIRNBAUM: I was recently in Paris at an opening and everybody went to Brasserie Lipp afterwards, and at the table next to mine —though he came from somewhere else—was Joseph Kosuth. We had a long conversation about Majerus, and I wasn't aware of how much he followed his students' careers, let alone Michel's. I can say that he is very aware of everything Michel accomplished and has actually written rather beautifully about him.

MCVEY: Let's talk about Michel's experience in the states, from his first trip to New York in the '90s when he met up with Julian Schnabel to his time in Los Angeles where he spent much of 2001 creating over 30 large-scale paintings. Of the two cities, L.A. seemed to be a more fruitful muse for the artist. His energy and enthusiasm seemed to be in line with L.A.'s exploding street art seen in the mid 2000's, which involved artists like Shepard Fairey and the very haphazardly Warholian Thierry Guetta (Mr. Brainwash).

BIRNBAUM: I know of his early visits to New York where he met some people from the American Fine Arts Gallery when he was a very young person. It shows that he was quite ambitious, he was so eager to be social and get involved with the right people. I think he definitely would have shifted the understanding of what German painting in a broader sense is, if he would have been allowed to continue. In fact, what he did is beyond what most German artists have done. As far as the street art reference; yes and no. He was a street person—he was always on his bike, he had a skater's mentality, he was at the techno clubs—but it's difficult because he had already “made it” in a way, having shown in some of the better galleries in Europe like Neugerriemschneider and others.

MCVEY: Majerus was in many ways fascinated by technology, especially the Internet and its ability to quickly disseminate images and information on a global scale. I wonder how he would have reacted to Internet censorship and the NSA scandal.

BIRNBAUM: I see exactly where you're going. Majerus was interested in everything new, and I do feel that his own personal sense of time and omnipresence was very much in line with how we think of the World Wide Web, in terms of everything happening now. For him, it was a strangely new temporal experience that he had to express in his art. It's almost like he was trying to translate that into something hopelessly old-fashioned—not oil on canvas, necessarily, but a painterly practice. How can you paint the Internet? What a ridiculous thing, but he did in a way. With every new project he was trying to grasp

digitalized space and transport it to our physical space. I could see him react to prescient developments in perhaps a more gloomy way, but really, his mentality was upgrade optimism. He was also a pretty cheerful character in that he was very much about affirming new things and not about mourning the death of painting or the disappearance of possibilities, but rather, celebrating new frontiers in his art.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

The New York Times

Galleries as the Art World's Leading Indicators

By DOROTHY SPEARS

During the midwinter, back in Manhattan, another much-anticipated show will include a selection of paintings and an installation by **Michel Majerus**. Mr. Majerus was a prolific young Luxembourgian artist, globe-trotting between shows in Europe and the United States, before his life and career were cut short by a 2002 plane crash.

In collaboration with his estate, Matthew Marks will dedicate two of his Chelsea galleries to nearly 20 of Mr. Majerus's large-scale paintings and a multimedia installation. When Mr. Marks first saw the artist's work in Germany in 2000, he said, "It had a curious energy to which I was attracted but did not quite understand." Combining references to a vast

range of 20th-century masters, from Willem de Kooning to Jean-Michel Basquiat, Mr. Majerus's work offers an exuberant window on to the cacophony of images, symbols and texts that reflect 21st-century consciousness.

When Mr. Marks included two paintings in a group exhibition at his gallery five years ago, he said in an e-mail, "They were the most exciting things in the show." Last year, he said, it finally dawned on him that if he wanted to see a comprehensive New York gallery exhibition of Mr. Majerus's work, he was going to have to organize it himself. The exhibition at the Matthew Marks Gallery, 522 and 526 West 22nd Street, will open on Feb. 8 and run through April 19.

frieze

Wie fährt es sich auf einer alten Skaterrampe von Michel Majerus heute?

Skating on a turn-of-the-century ramp made by Michel Majerus

Half-Pipe

Half Painting

Vor nun schon zehn Jahren kam Michel Majerus mit nur 35 Jahren bei einem Flugzeugabsturz ums Leben. Eine Retrospektive mit Stationen im Kunstmuseum Stuttgart und dem CAPC (Centre d'arts plastiques contemporains) in Bordeaux erinnert aus diesem Anlass an Majerus – und mit ihren riesigen Wandmalereien und den von der Popkultur rund um das Jahr 2000 informierten Installationen auch an ein unausgesprochenes Versprechen, das sein Werk zu formulieren schien: nämlich die Idee von Pop Art aus dem Postergeschäft der Geschichte für die Gegenwart zurückzuerobieren und zu erneuern.

In Stuttgart betonte die Ausstellung durch die Präsentation früherer Arbeiten, die während und kurz nach dem Studium an der dortigen Akademie entstanden, die Bindung des Künstlers an die Stadt. Zum Ende der Laufzeit schmückte Stuttgart sich schließlich mit einer von Majerus' bekanntesten Arbeiten: *if we are dead, so it is* (Wenn wir tot sind, dann soll es so sein, 2000). Die ursprünglich für den Kölnischen Kunstverein konzipierte Rampe für Skater stand in Stuttgart vor dem Kunstmuseum auf dem Schlossplatz und direkt an der Fußgängerzone. Kaum ein Passant, der hier ohne Einkaufstüten unterwegs wäre, auf denen Logos, Bilder und Schriftzüge bekannter Marken prangen – ähnlich derer, die Majerus auf seiner Halfpipe verteilt hatte. Wie von selbst entwickelten sich dabei eigentümliche Dialoge mit den Motiven auf der Rampe – sei es einer zerknüllten Plastiktüte in Beige, einem Comic-Totenschädel oder einer weiteren Tüte mit dem Logo eines großen Heimwerkermarkts – sowie Wörtern, Satzketten und Slogans: „newcomer“, „labil“ oder „Die neue Referenz“, aber auch „das befreien des malens vom thema ausdrück“. All diese Fragmente übernehmen in ihrer Sprachverknappung die Logik von Werbeslogans. Und kaum

jemand auf der Rampe war ohne Skater-Markenkleidung mit markigen Slogans wie „Keep it real“ unterwegs.

Zwischen Einkaufsparadies, Jugendkultur und Museum hatte Majerus' Arbeit – mit ihrer Nähe zu Werbung, Markenwelt und Malerei – ihren idealen Ort gefunden. Um Pop Art für die Gegenwart wiederzubeleben, entschied sich Majerus dazu, den herkömmlichen Methoden der Aneignung der Popkultur für die klassischen Medien Malerei und Skulptur eine neue hinzuzufügen: Mit seiner Halfpipe verwandelte er Marken gleichermaßen in Malerei wie in Popkultur: weder als Fundstück noch als käufliche Ware, die man in einer Tüte mit nach Hause nehmen kann, sondern als kollektive Erfahrung. Kann man sich eine bessere Art vorstellen, Pop aus dem Fundus kunsthistorischer Referenzen zu befreien und ihm neues Leben einzuhauchen, als Skater über eine im Grunde genommen gigantische, gebogene Leinwand rollen zu lassen?

In Majerus' Skaterrampe findet sich das Bild einer Welt, die mehr denn je Oberfläche geworden ist.

Auch in Bordeaux wurde die Halfpipe aufgebaut, sie passt exakt zwischen die Säulenreihen der kathedralenhaften historischen Lagerhallen des CAPC. Bordeaux gilt als europäisches Skater-Mekka schlechthin. Hier gibt es seit den frühen 1980er Jahren eine aktive Szene, die seit jeher im Austausch mit Amerika steht und internationale Stars wie Bastien Salabanzi hervorgebracht hat. In den letzten zehn Jahren wurde diese Szene schließlich im Zuge einer massiven Stadtmarketingkampagne massiv gefördert, am sichtbarsten wohl durch einen 2006 eröffneten

Andreas Schlaegel

1-3
Michel Majerus
if we are dead, so it is
(Wenn wir tot sind, dann soll es so sein), 2000
3x10x42 m
Installationsansicht
Schlossplatz Stuttgart, 2012

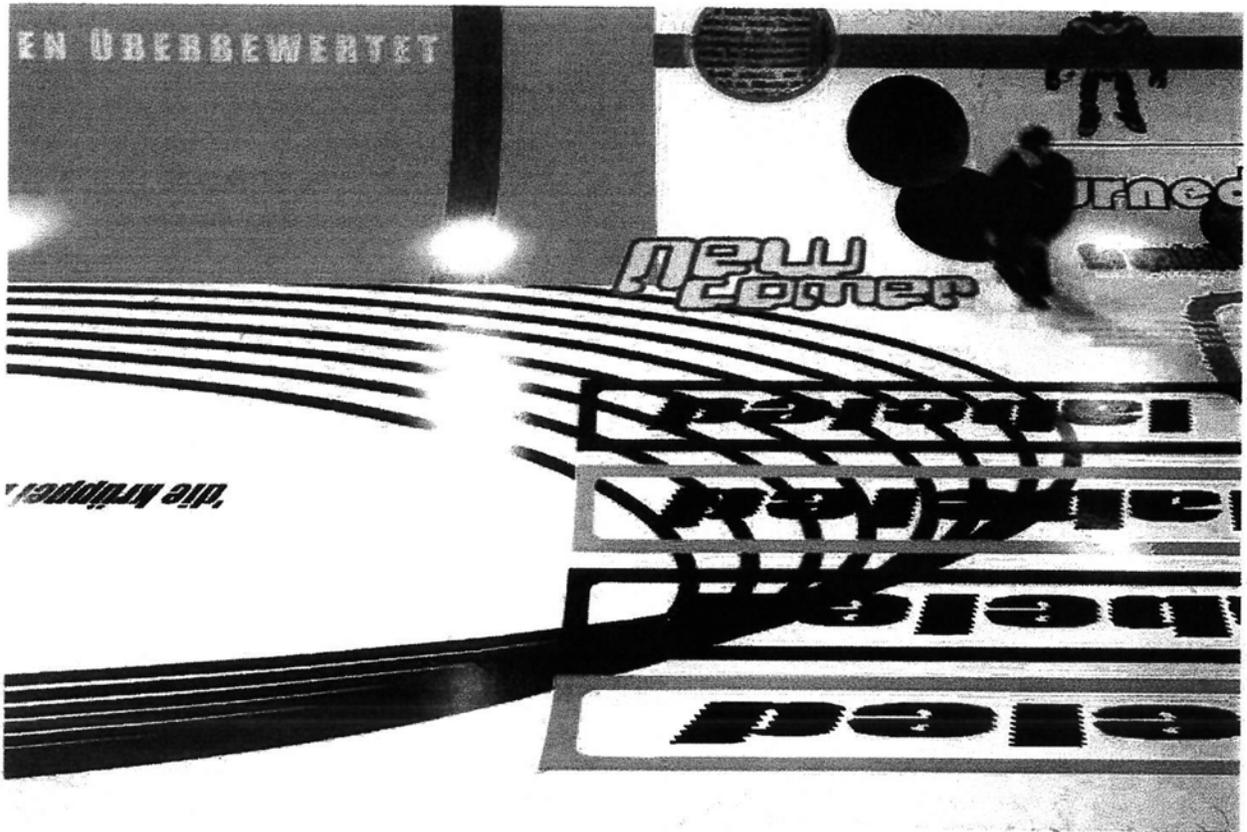
Michel Majerus
if we are dead, so it is, 2000
3x10x42 m
Installation view
Schlossplatz Stuttgart, 2012

It's been ten years since Michel Majerus died in a plane crash at age 35. A retrospective to mark the anniversary travelled this spring from Kunstmuseum Stuttgart to CAPC Musée d'art contemporain in Bordeaux. The show – featuring huge murals and installations inspired by popular culture circa 2000 – recalls an unspoken promise in the artist's work: to reclaim Pop art from the poster shop of history for the present.

In Stuttgart, the exhibition emphasized the artist's links to the city by including works made during and immediately after his studies at the local art academy. One of Majerus's best-known works – the skate ramp sculpture *if we are dead, so it is* (2000) originally made for the Kölnischer Kunstverein – was installed in front of the Kunstmuseum on the Schlossplatz square adjoining the pedestrian shopping zone. Most passers-by carried shopping bags emblazoned with the logos, pictures and names of familiar brands similar to those that Majerus had spread over the half-pipe. The passers-by created an impromptu dialogue with the work's motifs (a crumpled beige

plastic bag, a comic skull, another bag with the logo of a large DIY store) and its words, phrases and slogans ('newcomer', 'unstable', or 'the new reference', but also 'freeing painting from the theme of expression'), which all adopt the logic of advertising slogans. Most of the skaters using the ramp wore branded gear adorned with pithy slogans like 'keep it real'.

In this setting between a shopping paradise, youth culture and a museum, Majerus's work – with its affinity to advertising, brand culture and, ultimately, painting – found its ideal location. To reclaim Pop art for the present, Majerus added a new strategy which diverted from the traditional historical method of turning popular cultural artefacts into the classic media of painting and sculpture. With the half-pipe, he turned the world of brands into both painting and popular culture: neither an artefact nor a commodity to be purchased and taken home in a shopping bag, but a collective experience. What better way to reawaken Pop from reverential art historical references than to let skaters roll over what is basically a giant curved canvas?



Schlaegel, Andreas. "Half Pipe, Half Painting." *Frieze*, Summer 2012, pp. 30–32.



Skatepark von über 2.500 Quadratmetern. Repräsentativ an der Promenade entlang den Ufern der Garonne gelegen und unweit des CAPC, ist dieser Park bei gutem Wetter ein sozialer Treffpunkt. Am Eröffnungswochenende der Ausstellung finden hier die regionalen Skateboard-Meisterschaften statt. Die Ausstellung selbst versucht, mit freiem Eintritt auch die Skater und damit ein junges Publikum ins Museum zu locken. Wer zur Halfpipe will, muss allerdings erst einmal durch die gesamte Ausstellung.

Diese kaum zu übersehende pädagogische Komponente mag damit zu tun haben, dass Majerus in Frankreich kaum bekannt ist. Dass die Reaktionen in Bordeaux nicht so ausnahmslos positiv ausfallen, wie das in Stuttgart der Fall war, mag vielleicht auch mit dieser etwas sehr didaktischen Installation zu tun haben. Ein Anrufer bei einem Radiosender, der sich darüber beschwerte, was ein Künstler, der nichts über das Skaten wisse, sich denn anmaße, und dass er die Sportart und ihre Lebenseinstellung doch nur für sich ausbeuten wolle, scheint dennoch ein Einzelfall. Doch auch auf der Facebook-Seite des CAPC, auf der man den Aufbau der Rampe verfolgen kann, gibt es neben Anerkennung auch Spott und Kritik. Neben skeptischen technischen Anmerkungen – etwa, dass die Ränder der Rampe zu niedrig für bestimmte Tricks seien – ließ sich zumindest zwischen den Zeilen doch auch eine Skepsis herauslesen, vielleicht sogar etwas Angst davor, vor den Karren der Hochkultur gespannt zu werden.

Diese gemischten Reaktionen mögen ein gutes Zeichen sein. Zehn Jahre nach Majerus' Tod scheint sich ein jüngeres Publikum seinem

Werk ohne übertriebene Ehrfurcht und pragmatisch nähern zu können. Der historische Kontext, in dem seine Arbeiten entstanden sind – die 1990er Jahre in Berlin, Techno, Ecstasy, die Loveparade – und der über weite Strecken ihre Rezeption geprägt hat, ist inzwischen offensichtlich weit entfernt. Die 1990er Jahre erscheinen als abgeschlossene historische Epoche und ihre Markierungen halten bestenfalls als Ausstattungselemente her, als sprichwörtlicher Griff in die Mottenkiste. Wenn diese Arbeit von Majerus auch ohne den Künstler eine tatsächlich Generationen übergreifende Kommunikation zu ermöglichen scheint, so hat das nicht nur mit dem Motiv des Skatens zwischen Trendsportart und individualistischer Grundeinstellung zu tun oder damit, wie es als Element des Stadtmarketings eingesetzt wird. Denn in ihr findet sich auch das Bild einer Welt, die mehr denn je Oberfläche geworden ist – als Desktop eines Computers, der mit netten und lustigen Bildern und Bildschirmschonern gepflastert ist, als Benutzeroberfläche diverser sozialer Plattformen, die Orte des gegenseitigen Austausches von Sinsprüchen und Katzenbildern sind, in Form all der anderen Orte, an denen Oberflächen Strukturen maskieren. Und solange diese Oberfläche sich bis in die letzten Fältchen ausdehnt und mit ständig wechselnden und beliebigen Inhalten befüllt wird, werden die Arbeiten von Majerus relevant bleiben. Egal ob man in Stuttgart oder Bordeaux auf der Rampe skatet, Michel Majerus skatet in den Köpfen mit. *For real.*

Andreas Schlaegel ist Künstler und Autor. Er lebt in Berlin.

What better way to reawaken Pop than to let skaters roll over what is basically a giant curved canvas?

The half-pipe was also set up in the CAPC, where it fitted exactly between the rows of pillars in the institute's cathedral-like former warehouse spaces. Bordeaux counts among Europe's skateboard centres and has had an active scene since the early 1980s which has always been in touch with America and has produced international stars including Bastien Salabanzi. Over the past decade, this scene has been massively promoted as part of a major city marketing campaign, most visibly with a skate-park that opened in 2006 with a surface of more than 2,500 square metres. In fine weather, this prominently located facility on the promenade along the banks of the Garonne and not far from CAPC is a place to meet and to socialize. During the exhibition's opening weekend, the skatepark hosted the regional skateboard championships. By offering free entry, the CAPC tried to lure skaters, and thus a young audience, into the exhibition. But anyone wishing to get to the half-pipe had to pass through the entire show.

This blatantly pedagogical measure was perhaps motivated by the fact that Majerus is barely known in France. Yet the didacticism may be one reason why reactions in Bordeaux were not as unanimously positive as they were in Stuttgart.

One listener called into a radio programme to complain about the presumptuousness of this artist who knew nothing about skating; he claimed that Majerus had just been trying to exploit the sport and its lifestyle for his own ends. The CAPC Facebook page, which documented the ramp's installation, featured not only praise but also scorn and criticism. There were technical comments – for example, the ramp's sides are too low for certain tricks – but reading between the lines one could detect a concern, perhaps even fear, over being harnessed to and exploited by high-brow culture.

The mixed reaction may be a good sign. Ten years after Majerus's death, a younger audience can approach his oeuvre pragmatically, without excessive reverence. The historical context in which his works were made and which long shaped their reception – 1990s Berlin, techno, ecstasy, the Love Parade – is now part of the distant past. The 90s appear as a closed historical period and the decade's markings are useful at best as props or dated period elements. If Majerus's work can communicate across generations, even after the artist's death, this dialogue is not only due to the appeal of skating as a sporting trend and an individualist attitude, or to its use for city marketing. The exchange also reflects a world that has become pure surface: on the desktop of a computer plastered with harmless funny pictures and screen savers; in the user interface of social media platforms that facilitate the exchange of gossip, news and pictures of cats; in the form of all the other places where surfaces mask structures. As long as this surface keeps expanding into every last nook and cranny – keeps getting filled with an ever-changing blend of arbitrary content – Majerus's work will continue to be relevant. Whether you're on the ramp in Stuttgart or Bordeaux, the artist is there in your head, skating with you you. For real. *Translated by Nicholas Grindell*

Andreas Schlaegel is an artist and writer living in Berlin.

MOUSSE

FRENETIC STASIS

Raimar Stange

"Il mio lavoro si basa esattamente sull'assunto che qualsiasi rivendicazione di cultura e stile 'autentici' è illusoria". Così Michael Majerus (1967-2002) si presentava sul popolare *Art at the Turn of the Millennium* della Taschen. È una buona sintesi: riassume in poche parole il suo eclettismo freddo (adorava la techno), postmoderno, capace di includere tanto l'astrazione gestuale quanto la figurazione pop o il text painting, talvolta all'interno della stessa opera. La morte precoce ci ha lasciato per sempre il dubbio sul modo in cui il suo lavoro avrebbe potuto evolversi. A maggio si è conclusa una sua retrospettiva postuma al MUDAM del Lussemburgo, il suo Paese d'origine. Noi lo ricordiamo con questo articolo.

*Bring the next line up.*² Dunque mi si chiede di scrivere qualcosa di nuovo su un giovane artista morto da ormai quattro anni, un artista che è stato mio caro amico. La Storia si schianta sul mio presente privato. Un presente che mi assilla per avere delle risposte, come le vuole anche lo spazio pubblico di questa rivista d'arte.

*What looks good today may not look good tomorrow.*³ L'indagine sull'attualità dell'arte è sempre stata cara a Michel Majerus. Negli anni '90, niente era stracarico di attualità come i suoi 'installation paintings': mentre la 'scuola di Lipsia' (il cui successo commerciale cominciò solo dopo la morte di Majerus) era caratterizzata dal riferimento al 'Biederkeit', la virtù, come qualità intrinseca e senza tempo della germanità, le opere di Majerus erano estremamente contemporanee: c'erano loghi e scritte digitali; Super Mario irrompeva allegramente nello spazio del dipinto; una grossa sneaker si imponeva vigorosamente al centro di una superficie astratta e coloratissima; una versione deformata della bandiera americana e molti personaggi dei fumetti, copertine di rotocalchi e catene molecolari, tutti questi soggetti pretendevano che il loro valore estetico fosse riconosciuto. Come una macchina di elaborazione di dati visivi, Majerus reagiva attivamente a questo flusso interminabile di stimoli sensoriali e li canalizzava nel giro di pochi minuti, dando vita a un genere di arte che non poneva alcun confine tra high e low, piatto e spaziale, privato e pubblico, freddo e sentimentale, ora e mai.

*Beschleunigung.*⁴ Ciò nonostante, i lavori di Michel Majerus non scadono mai nella profusione di citazione postmoderne; piuttosto, vogliono suggerire una concezione del tempo in cui durata e velocità non sono più poli di un'opposizione che la seconda ha clamorosamente vinto, ma al contrario si condizionano dialetticamente a vicenda, secondo una modalità che Virilio ha definito "movimento nella stasi".

A dire il vero, Virilio sottolinea continuamente le qualità distruttive della velocità; arriva a scrivere: "Il potere della velocità non produce altro che annientamento". Ebbene, nel lavoro di Majerus, questo 'annientamento' è sostituito da una sorta di sospensione, un equilibrio dinamico che trova una corretta espressione nel verbo tedesco 'Aufheben', termine ambivalente che significa allo stesso tempo 'conservare' e 'annullare'.

L'artista è stato dunque fortemente influenzato dalla forza dialettica della velocità. È evidente soprattutto nei suoi primi lavori, in cui ad esempio ricorre spesso l'immagine di un circuito automobilistico stilizzato: questo soggetto incarna alla perfezione ciò che Virilio chiamava 'stasi frenetica', ossia quel genere di velocità costante che è in grado di trasformarsi in accattivante durata.

La stessa idea è ben rappresentata anche dalla musica techno, altro soggetto a cui Majerus fece spesso riferimento: ne impiegò l'estetica in un modo simile a quello della Pop Art, ritraendo loghi e DJ connessi a quell'area culturale; ma allo stesso tempo era consapevole che questo genere musicale esprimeva un particolarissimo concetto di tempo, quello che il critico culturale Simon Reynolds ha definito "culto dell'accelerazione senza meta".

*Now's the time.*⁵ Questa concezione non lineare del tempo è condivisa anche dal mondo dello skateboarding. E non è un caso che nel 2000 Majerus abbia esposto al Kunstverein di Colonia una halfpipe pronta per l'uso. Stampate sulla rampa c'erano le parole "Fuck the intention of the artist", insieme a molte fotografie (tra queste, quella di un sacchetto di plastica vuoto) ed elementi grafici.

Al cuore di questo lavoro c'era l'invito a sperimentare fisicamente un nuovo modo di percepire il tempo, che il teorico dell'architettura ed esperto di skateboarding Iain Borden definisce così: "Laddove nella società capitalistica il tempo è sempre più dominato dal tempo misurato degli orologi e da ragioni di ordine economico, nel mondo dello skateboard il tempo oscilla tra la durata della sessione (...) e il modello ritmico dettato dal move-transfer-move-transfer dello skater tra le pareti della rampa".

Skateando nella halfpipe, avanti e indietro in una sorta di loop, gli skater diventano parte dell'installazione, un elemento mobile dell'opera. In altre parole, l'attore diventa immagine; e questo effetto, piuttosto comune nella cultura skate nella quale filmare i propri movimenti è di essenziale importanza, ricorda anche le aspirazioni dell'avanguardia dei primi del Novecento e le sue 'opere d'arte aperte' (Umberto Eco).

*A link to the past.*⁶ Diversamente da quanto accade con lo skateboarding e la techno, in cui, citando sempre Simon Reynolds, lo scopo è "suscitare una sensazione, a prescindere dal contesto storico e da quello attuale", Majerus sottolineava con decisione l'esistenza di un precontesto storico e di un contesto attuale e la loro centrale importanza.

Da una parte, il tributo al precontesto storico era pagato citando diverse strategie artistiche - dalla Pop Art di Andy Warhol allo stile espressivo di Willem de Kooning, dal freddo realismo di Gerhard Richter alla forza del testo concettuale di Lawrence Wiener - e interiorizzandone le grammatiche estetiche, in modo da poterle prendere in prestito in qualunque momento dal suo 'museo immaginario' (André Malraux) e poterle impiegare nei suoi lavori. Dall'altra parte, e per collocare il suo lavoro nel presente, accoglieva nel suo lavoro quello di altri artisti, e si avvale della collaborazione di colleghi come il pittore tedesco Hans-Jörg Mayer. L'arricchimento derivato dal riferimento al contesto storico e a quello attuale dà al lavoro di Michel Majerus una cosa che Virilio credeva scomparsa: la durata.

Note:
1,2,3,4,5: titoli di opere dell'artista.

Il ritratto di Michel Majerus nella pagina a fianco è tratto dal libro *Altreich Fuchs: Portraits* edito da Snoeck Verlag, Colonia.

"My work operates precisely on the assumption that every claim to 'authentic' culture and lifestyles is illusory". This is how Michel Majerus (1967-2002) defines himself in the popular book *Art*



Stange, Raimar. "Frenetic Stasis." *Mousse*, September 2007, pp. 50–52.



Installation von Michel Majerus, *Zeit recht, neugerrnischeider*, Berlin, 2007

at the Turn of the Millennium published by Taschen. It's a good synthesis: it sums up in a few words his cool and postmodernist eclecticism (he was a techno music enthusiast) which included gestural abstraction, but also pop figuration and text painting, which sometimes existed even in the very same work. His premature death left us uncertain about how his work would have developed. A posthumous retrospective has closed in May at the MUDAM in Luxembourg, his native country. We recall him with this article.

Bring the next line up!: So I have to write something new on a young artist who died four years ago. An artist who was a close friend to me. History crashes into my private present. And this private present pesters me to find answers, as well as does the public space of this art magazine.

What looks good today may not look good tomorrow?: Investigating the topicality of art has always been dear to Michel Majerus. In the 90s, nothing was as overloaded with topicality as his installation paintings: while the 'school of Leipzig' (whose commercial success started after Majerus' death) was characterized by its reference to the 'Biederkeit' [virtue] as an intrinsic, timeless quality of the Germanity, Majerus' works were extremely contemporary: there were logotypes and digital signs; Super Mario cheerfully burst into the space of the painting; a sneaker presented off in the middle of an abstract, colorful background; a deformed version of the American flag and several comics characters, covers of gossip magazines and molecular chains expected their aesthetic value to be recognized. Like a visual data-processing machine, Majerus reacted actively

against this endless flood of sensory information and channeled it within a few minutes, producing a kind of art that didn't put any boundary between high and low, flat and spatial, private and public, cool and sentimental, now and never.

Beschleunigung?: Nonetheless the works of Michel Majerus are never lost in the over-abundance of postmodern quotations; they rather want to suggest a concept of time where duration and velocity are not poles of an opposition which the latter has won, but on the contrary, they dialectically condition each other, according to the modality that Virilio defines as 'motion in stasis.'

As a matter of fact, Virilio stresses the destructive qualities of velocity; he also writes: "The power of velocity is nothing but obliteration." Well, in Majerus' work, this 'obliteration' is replaced by a sort of suspense which is correctly expressed by the German verb 'Aufheben,' an ambivalent term that means at the same time 'to keep' and 'to annul.'

The artist was largely inspired by the dialectical force of velocity. It is evident especially in his earlier works, where the image of a stylized motor circuit is recurrent: this subject embodies what Virilio called 'frenetic stasis,' i.e. the kind of steady velocity that is able to change into captivating duration.

This idea is also well-represented in techno music, another subject that Majerus liked to refer to: he used its aesthetics in a way similar to that of Pop Art, portraying famous logos and DJs; but he was also aware that this kind of music expressed a peculiar concept of time, which the cultural critic Simon Reynolds defines as "cult of the pointless acceleration."

Now's the time?: This non-linear conception of time is shared by the world of the skateboard as well. Not by chance, in 2000 Majerus exhibited at the Kunstverein in Cologne a halfpipe ready for use. Printed on it were the words "Fuck the intention of the artist," together with several pictures (among them, that of an empty plastic bag) and graphic elements.

At the core of this work there was an invitation to physically ex-

perience a new way of perceiving time, which the architecture theorist and skateboarding expert Iain Borden defines as follows: "Whereas time in capitalism is increasingly dominated by the measured time of clocks and economic rationales, time in skateboarding ranges from the duration of the session (....) and the rhythmic pattern of move-transfer-move-transfer as the skater oscillates between walls."

By skating in the halfpipe, forward and backward in a kind of loop, the skaters become part of the installation, a moving element of the work. In other words, the actor becomes image: and this effect, which is quite common in the skate culture where filming one's own movements is essentially important, also recalls the aspirations of the avant-garde of the early twentieth century and its 'open works of art' (Umberto Eco).

A link to the past?: Differently from what happens with skateboarding and techno music, where, still in Simon Reynolds' words, the aim is "to cause a feeling, apart from the historical and from the current context," Majerus stressed firmly the existence of a historical pre-context and of a current context and their main importance.

On one hand, he did it by quoting different artistic strategies—from Andy Warhol's Pop Art to Willem de Kooning's expressive style, from the cool realism of Gerhard Richter to the strong conceptual text of Lawrence Wiener—and by interiorizing their aesthetic grammars, in order to be able to borrow them at any moment from his 'imaginary museum' (André Malraux) and to employ them in his works. On the other hand, he also accepted other people's work to mix with his own, and made use of the collaboration with such colleagues as the German painter Hans-Jörg Mayer. The enrichment derived from the reference to both the historical and the current context gives the work of Michel Majerus what Virilio believes disappeared: duration.

Notes:
1,2,3,4,5: titles of works by the artist.

Michel Majerus' portrait in the previous page is drawn from the book *Albrecht Fuchs, Portraits* published by Snoeck Verlag, Cologne.

sleek

Pop Goes the Easel

MICHEL MAJERUS' colour-saturated art gives shape to a new concept in painting. Comic images merge with abstract forms and dripping paint in multi-dimensional environments. Defining his expansive vision with speech bubbles and advertising slogans, Majerus reinvented Pop Art.

Text by Dr. Christina Lissmann/Translated from German by Monte Packham

ENGLISH

When Michel Majerus fell in love with painting, it was as though someone had pressed the »go« button, and started up a computer program. Inspired by Sigmar Polke's famous motto, »Higher beings were in command...«, Majerus began to frantically liberate visual elements from their original contexts, giving them a new existence in his art.

Majerus' world of pictures takes inspiration from youth culture and the ever-advancing technology of video games. Comics, trick films and familiar characters like Super Mario create the impression of a storyboard, as if they were part of a newly-created adventure. Oversized everyday objects appear alongside comic figures: a gigantic running shoe, washing machines, audio cassettes and the MTV logo.

We are used to seeing such pictorial elements on a small scale – comic books, computer screens, televisions – but in Majerus' art they reach massive proportions which test the dimensions of the spacious exhibition halls in which they are shown. Indeed much of his art is too large for conventional galleries. The viewer becomes dwarfed by images which in their original contexts would fit into the palm of his or her hand.

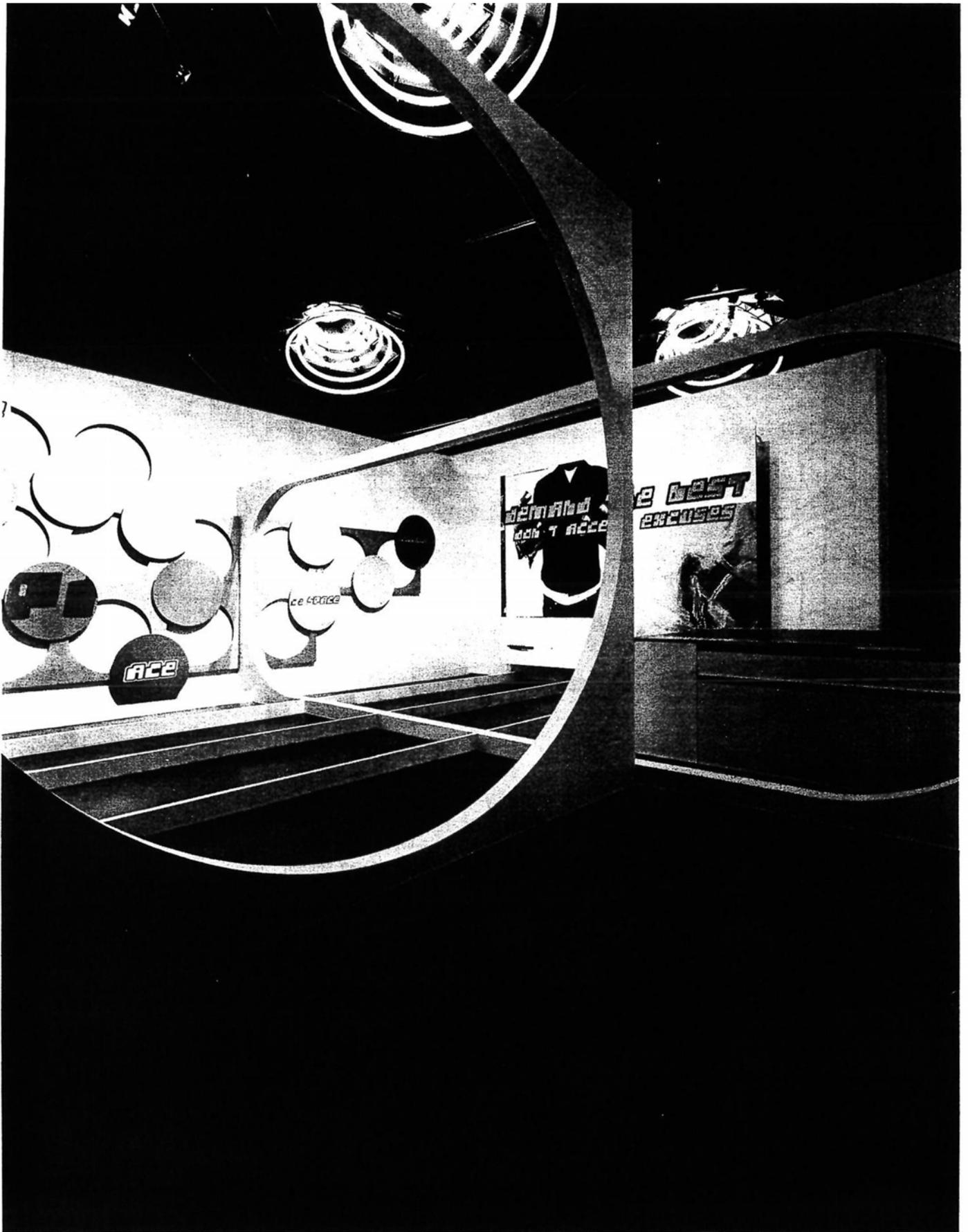
Majerus taints the harmlessness of these images with symbols, logos or words: »blood all over«, »your ideas get you killed« or »do not stretch over!« Famous examples from early art history are also quoted, sampled and given fresh meaning. It is as if Majerus found it self-evident to proceed where others had given up decades ago, or had maybe not begun to give up. His art is the result of a restless eye and a manic enthusiasm to

DEUTSCH

Als Michel Majerus sich in die Malerei verliebte, war es, als habe jemand die »Go«-Taste betätigt und ein Programm gestartet. Nach dem berühmten Motto von Sigmar Polke, »Höhere Wesen befehlen...«, begann Majerus in rasender Geschwindigkeit alle auf ihn einströmenden visuellen Reize aus ihrem Kontext zu befreien und ihnen in seiner Bilderwelt ein neues Leben zum Zweck der Kunst zu geben.

Majerus Bilderwelt versorgt sich aus der Jugendkultur und deren sich fortwährend übertreffenden digitalen Bildmaschinen, Spielkonsolen und Videogames. Comics, Trickfilme und Computerspiele hatten eine starke Wirkung auf den Künstler: Helden, Superstars, Charaktere wie Super Mario. Wie Akteure eines Storyboards vermitteln diese Figuren in seinen Arbeiten dem Betrachter die Illusion eines neuen Sinnzusammenhangs einer bekannten Geschichte.

Den Harmlosigkeiten der Comic- und Computerspielszenarien mischte Majerus manchmal eine dunkle Seite bei, die sich, kleinen Sprengsätzen gleich, über Symbole, Logos oder Worte formuliert und Banalitäten oder die fröhlichen Farbwelten konterkariert, etwa mit Schriftzügen wie »blood all over«, »your ideas get you killed« oder »do not stretch over!« Daneben tauchen in seinen Bildern überdimensionierte Alltagsgegenstände auf: Ein gigantischer Turnschuh, profane Waschmaschinen und Audiokassetten, das MTV-Logo und andere Warenzeichen. In ihrem ursprünglichen Kontext würden viele dieser Bildelemente leicht in die Handfläche des Betrachters passen, aber vor den riesigen, gewöhnliche Galerieräume spre-



MICHEL MAJERUS, installation view »Michel Majerus. Installationen 92-02«, Kunsthau Graz am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz 2005. Photo© Paul Ott, courtesy Kunsthau Graz.

Lissman, Christina. "Pop Goes the Easel." *Sleek*, Spring 2006, pp. 50–57.



MICHEL MAJERUS, *gold*, 2000. Acrylic on canvas, 303×348 cm. Collection Rudolf and Ute Scharpff, Stuttgart. Photo© Estate of Michel Majerus, courtesy neugerriemschneider, Berlin.

realise ideas which were previously not brought to fruition.

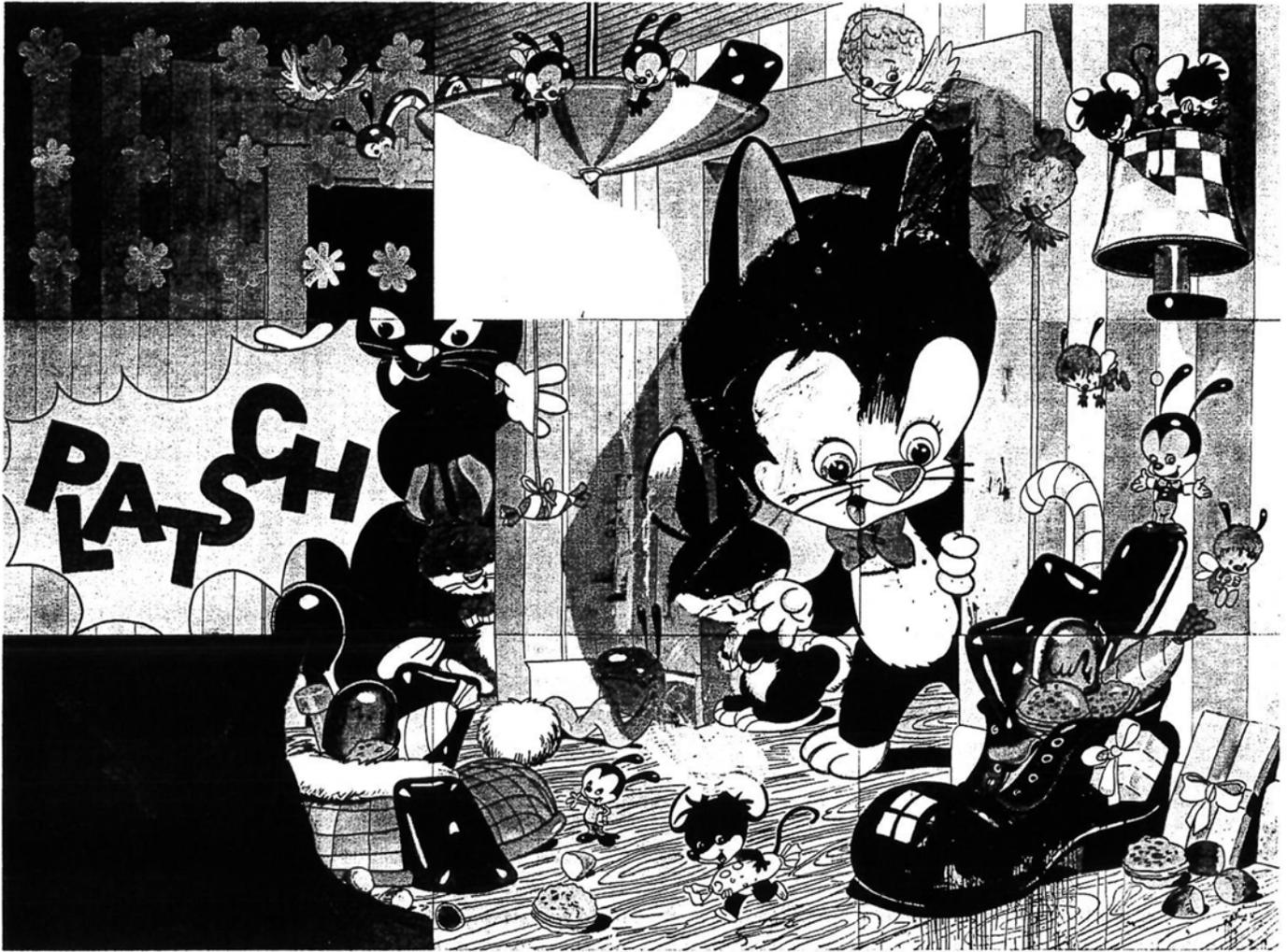
To emulate icons of art history, and to embody his visions with free abandon using acrylic on canvas in the tradition of Duchamp's ready-mades, show this artist to be a devotee of Andy Warhol's factory. Majerus' art is a process of self-reflexive progression which references its own history while anticipating its future at a speedy pace. Indeed he once confessed to a friend that he preferred to paint quickly and casually, rather than sit before the canvas for hours which would have driven him slowly crazy.

Majerus' images, formed on a computer screen from a combination of appropriated elements and original material, are anything but conventional collages. Rather, they evidence a contemporary approach to picture making. Some critics question whether painting can adequately meet the demands of such high-tech media, without compromising its legitimacy

genden Leinwänden kehrt sich das Größenverhältnis um.

Berühmte Vorbilder aus der jüngeren Kunstgeschichte werden zitiert, gesampelt und reanimiert. So als sei es ganz selbstverständlich, dort weiterzumachen, wo andere vor Jahrzehnten aufgehört oder noch nicht einmal angefangen hatten. Majerus verwirklichte Ideen, die bei anderen Künstlern bisher noch nicht gefruchtet hatten. Ikonen der Kunstgeschichte nachzubilden oder seinen Remix im Gestus Duchampscher ready made-Kultur wild und befreit in Acryl auf Leinwand zu bannen, zeigt Michel Majerus als Anhänger von Andy Warhols Factory. In der Tat gestand er einer Freundin, er male lieber schnell und beiläufig, als stundenlang vor der Leinwand zu sitzen und sich »einen abzubrechen«.

Wenn am Computer Bilderwelten teils aus Vorlagen, teils aus neugeschaffenen Bildelementen entstehen, sind das keine Collagen im herkömmlichen Sinn, sondern zeitgemäße



MICHEL MAJERUS, *katze*, 1993. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 9 parts, 714×966 cm. Photo© Estate of Michel Majerus, courtesy neugerrirmschneider, Berlin.

in the face of digitally created images. However, the choice of potential picture elements does not become arbitrary merely because digital processes produce rapid results. How such elements are combined determines the integrity of an artwork; and that responsibility lies wholly with the artist.

Michael Majerus had no qualms about experimenting with whatever was technically possible. His concept of painting was open: wall paintings, coloured reliefs, the use of text, and large format panels which he conceived in his relatively small Berlin studio and only realised on a grand scale within the exhibition space. Majerus created sensational effects by exploiting a huge format; painting became a negotiable comic experience defined by buoyant colour, sculptural forms and cheeky strokes of the brush. Yet in time this visual lure morphs into a trap in which our comic heroes cannot help; Super Mario is after all only an image. We are pulled in at a dizzying pace, and then spat out, reeling in instability.

Majerus' ambition was an anti-ambition. His was a painting of abundance with spaces to be filled, which reflected his mindset. Ambivalence and cynical scepticism shaped his art and being: »The intentions of the artist are becoming overrated«, he proclaimed in 2000 as a slogan for his *Skaterrampe* (»skater ramp«) at Cologne's Kunstverein.

Methoden der Bildherstellung. Einige Kritiker stellen die Frage, ob Malerei diesen Hightech-Medien und ihren Mechanismen adäquat begegnen kann, ohne in den Verdacht zu geraten, durch das Aufkommen von digital generierten Bildern längst gestürzt zu sein. Doch nur weil die Methode schnell Ergebnisse produziert, heißt dies noch lange nicht, daß die Auswahl der Bildelemente aus dem vorgefundenen Motivfundus austauschbar und beliebig ist. Michel Majerus hatte keine Hemmungen, sich all dessen zu bedienen, was technisch möglich ist. Sein Malereibegriff war für alles offen: Wandmalereien, Reliefs, Schriften, großformatige Paneele, die er in seinem relativ kleinen Berliner Atelier malte und erst in den großen Ausstellungsräumen zu den charakteristischen Riesenformaten zusammensetzte, wobei er deren sensationelle Wirkung als raumgreifendes Erlebnis einkalkulierte. Malerei als begehrter Raum, als erfahrbarer Trip in einen Hyper-Comic; Malerei, die den Betrachter anzieht und bespielt mit fröhlichen Farben, teils plastisch ausgearbeiteten Leckerbissen oder frechem, schnellen Pinselstrich. Verlockendes wird zur Falle, der Comicheld kann nicht helfen, Super Mario ist nur ein Abziehbild, Fast Forward, unglaubliche Sogwirkung und dann – der Fall ins All.

Majerus Bestreben war ein Anti-Bestreben: Eine Malerei der Fülle mit Leere zu durchsetzen und ihr in der Erscheinungs-



MICHEL MAJERUS, installation view »Demand the best don't accept excuses«, Deichtorhallen Hamburg 2005-06. Photo© B. Huebner/Deichtorhallen.

Abolishing statements and neutralising ideas through their opposites was part of Majerus' strategy. He manifested this with his breakthrough presence in »German Open« at Wolfsburg's Kunstmuseum in 1999, using the slogan, »What looks good today may not look good tomorrow.« »I'm positive,« he once wrote, »that you never have control over the short time in which you can make good things. You probably never know when this time comes about. It happens when you don't expect it and when you don't expect anything from yourself.«

When Michel Majerus died in a plane crash on 6 November 2002, one of the central figures of an artistic generation was snatched away. The enormously productive artist left behind an oeuvre of over 1,500 works.

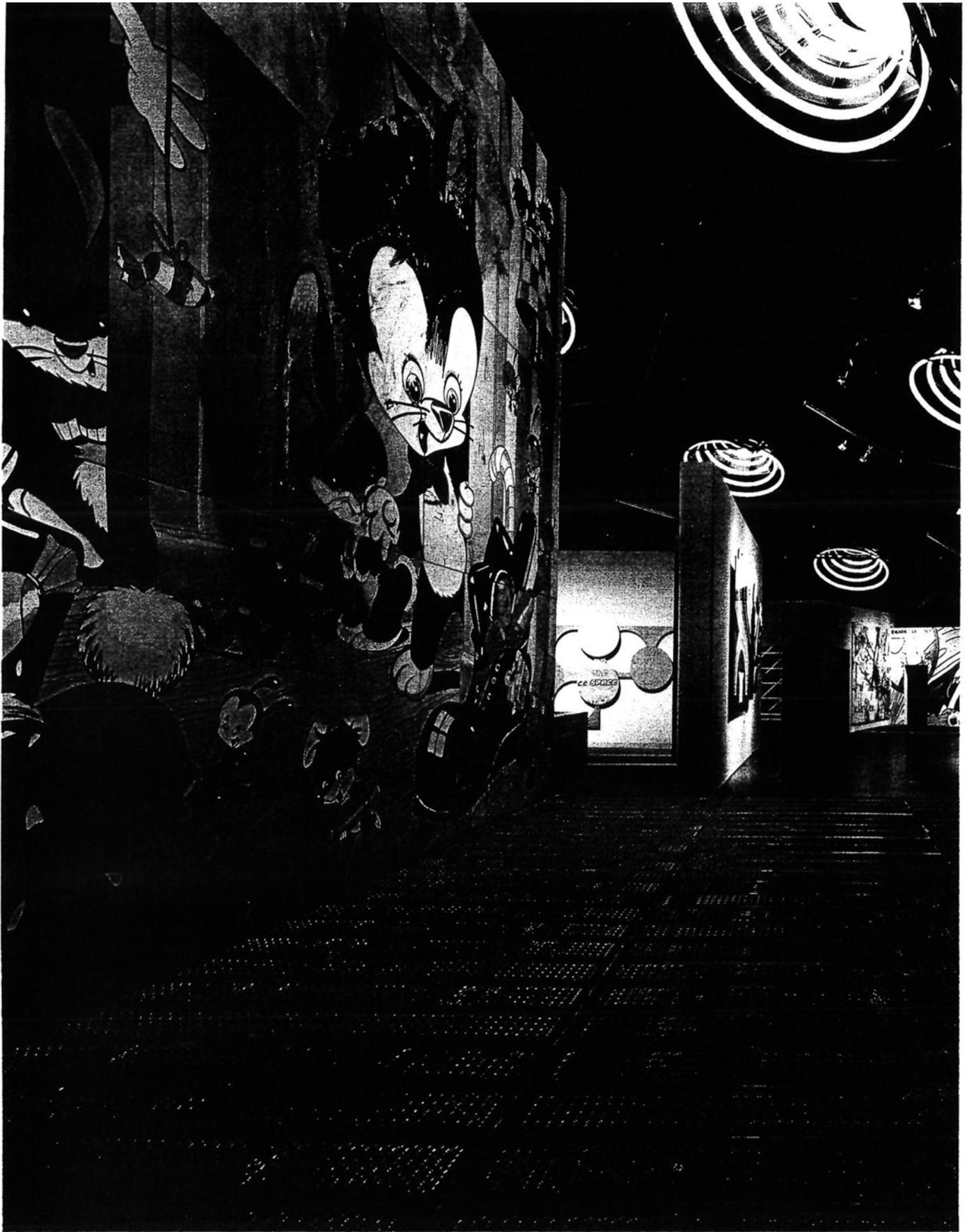
Many people love a young genius, but everyone loves a dead one. When that plane crashed and ended Majerus' life, it was as though someone without warning had pressed the »stop« button and terminated the program. All that was left on the screen was »game over«.

form wie als Bedeutungsträger einen virtuellen Ort zuzuweisen, der zugleich seine Haltung widerspiegelte. Ambivalenz und zynischer Skeptizismus gegenüber der eigenen künstlerischen Position. »Die Absichten des Künstlers werden überbewertet«, hatte er schon 2000 als Slogan in seiner *Skaterrampe* im Kölnerischen Kunstverein proklamiert.

Die Aufhebung von Statements, die Nivellierung einer Intention durch ihr Gegenteil gehört zur Strategie des Michel Majerus, der seinen Durchbruch 1999 mit der Teilnahme an der Gruppenausstellung »German Open« im Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg manifestierte und diese mit dem Slogan inszenierte: »What looks good today may not look good tomorrow.« »Ich bin davon überzeugt«, schrieb er an besagte Freundin, »daß man die Kontrolle über die kurze Zeit, in der man gute Sachen macht, selbst nicht hat. Man weiß vermutlich auch nie, wann es sich um diese Zeit handelt. Wahrscheinlich passiert es in der Zeit, in der niemand etwas von einem erwartet und man auch von sich selber nichts erwartet.«

Als Michel Majerus am 6.11.2002 beim Absturz einer Passagiermaschine im Landeanflug starb, wurde eine der zentralen Künstlerfiguren seiner Generation aus der Arbeit gerissen. Der ungeheuer produktive Künstler hinterließ ein Oeuvre von über 1500 Arbeiten.

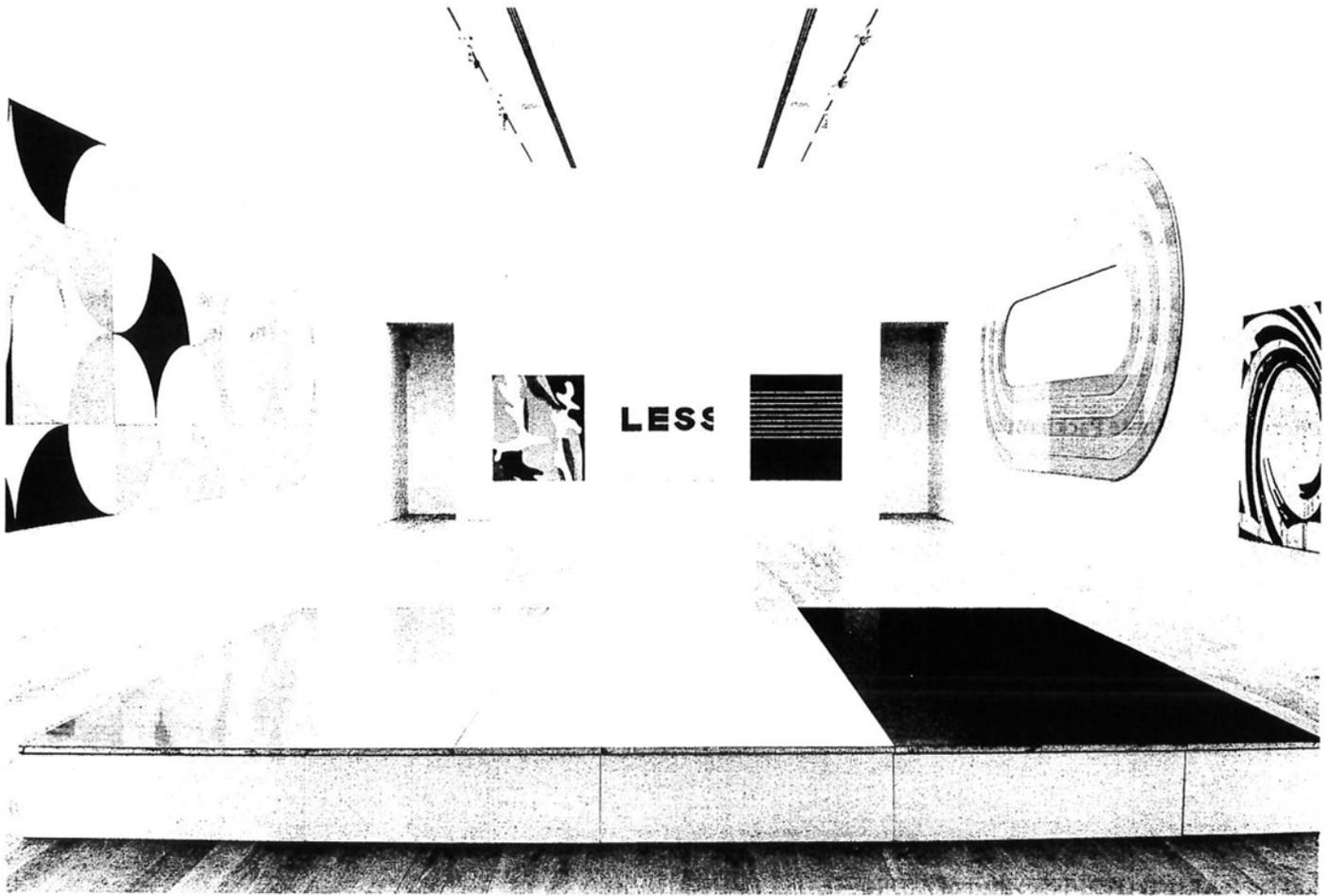
Das junge Genie lieben viele, das tote Genie alle. Und die Geschichte vom Flugzeugabsturz ist so, als habe jemand die »Stop«-Taste gedrückt und die Simulation »crash« gestartet – und auf dem Display leuchtet der Schriftzug »game over«.



MICHEL MAJERUS, installation view »Michel Majerus. Installationen 92-02«, Kunsthaus Graz am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz 2005. Photo© Paul Ott, courtesy Kunsthaus Graz.



MICHEL MAJERUS, installation view »Michel Majerus. Installationen 92-02«, Kunsthau Graz am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz 2005. Photo© Paul Ott, courtesy Kunsthau Graz.



MICHEL MAJERUS, »What looks good today may not look good tomorrow«, installation view hall IV, kestnergesellschaft, Hannover 2005-06. Photo© Doris Leuschner, courtesy kestnergesellschaft, Hannover.

MICHEL MAJERUS Born 1967 in Luxemburg. Died 2002 EXHIBITIONS Retrospective beginning in 2005 at the Kunsthaus Graz, the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, the Deichtorhallen Hamburg and the kestnergesellschaft Hannover, ending at the Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean Luxemburg (MUDAM), Luxemburg, 13 December, 2006 – 16 April, 2007 GALLERY Estate of Michel Majerus/neugerriemschneider, Berlin, tel. +49 30 30872810, www.neugerriemschneider.com

frieze

Back

*Deichtorhallen, Hamburg, and
Kestnergesellschaft, Hanover, Germany*

There's less than ten years between Michel Majerus' 1993 painting *Untitled (Loss of Self Confidence)* and *Splash Bombs 3* (2002). The first, created by a recent art school graduate, is a bleak black and white composition. On a whitewashed ground the words 'loss of self-confidence, lack of culture' are traced awkwardly, as if from a crooked projection. Below these wonky block letters is an abstract, floating, decapitated, cap-wearing head - maybe a silhouette of a cartoon character - and beside it is another brutalist figure with a rough, circular face hovering as if detached from

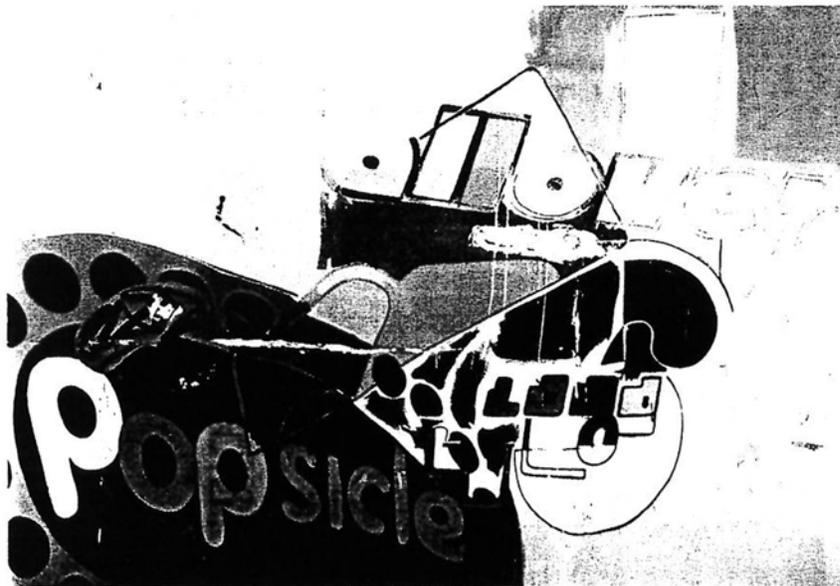
Michel Majerus
Load
2001
Acrylic on canvas
280x400 cm

its body. The painting could be a piece of graffiti on an unused roadside billboard, a rogue advertisement for personal doubt or an artistic capitulation. It's a 'good' bad painting, but it could easily have been consigned to oblivion if it weren't for the work that was to come.

Rushing forward nearly a decade - screaming yellow, orange, green and blue, *Splash Bombs 3* is a world away, seemingly put down with perfectly controlled fury or with enormous tongue-in-cheek bravado by a now well-known artist with an international practice and reputation. Twenty square metres of in-your-face colour inspired by washing powder packaging, a hedonistic *mélange* of old-school American Abstract Expressionism and

Pop art in a contemporary digital blender; frank, energetic and untroubled. Between these two paintings Majerus apparently produced more than 1,500 staggering, confrontational works. Speed and quantity, however, don't necessarily imply ease - rather, perhaps, its opposite. Majerus' practice was about working doggedly: a manic collection of sources, sampling, appropriating, reproducing, digital collage, nervous activity, turbo production, pirating, regurgitating, consuming and spitting it all back out on canvas, vast plastic print-outs and in installations. He was, as Günther Holler-Schuster noted, a kind of 'visual hacker'. It was crucial that Majerus was a painter in a decade that for the most part feigned scepticism about the medium, while he and other culture producers got wired up and adapted to the idea that images were plentiful, cheap and manipulable as never before. While obviously revelling in retro High Modern techniques, he was at the same time finding ways to get paintings to climb or slip off the walls, to jump out or warp their given architectural and conceptual frames. His paintings became virtual or head spaces.

The tandem painting exhibitions 'Demand the Best, Don't Accept Excuses' and 'What Looks Good Today May Not Look Good Tomorrow' were the second stage of a posthumous five-institution retrospective that began in Kunsthalle Graz and the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam last year, and which will conclude next year at the new Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean in Majerus' place of birth, Luxembourg. Each exhibition was conceived to place a different emphasis on his work. Retrospectives inevitably have to do with the benefit of hindsight; they are basically synonymous with a process of summing up, the idea of giving a definitive overview, trying to get the artist canonized or marking out the boundaries of an artistic lot. Ironically Majerus' iconoclastic work has much →



Michel Majerus



Michel Majerus
Katze
(Cat)
(detail)
1993
Oil and acrylic on
canvas
Nine canvases, each
238×322 cm

to do with boiling everything down, synthesis and summation, but in a way that the big picture remains elusive, tantalizing, part of a flux.

Having seen many of his works over the years in solo exhibitions and in the mega-sized group shows that blossomed in the late 1990s, it was moving and shocking, in at least disorientating, to see Majerus' work as he probably never saw it or would have installed it himself. Here it was inflected by an unavoidable eulogy to the artist - who died in 2002, at the age of only 35 - and accordingly reverent rather than cheeky, as the artist himself often was in his approach. In Hamburg there were about 18 of his giant multi-panelled paintings, some covering 100 square metres, including the delightful comic-based work *Katze* (Cat, 1993). In Hanover there was a selection of his 60 x 60 cm bit-size canvases that are a kind of referential patchwork and, upstairs, a reconstruction of his painting installation *Qualified* (1998). In this painting Nintendo figure Super Mario, Space Invaders, Tron and the Teletubbies are given as much attention, and get to share the same painterly planes in homages to work by figures such as Willem de Kooning, Andy Warhol, Frank Stella, Robert Morris and Ellsworth Kelly. Majerus could have been an excellent forger.

Paintings for Majerus seem to have been more than anything else signs of and for his times, especially considering the slogans constantly repeated in his work: 'a response to something already experienced', 'fading image' or 'yet sometimes what is read successfully stops us with its meaning'. To these we could add: premature conclusions always leave you wanting more.

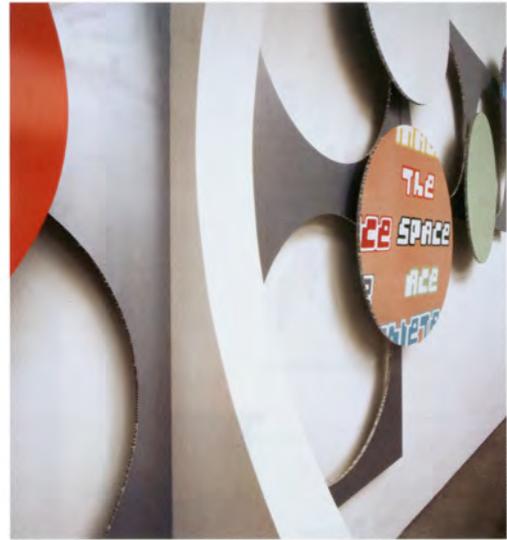
Dominic Eichler

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047



Birnbaum, Daniel. "Search Engine: The Art of Michel Majerus." *Artforum*, February 2006, cover, pp. 168–73.



This page, clockwise from top left: Michel Majerus, *nothing is permanent*, 2000, acrylic on canvas, 8' 6" x 14' 9". Michel Majerus, *mace the space ace*, 2000. Installation view, Galerie Monika Sprüth, Cologne. View of "Michel Majerus," Kunsthalle Basel, 1996. View of "Michel Majerus: what looks good today may not look good tomorrow," Kestnergesellschaft, Hannover, 2005. Photo: Doris Leuschner. Opposite page, clockwise from top right: View of "Michel Majerus: what looks good today may not look good tomorrow," Kestnergesellschaft, Hannover, 2005. Photo: Doris Leuschner. Michel Majerus, *load*, 2001, acrylic on canvas, 9' 2 1/4" x 13' 1 1/2". View of "Michel Majerus: installation," Kunsthaus Graz, Austria, 2005.

Search Engine

THE ART OF MICHEL MAJERUS



Over the course of a decade-long career, Michel Majerus crammed the digital efflux of our age into paintings that strain conventional definitions of the medium. On the occasion of the artist's current multipartite European retrospective, DANIEL BIRNBAUM revisits an enduring oeuvre cut short in its prime.



"I'M CERTAIN THAT ONE doesn't have control over the short time in which one does good things," said Michel Majerus, the Berlin-based artist who died in a plane crash in his native Luxembourg in November 2002 at the age of thirty-five. His time as an artist was indeed short—less than a decade was all he had. Yet it is important to stress that this brevity had nothing to do with the self-destructiveness so often associated with artists who die young. Majerus, whom I came to know quite well in the mid-'90s, was incredibly affable and sincere. His death was simply a meaningless accident that prematurely ended one of the most promising artistic careers of his generation—at the very moment of a major breakthrough. Nevertheless, by then he had already developed a body of work that, in retrospect, appears to be a key contribution—I'm inclined to say *the* key contribution—to what one might call painting in the expanded field. His work, claims the catalogue accompanying a sprawling five-part European retrospective that began last year and culminates in 2007, constitutes the most important counterposition to the revival of expressionist styles in early twenty-first-century painting. To this I would add that Majerus's production of images and visual environments, in fact, represents one of very few

facade of the Italian pavilion at the Venice Biennale or, more unexpectedly, drape entirely Berlin's Brandenburg Gate. A student of Joseph Kosuth's in Stuttgart in the early '90s, Majerus, of course, did not believe in traditional disciplines defined in terms of material support, but one can perhaps see his art as actively grappling with issues of painting in a different way. His massive works on canvas—some of which reach nearly thirty feet in

width—display fragments from the history of painting and imagemaking in its entirety, from Jean-Antoine Watteau, Philipp Otto Runge, and Willem de Kooning to Disney, Frank Stella, and Jörg Immendorff. Yet



what dominates Majerus's fields are not citations from old or recent masters but images plucked from glossy advertisements or the anonymous pictorial cosmos of video games like Super Mario Bros. and Donkey Kong. These figures might inhabit fragments of abstraction or bump against graphic styling appropriated from the posters and flyers of the German techno scene, which was but one of the subcultures—along with skateboarding and manga—whose visual vernaculars Majerus mined. Through it all float theoretical quotes that laconically question the very status of artistic production: WHAT LOOKS GOOD TODAY MAY NOT LOOK GOOD TOMORROW; PRODUCE, REDUCE, REUSE; FUCK THE INTENTION OF THE ARTIST.

recent approaches to painting that cannot be understood in terms of a return to anything from the past. His art had a specific kind of newness—not the lofty, if contested, "originality of the avant-garde," but the prepackaged newness of the latest cell-phone graphic or just-released sneaker from Nike. Majerus's art was *about* this newness. But in what sense was it painting?

We tend to identify large, colorful surfaces filled with imagery and text as paintings, whether they are acrylic on canvas, lacquer on aluminum, or digital printing on synthetic fabric. We are likely to see them as paintings even if, like two of Majerus's most monumental works, they cover the

Certainly Majerus's practice took cues from Pop and its forebears (the omnivorous Titian-to-trash sampling of Robert Rauschenberg and the painted agglomerations of James Rosenquist or Sigmar Polke come to mind) as much as it represented a fresh take on the appropriation strategies of the late '70s and '80s. But his work might be distinguished from these predecessors by the stunning sweep of its polyglot promiscuity. The imagery that fills his paintings—otherwise visible on T-shirts, key rings, and stickers, or in computer games and comics—is, as German critic

Tilman Baumgärtel put it, today's lowest common cultural denominator. It's just as legible in Luxembourg and Berlin as it is in Manila or Bangladesh. Churning out images such as a ridiculous video-game monkey climbing a tree of expressionist brushstrokes, Majerus established himself as a master of contemporary ugliness. His large, lurid surfaces are among the most glaring and visually overpowering works of art I know. There is often something truly hideous and uniquely superficial about them, a quality the artist considered of particular importance. As Baumgärtel

on a computer screen. Majerus created a similarly bewildering scenario in a work shown in the lobby bar of a cinema complex during Manifesta 2. The painting, *yet sometimes what is read successfully, stops us with its meaning, no. II*, 1998, consists of a large horizontal aluminum panel covered with bright waves of color and a cropped graphic that seems to suggest the volume function on a digital music player. At the right edge of the work, an enormous athletic shoe digitally printed on a cutout panel literally steps out of the picture. With startling photographic illusionism, the

silhouetted and foreshortened shoe acts like a kick in the face to the viewer and also makes it abundantly clear that Majerus couldn't care less about respecting old-fashioned pictorial devices such as the rectangular frame of the picture plane. And yet the sneaker does not step out into a total void: A second white panel functions as a back-



Opposite page, clockwise from top: Michel Majerus, *sein lieblingsthema war sicherheit seine these—es gibt sie nicht* (his favorite topic was safety, his thesis—it does not exist), 1999. Installation view, Neugerriemerschneider, Berlin, 1999. Michel Majerus, *what looks good today may not look good tomorrow*, 1999, acrylic on canvas, 10' x 11' 10 1/2". Michel Majerus, *if we are dead, so it is*, 2000. Installation view, Kölnischer Kunstverein. This page, left: Michel Majerus, *yet sometimes what is read successfully, stops us with its meaning, no. II*, 1998. Installation view, Manifesta 2, Luxembourg. Right: Michel Majerus, *the space is where you'll find it* (detail), 2000. Installation view, Deffina, London.

points out, Majerus's work can even make the deadpan crassness of Jeff Koons look sophisticated.

Majerus never mourned the death of painting or authenticity and yet his work concerns the very conditions of painting's possibility and the kinds of representation associated with the medium. Perhaps more interesting than the introduction of various popular vocabularies into his art—a standard operation in much work today—is the way that the digital methods of picture production seem to alter the very space of representation itself, producing a strange sense of emptiness and visual dissonance. Take, for example, *eye protection*, 1999, with its perplexing mix of wave patterns, techno-style lettering, and enlarged handwriting. Across the bottom of the painting runs the text: IT'S HARD TO DO A PROPER ANALYSIS. This is certainly true. More than thirty feet wide, the digital print on aluminum evokes the heterogeneous spatial realms one encounters simultaneously

Majerus's production of images and visual environments represents one of very few recent approaches to painting that cannot be understood in terms of a return to anything from the past.



drop that gives the shoe its almost sculptural presence in spite of its total flatness, creating a set of disconnected spaces that cannot be easily assimilated within the ordinary world of kinesthetic and perceptual experience.

This radical discontinuity is the most typical feature of Majerus's art. It is difficult to orient oneself in his works. To an eye not trained in the visual logic of computer games, the space can make little sense. Here, the brain, as Gilles Deleuze put it in a different context, "has lost its Euclidean coordinates and now emits other signs"—signs that are hardly compatible with the traditional conditions of what we call painting, the medium of flatness and delimitation. Confusing spatial circumstances are nothing new to painting, of course, extending in a long line from El Lissitzky through Stella to various figures

today. Yet with the proliferation of digital technologies, we have become more accustomed to layouts that embrace this heterogeneity, and Majerus is an artist who, perhaps more effectively than any other, has chosen to display and even exacerbate this visual logic. One of his means is the disconcertingly empty ground in which his pictorial elements often float. These blank areas, usually white, seem to distance the components from one another rather than producing a sense of coherence. Majerus amplifies this dissonance by mixing, often in a single work, techniques like painting, silk-screen, and various forms of digital printing. The artist seems to insist that the visual systems generated by digital devices cannot be translated seamlessly into shapes and colors on a surface, be it canvas, chipboard, or Sheetrock. And yet, with a certain amount of brute force, that is what happens in Majerus's work—without any visible effort to reconcile the divergent pictorial terms. He never used painting, if that's even the right term, as a zone of resolution. Instead, he treated it as a medium forever teetering on the verge of collapse, an insufficient armature to contain and support all the disparate systems he brought to it.

Majerus treated painting as a medium forever teetering on the verge of collapse, an insufficient armature to support all the disparate systems he brought to it.

his breakthrough solo exhibition—his first at an institution—at the Kunsthalle Basel in 1996, he installed a metallic grid on the floor through which one could still glimpse the old parquet. The new flooring changed the acoustic situation completely: You were surprised by the sound of your own steps if you toured the empty Kunsthalle alone, and if a group gathered, the overwhelming sound created an atmosphere reminiscent of the techno clubs of the '90s.

Majerus would go on to create more and more ambitious environments that altered the perception of the space itself rather than just the images on the walls. Specifically designed wall structures or elegant-looking forms of scaffolding became integrated parts of his shows, and the “paintings” seemed to develop directly out of these architec-



tural arrangements. Occasionally the permanent features of a given space, such as pillars or steel rafters, were incorporated in the installation, thus changing the original architecture beyond recognition. I remember experiencing this firsthand in 1997 in “Space Safari” at Anders Tornberg’s small gallery in Lund, Sweden, where I could no longer distinguish between the permanent walls and columns and the building blocks the artist had added to the space. Everything was part of a kind

of three-dimensional painting—an approach that drew on a host of precedents from de Stijl installations to Warhol’s superimposition of his canvases on wallpaper, but one that felt uniquely Majerus’s own. He didn’t create painting installations; his spatial constructs seemed to emanate out of the computer game as a visual machinery that suggests more dimensions than can be reproduced at once in our everyday perceptual space. This may be why his works are never fully “satisfying” or “successful.” They can never “succeed” because they exist between different kinds of worlds, orders, and logics, and although they seem to suggest that a

So perhaps one shouldn’t refer to Majerus as a painter after all, but rather emphasize the way in which his spatial ruptures and jarringly mismatched iconographies evince the crisis that’s engendered when the medium is so aggressively exposed to the visual production of today’s technologies. His critique of painting does not ultimately entrench it more firmly in its traditional areas of competence, but instead opens it up to tensions and conflicts it clearly can no longer handle. This is painting in the expanded field—or not even painting at all. Early on, Majerus added physical elements to his work that made the entire gallery part of the show. For

unified translation of these disparate realms into our own might be possible, of course one never is. We're left with only orphaned characters from Nintendo and a useless futuristic scaffolding, or a massive working half-pipe covered with bright patterns, photographic imagery, and slogans, like the one Majerus crammed into the Kölnischer Kunstverein in 2000. He invited skaters to perform on his installation, but the lively gesture was characteristically qualified, this time by a ceiling height that precluded actual use and the title, *if we are dead, so it is*.

During his last two years, Majerus spent long periods in LA, but work in his Berlin studio continued uninterrupted with the help of an assistant who painted images delivered via e-mail attachments. It was as if the limitations of site and geography were so obviously irrelevant to him that he never considered halting his Berlin production simply because he happened to live abroad—and that may be, to quote Gerhard Richter, “the daily practice of painting” in the twenty-first century. Majerus’s last major project

Opposite page, left: Michel Majerus, *reminder*, 1998. Installation view, Manifesta 2, Luxembourg. Right: Michel Majerus, *mm1*, 2002, acrylic on canvas, 8' 6 3/4" x 10'. This page, left: Michel Majerus, *Sozialpalast*, 2002. Installation view, Brandenburg Gate, Berlin, 2002. Right: Michel Majerus, *gold*, 2000, acrylic on canvas, 10' x 11' 5".



(our sole curatorial collaboration) was completed along these lines, with him in the US and me on the other side of the Atlantic. For three weeks during the German national elections of September 2002, Majerus covered the iconic Brandenburg Gate, then undergoing restoration, with an enormous digital rendering of the so-called Schöneberg Sozialpalast, an early-'70s graffiti-covered housing block. Standing on the site of the infamous Sportpalast where in 1943 Joseph Goebbels called for “total war,” and home primarily to unemployed immigrants of more than twenty-five nationalities, the building was being considered for demolition and represented everything a conservative Berlin politician would want to repress about his hometown. But during the days leading up to the election, all the major

international television networks reporting from the German capital inadvertently carried a surprising image in the background that the reporters could not quite explain. The project, I think, marked a new degree of political involvement on Majerus’s part, and perhaps anticipated artistic responses to Berlin’s other contested buildings, such as the recent interventions at the Palast der Republik.

In the 1990s Majerus appeared to me to be the most contemporary of contemporaries. No one else seemed to make art that was so obviously



of our times. Today’s digital technologies produce a global omnipresence—an altered sense of time, of the now—that was at the very center of Majerus’s interests. “What looks good today may not look good tomorrow” the artist stated again and again in his work. The largest piece containing this text was a massive geometric relief presented in the bombastic central space of the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg in 1999, which also contained the crucial sentence *NOW’S THE TIME* in white capital letters against a black circular backdrop. Indeed, “The Power of Now” was the title of my first essay attempting to come to grips with the radical presence that his work so forcefully conveys. The temporality of Majerus’s work, I claimed a decade ago, is that of a floating, all-encompassing *now*, analogous perhaps to that of the World Wide Web. Both phenomena—Majerus’s art and the Internet—were new to me then. Now, that now seems a long time ago. □

DANIEL BIRNBAUM IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF ARTFORUM.

Michel Majerus was the subject of related solo exhibitions in 2005 and 2006 at the Kunsthaus Graz, Austria, the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, and the Deichtorhallen Hamburg. His paintings will remain on view at the Kunstgesellschaft, Hannover, until February 12. A fifth survey will appear from December 13, 2006, through April 26, 2007, at the Musée d’Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

Michel Majerus

»Pop Reloaded«, Hamburger Bahnhof
by Dave Allen and Harald Fricke

It's a gloriously sunny evening in Berlin, summer 2002. Raimar Stange and I meet with Michel Majerus in a bar in Prenzlauerberg, and in the course of the meandering conversation the topic of Superman comes up and Michel's desire to watch the film that evening. 'On such a gorgeous night?', I thought to myself. 'Stay in and watch a video film on a night like this?'. Having no other plans and therefore easily persuaded, I went along with the idea. We paid up and left the bar. Michel hopped on his bike and raced off to procure the film from the nearest video rental store while Raimar and I scored some chips, beer and coca cola.

We met up ten minutes later at Michel's place, an almost desolate building under complete renovation where his apartment and studio were the only finished and inhabitable spaces in use. Everything else was a mess of a building site; cables and concrete everywhere. I really didn't know what the forthcoming screening plans were so I was comically surprised when Michel carried his tv and video player down the stairs from his apartment into the hof, laid down some bubble wrap on the ground and lowered his mattress from his first floor window on a length of rope. The sun set, the tape went in, someone pressed play and like magic amid the hue of the tv screen, the stars came out.

Looking at some of Majerus' late works that were shown at Hamburger Bahnhof I felt an uncanny mood of happiness reflected in these paintings. It was like an overwhelming, surreal step into the open ever-expanding field of consumer industry: A warm welcome to all the trash products out of the bizarre world of low-cost sale stores. Let's make it cheap: Larger than life he had painted charts of playstation consoles, video cassettes signified by the xxx-label of porn productions, glimpses of stock car racings devoured in low density manner of a badly adjusted tv-transmission.

Majerus loved to tear down the barrier between high and low culture – as it had returned after techno and club culture at the beginning of the new millenium – and to confront the regaining desire for a conservative, yet formal seriousness in art with the ebbs of the everyday life. It seemed as if he tried to prove that underground attitudes still existed, even in those households where broken cooperative pottery had been changed to Bauhaus-style tea cups and where the early Berlin days of squatted studios and flats were now discussed in over-expensive Mitte-restaurants. Tongue in cheek Majerus used the surfaces of 50s- and pop-art-style draped easels to mirror the visual culture of mass consumed products – and to insist in the value of cheapness as an allegory of artistic production. As a painter Majerus put irony into the logic of art-as-fetish (in a Marxist sense) declaring that the subject in his paintings is still the object of cultural mass production. For this reason Christine Standfest could write in the 1999-Biennale-catalogue about Majerus' artistic strategy: 'Parallel links, market economy, pure consumption of everything – images, surfaces, procedures, spaces, structures, scales, sizes, words, texts. Pure pragmatism deducing itself from nothing other than its own production.'



The exhibited works in Hamburger Bahnhof's "Pop Reloaded"-show were made in Los Angeles, where the U.S. by way of Hollywood continually re-creates its public persona to be seen from overseas. But Majerus doesn't assert or act on the projected squeakless picture, he keeps it raw and lean. Seen overall, his view of the spectacular visual bombardment of the contemporary everyday, resembles a gigantic, resplendantly garrish billboard viewed at 55mph through a car windscreen as you whizz along a freeway. The images flash past before you've read the whole ad, you're left with mere snippets to piece together, but you can do this easily as you know them already because you just saw them a couple of miles ago. And you know you'll see them again.

The works may employ appropriation and appear to simply quote visually, but often they deliberately mis-quote, and re-present the quotation or the borrowed image in a new and freshly obscure neon light. Like Duchamp's continual game playing with puns using texts from popular almanacs and manufacturer's catalogues from provincial France, Majerus reflects the nullifyingly obsessive use of visual language in the mass media channels of the contemporary (global) village market.

'Pop Reloaded' – We are reminded of the series of collaborative works by Warhol and Basquiat of the early eighties. The appropriated symbolism of the two artists' motifs and styles clashed to amplify a renewed symbolism – the implied context of the painting's images



shifted the artists to the forefront of their perceived reading. They were at once recognisable 'Warhols' and 'Basquiats'.

('Reload' – The title of Tom Jones' album release of a couple of years ago, an effort to assimilate himself with contemporary pop musicians and their audience, several generations younger than himself. The marketing ploy is another discussion... Singing duets with this select young scene – The Stereophonics, The Cardigans... were the perception of the songs shifted in anyway? It's a doubtful thought, unless of course you're big on Tom Jones. Perhaps a reason for this is that the expectation of our ears are less easier confounded and turned around than our eyes).

By any means Majerus intended to play games in which he could subvert the expectations of the viewer. When he was invited to use the Brandenburger Tor as a billboard he didn't come up with the idea of a

joyful surface and showed a depiction of urban reality: social housings were to be seen on the facade of the reunification monument. Unfortunately the exhibition at Hamburger Bahnhof didn't refer to his other activities but tried to emphasize on the 'techno'-character of Majerus' work – putting the paintings in relationship with flashing designs of his signature animated by a love parade typographer. But Majerus lacked this sense for perfection as decor, he always liked a certain unfinished edginess. In this sense he was a true predecessor of pop art or to put it in the words of Andy Warhol: 'New art's never new when it's done'. Knowing the downfalls of self-contradiction Majerus stayed a step apart from the path and ignored the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' paintings. That was his tribute to the logic of ambivalence, as a result of shizo-capitalism truly experienced by Majerus' in his Berlin years which brought him from underground clubs in Mitte to Venice's halls of fame in less than five years.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

frieze

MICHEL MAJERUS 1967–2002



He told me he would call as soon as he got home, and he kept his promise. Early one morning in mid-September the phone rang and I woke to the sound of Michel Majerus laughing triumphantly. The Berlin-based painter was standing in front of the city's Brandenburg Gate, the German national symbol *par excellence*, which during its two-year restoration period had mostly been covered with advertisements for Deutsche Telecom. Majerus' huge image of the Schöneberg Sozialpalast, an early 1970s housing block now covered in graffiti and pock-marked with satellite dishes, had just been draped over the Berlin landmark, which it was to veil over the last few weeks before its reopening. During the actual production and installation of the work Majerus had been in New York. We had been planning the project for months over the phone, and finally there it was – 'the monster', as he called it. He was overjoyed, and I was relieved that things had worked out so well. Now, a few months later, Majerus is dead – he died in a plane crash in Luxembourg on 6 November, 2002 – a fact that I struggle to come to terms with as his laughter still resounds in my ears.

That enormous picture covering the Brandenburg Gate, on display for three weeks in September, was Majerus' last major project. We worked on it together, and this is an account of a collaboration involving many people, the most important of whom is no longer with us. It all began with Jochen Volz, curator of Frankfurt's Portikus, noticing some affinities between Majerus' work and that of Thomas Bayrle, a Frankfurt-based artist in his mid-60s who had first celebrated the super-flat Pop surface some 40 years ago: 'With me, everything is flat', says Bayrle. Volz and I decided we would try to bring the two artists together one day in some form of collaboration.

Then came a fax from Bewag, the Berlin electricity company, inviting me to submit a proposal for a project for the Brandenburg Gate. I called Majerus, who was on his bike. 'Interesting', he said, and then the line went dead. A few days later he called back, again on the bike. He had just passed a building in Berlin's western district of Schöneberg: the Sozialpalast, one of the city's most controversial landmarks. It stands on the site



of the infamous Sportpalast, where in 1943 Joseph Goebbels declared "Total War". For many years right-wing politicians have criticized this piece of 1970s social housing and everything it stands for: 25 different nationalities are represented in the complex, and around 40% of its inhabitants are unemployed. The CDU, the German Conservative party, would like to see the building demolished. 'I've got an idea', said Majerus, and a few days later his friend Chris Rehberger, a graphic designer, sent me an outline of the plan: a replica of the façade of the hated building covering the whole eastern side of the Brandenburg Gate. In the meantime Bayrle had also come up with an idea for the other side of the Gate: an image of interwoven Autobahns, with cars apparently climbing up the side. German artists from two different generations were thus planning to poke fun at one of the country's most celebrated monuments, while highlighting socio-political realities in a way that would undermine the very idea behind such grand architectural gestures. Were these two projects really to be executed during the three weeks leading up to the gate's ceremonial reopening on 3 October, the Day of German Unity? Well, no one stopped us, so indeed they were.

A second peal of laughter, even more intense than the first, came down the phone on the evening of the German general election on 22 September. Majerus asked me to turn on the TV – the most hilarious thing was being shown on CNN. The net-

work had rented a room in the luxurious Adlon Hotel – itself rebuilt some years ago as a pastiche of its prewar original – in order to be able to report directly from Berlin with the Brandenburg Gate as a backdrop. But of course what the viewer saw was the image of the Sozialpalast, with the four horses of the Quadriga statue sticking out mysteriously on top. For several hours this bizarre spectacle could be seen without any explanation on virtually every channel.

When I first came across Majerus' works in Berlin in the mid-1990s I tried to sum up the impact of his art in this magazine. 'For Michel Majerus, art history is at an end', was the bold opening of that short essay. Majerus quoted the history of painting in its entirety, but he never moralized or indulged in melancholy reflections on the loss of authenticity. Instead, his works celebrate the profusion of images to which the history of art has given rise. The temporality of his

work, I claimed – and still do – is that of a floating and all-encompassing Now, perhaps analogous to that of the Internet. With the Brandenburg Gate project his art acquired a new political dimension. The work prompted much discussion and was seen as a critical comment on the controversial decision to rebuild the old Prussian Berlin Castle (which was bombed during World War II and eventually torn down to make way for East Germany's Palast der Republik).

Intriguingly, the residents of the Sozialpalast later contacted the artist and insisted that an image of the Brandenburg Gate should be displayed on their building as the second part of the project. Majerus took this idea very seriously. One scheme involved building a replica of the Quadriga with its four horses on top of the 1970s block. What better way to honour the artist than for this to happen?

Daniel Birnbaum

MODERN PAINTERS



Franz Ackermann and **Michel Majerus**—two young painters who have coined their own currencies of postmodern irony.



Adventures of Uncertainty

RAIMAR STANGE

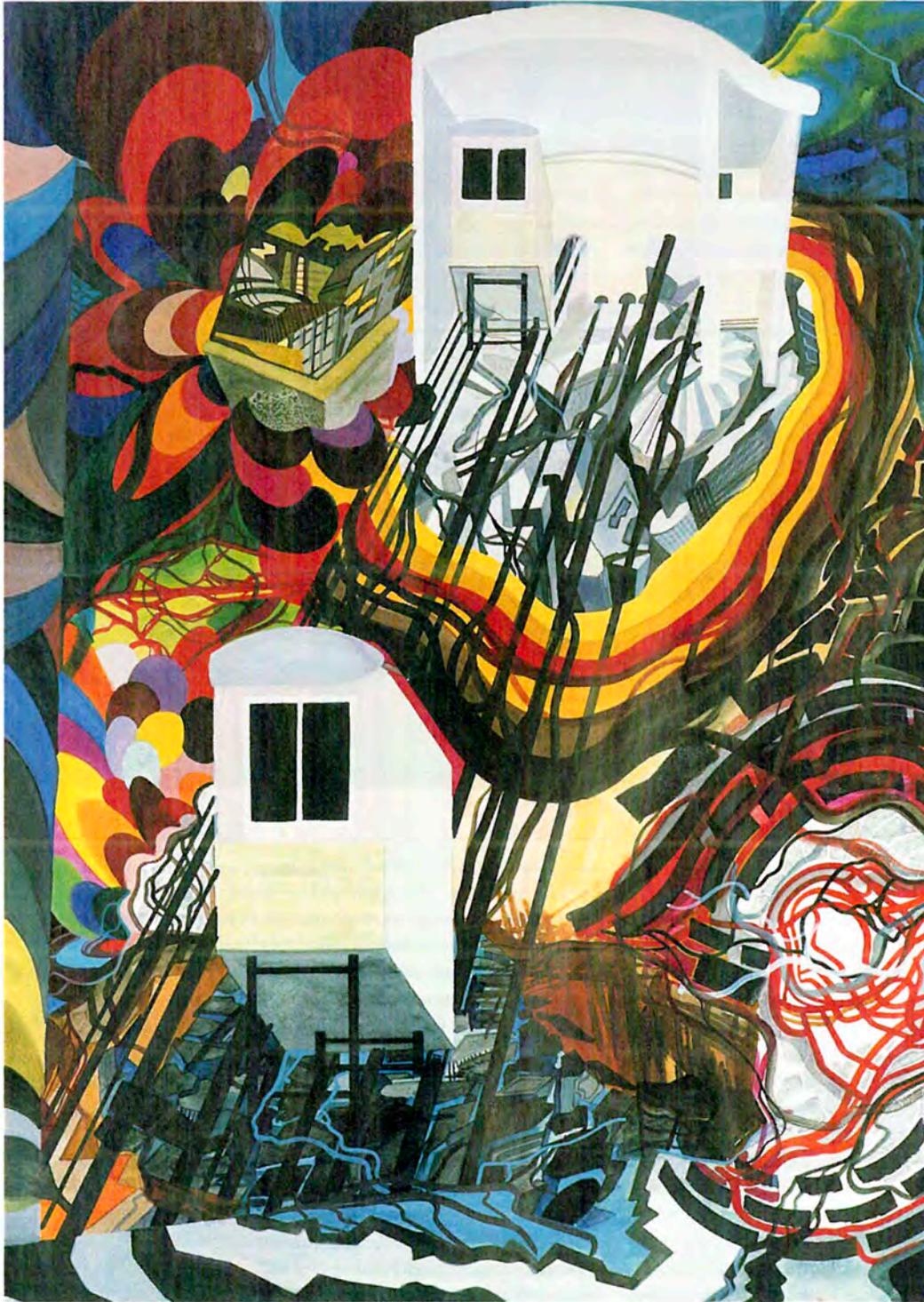
FRANZ ACKERMANN AND MICHEL MAJERUS ARE both primarily painters, but they also make appearances as photographic, video and installation artists in their exhibitions. Since the mid-90s they have been among the most successful young artists working in Berlin. In their artistic formulations both repeatedly refer to found material, aesthetic models from recent art history, and popular references drawn from the worlds of music, film and advertising. However, the fact that Ackermann tends to prefer punk and rock, while Majerus is more inclined towards techno and DJ culture, highlights crucial differences between their artistic strategies.

Ackermann's work, in all its manifestations, revolves

around the themes of speed, bustling activity and globalisation. The postmodern world as a fully capitalised system that is being made increasingly small by the achievements of modern technology becomes part of his aesthetic masterplan. Ackermann's best-known works are his small 'mental maps' series – drawings and watercolours, many of which have been made on the spot during the artist's lengthy travels – that would fit easily into a suitcase. Psychedelic-looking splashes of colour, near-realistic fragments of architecture and cartographic elements assemble themselves into subjective records of journeys, internalised maps of the artist's own experiences in strangely familiar foreign places. The clichés that the media and the tourist industry constantly bombard us with

(Top left)
Franz Ackermann and
his assistants at the
Stedelijk, Amsterdam
Photo:
Jelle Bouwhuis

(Left)
Michel Majerus. Photo:
Albrecht Fuchs, Cologne



Franz Ackermann,
*Untitled (mental map:
crossing cities)*, 1999,
mixed media on paper,
70 x 50 cm

are there before we are, you might say, but they always go with us wherever we go in the world. Ackermann's 'mental maps' reveal this tension between actual experience and preconceived ways of seeing. The artist describes his motivation as follows: 'What is communicated is not the touristic qualities of the travels undertaken and the media passed through, but rather a kind of distillation of a journey, fuelled by memory and current experience.'

Ackermann's large-scale *Evasions*, on the other hand, are produced in his own studio. These compositions contain large swathes of paint, realistic depictions of urban situations and, once again, elements of cartography. Pop-art inspired floral patterns and resonating epicentres also make the surface of the painting vibrate restlessly. The *Evasions* are like a painted store of memories, recording the experiences that the artist has had on his numerous travels. These paintings speak

of exotic kitsch and industrial exploitation, and a fascination with rapid shifts of location and incredible urban projects. In these paintings, with their manipulated perspectives *à la* Piranesi and absurd proportions, time and space become ambiguous, and for good reason: does modern technology not already allow us, at least in a virtual sense, to be in several different places at once? Incidentally, the artist always works on several of these paintings at the same time, constantly switching from one to another. Movement, even within the confines of his studio, is still an indispensable part of his working method.

Ackermann's *here: promising absence* (1996) is concerned with the dialectic of presence and absence. The title pages of various tourist brochures about countries Ackermann has not yet visited are projected in rapid sequence onto the wall. Rather than revealing his fond private impressions of his own holidays, as such a slide show would normally do, the artist presents only the essence of such journeys, as 'prescribed' by the relevant brochures but not yet experienced by the artist himself. *here: promising absence* cleverly and deliberately leaves open the question of whether there is any real difference between a journey actually experienced and a holiday merely recommended by the advertising industry.

In his photographic series, *Ruins I + II* (2001-2), Ackermann shows the shop windows of practically all the travel agents in Berlin. In this group of works the photographs present holidays in what one might call their germ state, characterised by commercial considerations and organised by third parties. With the uniform and uncaptioned photographs and their sequential presentation, he makes the point that in being commodified for the tourist industry the countries of the world tend to become identical. All of a sudden, the tourist industry knows no hierarchies.

Ackermann generally combines a number of artistic media in his exhibitions, and striking texts or words are also written directly onto the wall of the exhibition space. Thus, in his contribution to the Amsterdam group exhibition 'Urban Living' in 1997, the words "Tourists are money" were clearly marked in black letters on the wall. This quote from the notorious Sex Pistols song, *God Save the Queen*, recalls, in a manner both aggressive and calculated, the links between tourism, the economy and a restless desire for travel. This unholy triad, as the philosopher Siegfried Kracauer wrote in the mid-1920s, can lead with its 'profane impermanences' to a 'distortion of real existence'. Fifty years later the French cultural critic Paul Virilio intensified the debate, asking, 'Where are we when we travel?' His critical answer was: '... in the non-place of speed. The world citizen becomes the utopian citizen, who inhabits only means of transport and transit zones.'

This 'dismantling of the world' is another theme of Ackermann's art.

LET US NOW TURN TO THE ART OF MICHEL MAJERUS. HIS work is emotional, yet down-to-earth, rapidly completed and yet constructed with near-mechanical precision. Majerus's approach, at once postmodern and Popish, is rather like a picture-processing project: he has mastered the systems of countless popular visual modes – both images from the realm of 'high art' and those from supposed 'low art' – and, like a DJ at the mixing desk, he creates new artworks which are both powerful and yet seemingly superficial. He makes use of expressive brush-strokes *à la* Willem de Kooning, and borrowed motifs from Frank Stella, decorative icons from MTV

Franz Ackermann.
installation view of
'Urban Living', 1997



and cute comic figures are deftly mixed into the finished works. Distinctive (typo)graphical elements from advertising also turn up frequently, whether subliminally or quite blatantly. While using different media – painting, screenprinting and photography – both Majerus and Ackermann weave bits of sculpture, installation and writing into their work.

Majerus's installation *Controlling the Moonlight Maze*, shown in Berlin in 2002, included an enormous painting of the US flag in spirited sweeping stripes. Screenprinted in the bottom-right corner of *The Modern Age Abstract* is a gingerbread heart bearing the slogan 'Herzliche Grüsse' (Best Wishes). The painting builds on the visual and emotional power of the iconic stars and stripes, particularly in its resounding endorsement of the 'American way of life', while at the same time disrespectfully mocking the flag's utopian promises with elegant distortions and the addition of the extremely tacky and provincial gingerbread heart.

In *Tex-Mex* (2002), a later variation of this flag-painting – a genre that has been extremely popular since Jasper Johns – Majerus writes the title of a pop song by the singer and sex symbol Shakira in the middle of the stripe-filled painting. In

ACKERMANN'S WORK, IN ALL ITS MANIFESTATIONS, REVOLVES AROUND THE THEMES OF SPEED, BUSTLING ACTIVITY AND GLOBALISATION.



LIKE A DJ AT THE MIXING DESK, MAJERUS CREATES NEW ARTWORKS WHICH ARE BOTH POWERFUL AND YET SEEMINGLY SUPERFICIAL.

(Above)
Michel Majerus,
 installation view of
*Controlling the
 Midnight Maze*, 2002

(Below)
Michel Majerus, *Skull*,
 2000, acrylic on
 canvas, 210 x 210 cm

All images courtesy of
 neugerriemschneider,
 Berlin



doing so he adroitly links the worlds of commodity pop and power-politics – don't forget, after all, that in 2001 Madonna danced in front of the American flag for the video of her version of Don McLean's *American Pie*. In a dubiously patriotic gesture she didn't sing the whole song, but brazenly censored the line 'I read a book on Marx'. Majerus, in contrast, deliberately avoids making any blatant political message in his two flag paintings. He is primarily interested in visual effect or, more precisely, in the pleasure to be had from manipulating the

iconography of the flag through paint. His flags burst with painterly power while at the same time refusing to deliver any clear message. Instead, in the words of the young artist himself, the paintings take us on a risky 'adventure of uncertainty'.

Typical of Majerus's artistic strategy is an early untitled painting in which an Andy Warhol screen-printed skull has been morphed into an abstract image and applied to the canvas using acrylic paint. The celebrated Pop artist's motif, which we have all stored in

our 'imaginary museum', is defamiliarised in the style of Gerhard Richter. Majerus brings together the work of two favourite artists, keeping their different aesthetics alive through his own work. Further reference to Warhol is made in *A1 7, T1 7, H1-7* in which Majerus has taken 28 wooden boxes that are the same size as Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*. Printed on them are media images such as a character from the film *Toy Story* and the logos of well-known techno DJs Jeff Mills and Richie Hawtin.

As I suggested at the beginning of this article, the very different musical preferences of Franz Ackermann and Michel Majerus reflect their different artistic attitudes. Ackermann, the one who might be called the 'punk' of the two, reacts aggressively and in very concrete terms to post-modern reality and its political context; Majerus, who might be described as a 'sampler', responds to current events in a more relaxed manner and is less concerned with delivering any message. By adopting this strategy he manages to establish an ideological, critical detachment from reality. ■

'Franz Ackermann', 14 September - 31 December 2002, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

'Michel Majerus and Hans Jörg Mayer: Last Days', 30 November 2002 - 25 January 2003, neugerriemschneider, Berlin

Michel Majerus (b.1967) died in a plane crash on 6 November 2002. The title of the exhibition, 'Letzte Tage' (Last Days), was chosen by Michel Majerus and Hans Jörg Mayer together.

frieze

For Michel Majerus, art history is over. All images that have ever existed appear to be represented in his work simultaneously, in an infinitely rich and hospitable present. Seemingly unrelated or even incompatible pieces of visual information – a slice of a Frank Stella painting and a Nintendo monkey, say – exist side by side, or even folded inside each other. These juxtapositions create radical clashes and visual effects which transcend the traditional confines of painting. Distinctions between high and low, original and reproduction, no longer seem relevant. It's all there at once – glaring, overwhelming and hideous.

His often extremely large canvases – some almost ten metres wide – display fragments from the history of painting and image-making in its entirety: Rubens, Runge, Böcklin, Watteau, Cézanne, Schwitters, de Kooning, Warhol, Disney and many others. What dominates, however, are not the traces of old and recent masters, but lurid slivers from newspaper ads, comic strips, and video-game imagery, all reproduced in bright acrylic. Is this an updated form of Pop, or a new take on appropriation? Probably both, and something else as well.

What's interesting in Majerus' work is the radical sense of presence it conveys, and its complete lack of sentimentality. It's ugly, it's spectacular, it's superficial, but there is no reason to moralise or indulge in melancholic reflections upon the loss of authenticity. Majerus does not mourn the death of painting, but instead celebrates the abundance of imagery accumulated throughout the history of art, and generated today with increasing speed by the media and new information technologies. The temporality of his works is that of a floating and all-encompassing Now, analogous, perhaps, to that of the World Wide Web.

Radical pluralism is, of course, not Majerus' invention. In an interview with Gerhard Richter, Benjamin Buchloh contends: 'One always gets the feeling that you're showing the various possibilities just as possibilities, so that they simply stand alongside or against each other, without performing any other function.'¹ Buchloh's observation could equally apply to Majerus' way of appropriating various conflicting styles without presenting any single one of them as his own privileged mode of expression. But whereas Richter's oeuvre, as Buchloh suggests, could be seen as a farewell to the avant garde in the moment of its eclipse, no such strategic claims could be made for Majerus' chaotic imagery. Rather than reflecting upon lost possibilities, his work affirms that some options are still open for the visual, painterly or not.

Majerus' work seems devoid of all intimacy, and ultimately of subjectivity as such. His images bear no essential link to a psychological interiority, but seem to float freely along the conduits of visual information, where the hierarchies keeping entertainment and high culture apart have long been abandoned, and where cartoon figures live inside pieces of abstract art. Sometimes the scene depicted is covered by a thin white layer, as if glimpsed through a Robert Ryman painting; in others, a bundle of Expressionist brush strokes surround stupid looking animals from a video-game.

What's the point of this mess? Majerus proposes painting as no longer a strictly circumscribed mode of expression, but rather as a zone of contagion, constantly branching out and widening its scope. Rather than working exclusively with flat images hanging on the walls, Majerus often manipulates the architectural conditions of the room as a whole: furnishing a traditional museum space with a rough industrial metal floor, for instance. Inside the images, the clash between traditional painting and new technology is sometimes emphasised through the juxtaposition of bright acrylic with murky and history-laden oils. In *Katze* (1993), his largest painting to date, the insipid scene – a huge cartoon cat surrounded by birds, bees, mice and tons of candy – is blurred by a murky field of oil paint, introducing a fragment from a different time. Different, but not gone. In Majerus' world the past is now.

When confronted with his huge paintings, one gets a sense of a will to encompass everything. No image is irrelevant or unworthy of attention. Majerus is the very antithesis of such subtle reductionist painters as Luc Tuymans and Cecilia Edefalk, and naturally his production is fittingly massive. While they take away from images to make what remains more visible, Majerus simply adds another layer.

Considering the variety of styles and appearances in Majerus' work, it may be inappropriate to theorise his production within one framework. In his first catalogue, Majerus decided to avoid a false sense of unity, and instead of publishing one essay, chose some 20-odd quotes as commentaries on his work.² This lack of synthesis may appear disturbing, but for me his work remains intimately associated with an advertising slogan for West cigarettes that deluged Berlin when I was first assailed by his painterly bombardment. It read: THE POWER OF NOW.