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DI WHY, NOT?: A REVIEW AND AN APPLICATION OF THE DAS INSTITUT METHOD

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DAS INSTITUT, "D I Why?", Swiss Institute Contemporary Art New York, New York, 2009, exhibition view, copyright: Kerstin Brätsch, Adele Röder, Swiss Institute

If the spring brings rebirth, then the fall is certainly a period of restructuring. As trees burn their leaves for stores of energy, the fall "season" in the culture business shimmers with collection launches, premieres and other great efforts to grab audience back— thus securing a reason for continued existence. In this particularly lean recession year, the stance of many New York commercial galleries has been to brace against the coming chill with "modest" exhibitions that hedge bets until a mythic spring—prophesized by a now steadily raising Dow Jones Industrial Index. Beyond the obligatory scaling down of list prices, size of works and preciousness of media, the oxymoronic concept of the "multi-solo-show" where a gallery divides its space into smaller lots, each featuring the work of a different artist, is again the norm. Of course the bazaar-like presentation of a "main space" and a "project room" is by no means new. However, the something for everyone and a little of everything survival tactic is now seeping into the non-profit world as well as art practice itself – for its own set of survival reasons.

In the market of the non-profit ghetto, the reasons for this restructuring are undoubtedly varied—and possibly essential given the complexities of funding—yet tend to stem from a dual-agenda: to display more artistic practices while justifying to supporters and the like that more artists are being “served”. From the standpoint of day-to-day operating, the subdividing of the exhibition space into little islands makes the job of the curator a little more “economical” as the selection and parceling of the gallery into little commissions becomes more the game than the arranging of comprehensive and slow to materialize larger exhibits. With equal cleverness, the administration of the gallery itself into specialized zones and series such as the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum’s summer pilot run of “an experimental series to allow the museum to respond quickly to innovations and new developments in contemporary art” dubbed “Intervals”, is presented in the otherwise undesirable real-estate of the building’s stair case. This kind of consort allows to *get more* out of a respective space, to market exhibitions—and the persona of the curator—in addition to the artwork, and form an easy to manage production calendar freeing the curators, directors, and the like to focus more on fundraising and other related business, travel, research, and the like. In a form of true elegance, the abstracting of what is on view into a themed program creates a neat package for foundations, donors, and press releases. Unlike simple marketing, this kind of re-branding not only presents an outward view of a company or institution, but is also done so as to reframe a new mode of production or operation.

Whether or not the above model has been followed, it is within this context that the Swiss Institute opened its fall season with “A New Era”, a collection of six handsomely presented, yet disparate shows, in a newly renovated—and subdivided—gallery space. Sitting in the center of it all was another “institute” whose publishing blithely and ambiguously parodies the many forms of branding inherent in the New York milieu, particularly these ulterior motives by both galleries, and as I’ll show, artist alike. Setting up as an “import/export agency” founded in 2007, DAS INSTITUT, is a collaborative art practice run by the German born and New York based artists Kerstin Brätsch and Adele Röder both of whom have their own independent practice. When entering “DI WHY?”, their exhibition which closed last week, it was a little hard to make out what exactly this agency does—the copy states that DAS INSTITUT focuses on marketing and communications issues through the production of objects which facilitate these aims. Eschewing immediate legibility, an almost totalizing universe of bold lines and vivid colors approaches the viewer in a massive array of theatrically hung, shelved or laid paintings, prints, stickers, and a few other objects. Instead of creating garish discomfort, the vivacious and alluringly colored works give off a strong sense of unity as their respective placement is balanced in a way that a set-designer might temper a void by featuring non-competing points of attraction at various scales and orientations—the *mise-en-scène* of the room is heightened by the artists interplay between paintings on transparent Mylar and prints on opaque surfaces creating a harmonizing play of light and planes of compositional reference. In many ways, the display takes on the appearance of a showroom or boutique. As one would expect

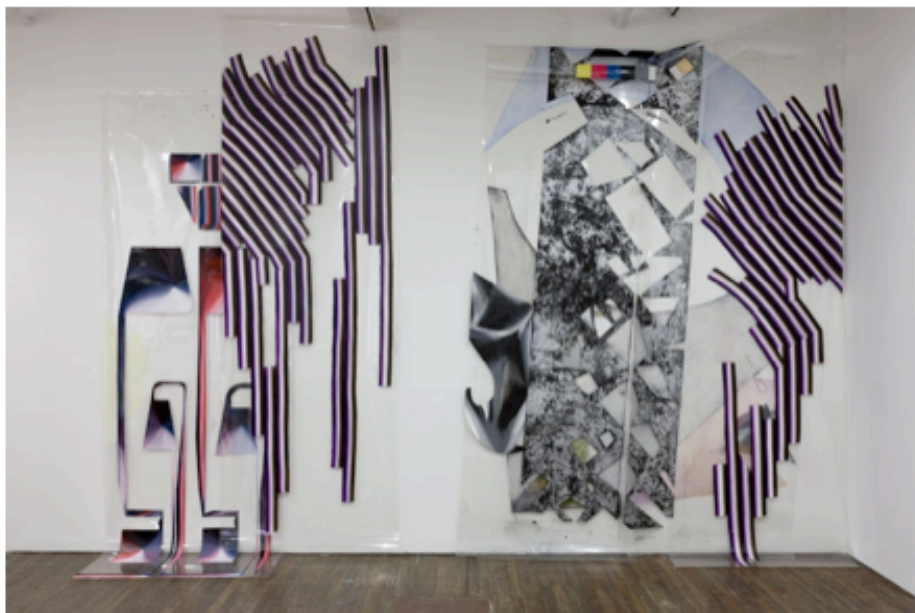
of a hip agency, a clear but slightly obscured—à la a viral campaign—identity is articulated as shared motifs quickly become apparent with the prints possessing elements from the paintings and vice versa. Herein, what might actually be “imported” and “exported” starts to take shape.



DAS INSTITUT, "Das Institute invites Five Friends: Ourania Fasoulidou (artist catalogue), Debo Eilers (video), Lukas Knipscher (photographs), Nikolas Gambaroff (drawings)", 2009, Swiss Institute Contemporary Art New York, New York, 2009, installation view (detail), copyright: Kerstin Brätsch, Adele Röder, Swiss Institute

Lining an entire wall of the gallery space is a collection of objects arranged along a very long shelf. The heftiest of such is a telephone book-sized catalog entitled *Starline Necessary Couture* authored by Adele Röder for DAS INSTITUT. The contents of this “bible” are stores of related abstract patterns created solely through Adobe Photoshop without importing any source material—that is to say that all of the patterns were “drawn” directly through Photoshop’s native tools, and as such are purely digital and non-representational. As the title suggests, the catalog is a kind of pattern or swatch sourcebook from which to sample from, and to use toward, the realization of a stylized and fashionable high end product—slyly posited in the exhibition as “fine art”. It is with this compendium that DAS INSTITUT’s production and division of labor set forth.

As a first action, Brätsch cribs through, or shall we say, “appropriates” patterns from this swatch book and tries to reproduce them via her large-scale paintings on Mylar. Neither a quassi-Heraclitian exercise on the impossibility to paint the same thing twice, or a critique on repetition and identity, Brätsch’s new works simply follow from the pattern guides almost in “fair-use” and are in turn subjectively altered a bit. As a kind of retort, Röder bounces these altered patterns into her own digital prints on paper and so on and so forth creating a business of “importing” and “exporting” visual images between the two artists as playful, or inspired ciphers. This quite literal back-and-forth process of knee jerk reactions and variations ultimately produces the collection on display—it would be safe to speculate that some editing was done. Although this process of simple intuitive inter-subjectivity is rather benign, for some reason DAS INSTITUT has couched this whole system of mutual interrupting in the guise of some conceptual framework, namely an “import/export agency” that is interested in marketing and branding—which I’m defining as a promotional that both marks and masks a shift in production.



Kerstin Brätsch für DAS INSTITUT, "Mylar Paintings", 2009, "D I Why?", Swiss Institute Contemporary Art New York, New York, 2009, installation view, copyright: Kerstin Brätsch, Adele Röder, Swiss Institute

Even though actual importing and exporting companies are a backbone of any contemporary economy, the expression "import/export business" is often colloquially used as a cover for shadiness and tends to connote some form of illicit trade—often by immigrants. With this in mind, DAS INSTITUT 's practice and the inquisitive title of the show, "DI WHY?", could possibly point to a more perverse meaning.

So, what could this questionable nature be? DAS INSTITUT might be scratching at the overriding trend for both artists and experimental curators to imbue great importance to the branding frame works of their respective "practice" when little actual self-reflexive or discursive thought related to these purported themes can be found in the artwork itself. DAS INSTITUT has already been swept into this type of sound bite exhibitionism earlier this year through their inclusion in the New Museum's *Younger Than Jesus*, a simple biannual marketed as a "generational" which functioned in the means of a typical survey with little analysis of demographical issues in the artwork or by curatorial study—pick up a copy of this exhibition's catalog to see how the curatorial leg work, such as studio visits, recommendations and other like responsibilities were done through a basically out-sourced and non-paid email exchange branded and sold as celebration of social networks. Along these lines, DAS INSTITUT could also be chiding the work of their colleagues such as Reena Spaulings Fine Arts and their advertizing of a fabricated art dealer persona—whatever musings good or bad might be wrought out of this conceit, it is still fundamentally a promotional device for an actual business as well. However, instead of simply issuing these slogans by fiat, DAS INSTITUT 's showing leverages similar barbs within their art making as well.

From the very announcement of the show, a question has been delivered through its title: "DI WHY?". This is of course a cleaver pun on the expression DIY, or Do it yourself, but the positioning of this idea as a *rhetorical* question flags a hidden complexity when viewing the art on display.

On a base level, the DIY moniker is used to describe the process of making or altering something without the aid of experts or professionals, thus there is an obvious paradox here. DAS INSTITUT are quite literally experts and professionals —attested to by their training, show history, and inclusion in the Swiss Institute's program—yet the work on display follows many aesthetic conventions that grew out of DIY culture such as printed collage-like reproductions of "borrowed" materials rendered with a general "messy" attitude in both material choice and application to imbue a sprit of being made in haste and in urgency. With this in mind, the "why" of the title is to some degree pejoratively asking the gallery visitor: why make something on your own when you can get it "homemade" from the professionals. But this is the leaser point and not the true "shadiness".

This question of “why” is best aimed at the current cult of the *in situ* formalist as *rebel* embodied in the detritus chic of Gedi Sibony for example. In this “style”, thin semiotic valances between the forms and vocabularies of *bricolage* are conflated to form some kind of narrative polemic *and* panacea on everything from the fracturing of social society to global warming. Take for example the verbiage employed by the Contemporary Art Musuem St. Louis' exhibition of Sibony's work curated by Anthony Huberman earlier this year: “[sic] In the context of the near-collapse of our contemporary socio-political reality, these works quietly promote an economy of means, re-use, transparency, and the power and beauty of bare essentials”. Inherent in this rhetoric is a totemic celebration of the abject ritualized via “references” to other non-hegemonic symbolism such as squatter and working class lifestyles, social or political activism, indie music, and so on. And here DAS INSTITUT seems to accept these metaphors not as simulations—cheap materials in the context of an art gallery is by no means equitable to the harsh realities of a make-do existence at the weak end of the global economic or political spectrum—but simply as today's fashion statement of “necessary couture”. Humorously enough, some of the works in “DI WHY?” are printed as decorations on party napkins that could potentially become frivolous trash after being soiled, but could also be “completed” by said use and thus made collectable. Even still, another line of argument could arise if DAS INSTITUT 's question of “why?” is taken in earnest—as both readings of the question are valid—that is, if this mode of pseudo-DIY is today's radical chic, why is that? Why do curators wish to “traffic” in it, and why for that matter, have certain artists decided to use these crude techniques?



DAS INSTITUT, "D I Why?", Swiss Institute Contemporary Art New York, 2009, exhibition view, copyright: Kerstin Brätsch, Adele Röder, Swiss Institute

Although there have been many recent talks on the "crises of criticism" for some time now, the real answer is that there is no "crisis" per se. Instead there is a clash within a new restructuring; the curatorial desire to inscribe new artworks within a particular collection or canon paired physical with the ability to do so through presentation and insertion is a more attractive and popular form than the historian's effort to do so through writing aided by scant reproductions. Since artworks ostensibly need to sit together in exhibition, various formal and conversational tactics have been taking place so that the artist can demonstrate these genealogical or culturally significant interrelations superficially and through glib means. In suit, a work with more referential characteristics, be they media, distribution channels, and other conceptual trappings, become more attractive to the curator as there are simply more tangents to run off of and to "connect" with—especially in these DIY-esque works that are not really pastiches of styles and forms per se, but are literally collections banal artifacts waiting to be easily defined, digested and then deposited. Likewise, the guise of this kind of work being critically minded lends a form of social importance allaying any insecurities of being simply "beautiful"—as much of it actually is in an empathetic way, and should be celebrated as such. This kind of special interest vehicle, which allows structural or organization goals to frame the reception of contemporary art practice is similar to the like strategies of dividing the gallery space as yet another form of streamlined packaging. However, the joke is actually on the curator, as many artists have learned to feed this desire with work made quickly, but with enough conceptual acrobatics to make them acceptable as part of a canon of their own oeuvre—or that of a supposed canon on the critique of modernity. And here, the artist has found a way not only to maximize the circulation of his/her work, but also to reduce the budget in terms of both time and materials—the original shady business of "skimming", although one that is justifiable considering the low rate of artist fee's. Within this particular loop, a potential critique of excess is ensnared as another symptom of that very excess. And it is with this dual farce of today's production and related branding activities, namely the desire for the curator to collect and justify an artistic industry of prefab and ready-at-hand esoterics, that one should enjoy DAS INSTITUT's irreverent something for everybody with a little for everyone approach.

"DI Why?" treats referents like refreshments at a party, from appropriation, to the politics of representation, to subculture fetishism, to pop, and even Relational Aesthetics—there was an opening event with an "exotic" food import: *Currywurst* and *Berliner Weisse mit Schuss*. What is truly unique about this show is that all of these devices are derived from completely blank and empty signifiers, the art-for-art sake drawings of the *Starline Necessary Couture* catalog. Likewise, DAS INSTITUT never makes any claims to as to what the "glyphs" are. In many ways, this hollow pit at the core of this project has its greatest affinity with the mythic muted post horn ambiguously subtitled "W.A.S.T.E." in the *Crying of Lot 49*—a graffiti motif in the book which could point to a vast global conspiracy, a reoccurring adolescent prank, or could simply be the mad hallucinations which a narcissistic protagonist constructs to find meaning in an uncertain world. Through their "all in" stance, DAS INSTITUT has rekindled a novel form of critique, that of the court jester. With it, they playfully aim this mockery toward their immediate and supposedly kingly suitors, the fine art world. A "why" questions which remains though is: "why" taunt a second time? To do so, would turn the parody on itself. Let's hope DAS INSTITUT turns their cunning on a less insular subject next time around—and considering the last meaning which could be wrangled out of the title's question of "DI WHY?", or "DAS INSTITUT WHY?", it would be possible to reason that they have the introspective grit to do so.

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