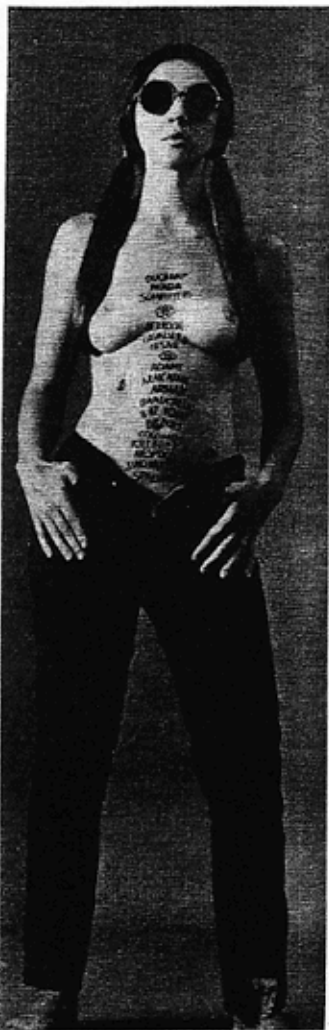


The Mollusk of Reference

JOHN KELSEY ON "ROGER AND OUT"



THAT SCHOOL FOR HER WAS THE LOCAL BOOKSTORE and bartending in a city without an academy, serving people like Martin Kippenberger and Rosemarie Trockel, may be one reason why Cosima von Bonin is so singularly attuned to the dynamics by which artists emerge and become recognized as actors in their field. As the story goes, her own career begins with the moment she suddenly insists that her friends and customers in Cologne thenceforth refer to her as "the artist" Cosima von Bonin. Ever since, her practice has been an elaboration of the notion that the artist is information transmitted and received. All her themes—the self-historicizing of a community that both includes and excludes, indoctrination and discipline, role-playing and rank, the performance of success and failure, etc.—announce artistic production as a tactical, performative engagement with a given set of power relations. Some say that what keeps von Bonin's story interesting is precisely the fact that she is not and never has been a real artist, so every move she makes risks betraying her original (creative) imposture. Others admit that she intimidates them with the Brandoesque power of her act, and that it's too late now to call her out without risking one's own credibility too.

In any case, with her retrospective "Roger and Out" having recently opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles—at this midcareer moment, that is, in von Bonin's mythic trajectory—it seems obvious that we aren't bored yet. If now is the time of survey and summary, of piling up the loot in the museum's main gallery and making it official, there is nevertheless still the feeling of a gamble being made, on the part of both the artist and the institution and dealers who represent her. Will this attempt to make her work legible in America come at the price of neutralizing the dialogical play insiders have always loved in von Bonin's work? Will Cologne open up or clam up in Los Angeles? "Roger and Out" both confirms and ends the conversation, acknowledging a message received and signing off in the same breath. The receiver of this brief transmission, whether a friend or a faceless ticket buyer, picks up the double message of communication and its interruption, and somehow it sounds like competence.

In the catalogue for the show, texts by MOCA curators Ann Goldstein (who organized the exhibition) and Bennett Simpson and by critics Isabelle Graw and Manfred Hermes recount how von Bonin emerged within the postmanly,

postpainterly context of early-1990s Cologne, specifically in relation to the contentious clique of neo-Conceptualists and institutional critics attached to Galerie Christian Nagel. Tales and details of the artist's early collaborations with Kai Althoff, Josef Strau, and many others, of how her projects intersected with the fiercely collective ethic of the artist-run space Friesenwall 120 and with the upstart feminism of the journal *Eau de Cologne*, of her wily navigations of tricky art-couple dynamics (she has been married to Michael Krebber since 1992), and of all the various ways she has shown up as an artist without exactly being one, and risked making art of *that*, both historicize and mythologize the artist in Cologne in Los Angeles. This is because the local history that includes von Bonin is also the story of an art world performing itself with a vengeance, and because of the extent to which her works remain embedded in a collective reappropriation of context via the ruses of fiction. Some art can't simply be shown or described—it must be scripted and followed, especially when the artist's primary material is the social field in which she continually repositions herself. In this case, to curate is to map tactical moves in relation to both materials and people, and to install is to fabulate. To consume von Bonin in a museum is to engage something unavoidably legendary in her practice.

At MOCA, a narrow corridor leads us through scrappy traces of early von Bonin, presenting examples of a practice readable mostly in the gaps. *Untitled (Krebber über Krebber)*, 1990, is a black-and-white photograph of a topless woman with long hair and dark glasses whose bare white skin has been inscribed with an all-male roster of avant-garde brand names (Duchamp, Picabia, Schwitters . . .). It's based on an appropriated *Flash Art* ad from the '70s. Subtly altering this source image by replacing the name *Klapheck* with *Krebber*, and leaving the rest as she found it, von Bonin performs authorship as a nearly imperceptible act of trespassing on the domain of others. And if naming is the job of men, then renaming is the more devious and resistant function by which this nonartist enters occupied territory, freeing up some space for her own movement. While everything about the image is up and down—the bold verticality of the model's stance serving as a support for the list of men that extends down into her unzipped jeans—von Bonin's gesture is cunningly horizontal. And this is how she arrives as an artist:

laterally, by means of a sliding and displacement.

Another instance of appropriation and naming, and another play on verticality and inclusion, *Installation Münzstrasse Hamburg*, 1990/2007, revisits von Bonin's very first "solo" exhibition, a collaboration with Strau. For this work, initially shown at Ausstellungsraum Münzstrasse 10 in Hamburg, Strau and von Bonin took as their primary material a list of the artists included in Harald Szeemann's 1969 exhibition "Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form," but revised it by adding some contemporaries—Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman, Kippenberger, et al. They then printed the name of each artist, along with the years of his or her birth and first solo exhibition, on a helium balloon. The work reconstructs and elevates a community of artists, floating the names of others up to a horizontal wooden grid where the thirty-two multicolored balloons are finally caught and immobilized as a sort of hanging garden.

Von Bonin's post-'90s work anticipates the professional artist's return as full-time manager of her own brand-image

Von Bonin's first and only appearance at American Fine Arts, New York, in 1993, is represented in the MoCA show by a series of crude drawings of prison windows—another collaboration, this one between artist-dealer Colin de Land and a caged parakeet. These lo-fi works, which consist of chalk and bird droppings on cardboard, did not greet viewers en masse at the AFA opening but were completed one at a time, by dealer and bird, over the course of the show. So we have, on the one hand, the disciplinary functions of lists, grids, and cages, and on the other, the possibility of meandering and sideways movements, and a systematic horizontality that occurs not only formally but in all the ways the artist displaces authorship across a social field that now includes animals.

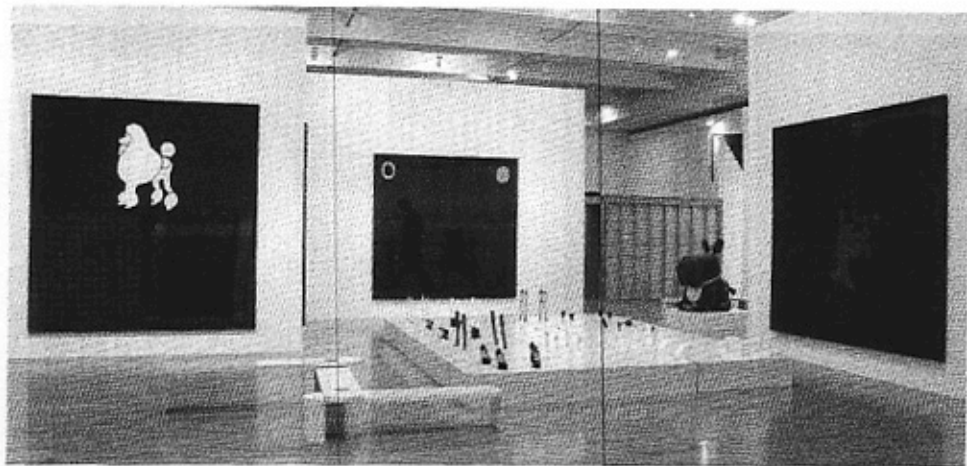
At the end of the '90s, the performative aspects of von Bonin's work begin to reflect a general expansion and speeding up of the international art market. Like everything else, the artist goes global, and the recurrence of fashion signifiers in her practice mirrors the way artists are circulated as values within the sprawling noncontext of Chelsea and Art Basel. In her catalogue text for "Roger and Out," Graw describes von Bonin's shift from ephemeral and intensely collaborative projects to the kind of object-production befitting an international art star both as a decided "capitulation" to market forces and, paradoxically, as a devious "outperforming" of the market's demands. Since 2000, and right up through her "major" Chelsea shows at Friedrich Petzel Gallery in 2003 and 2006 and at Documenta 12, von Bonin's large-scale "*lappen*" (rags)—paintinglike compositions of readymade textiles



Cosima von Bonin, *Untitled (Krepper über Krepper)*, 1990, black-and-white photograph, 37 1/4 x 13 1/4".

hand-stitched with figures and texts—have been her signature product. Dominating the MOCA catalogue, where virtually her entire *lappen* output is represented, these works recall both Sigmar Polke's famous use of mass-produced textiles as supports for paintings and Mike Kelley's hand-crafted banners, not to mention Sergej Jensen's recent "paintings" made of found fabrics. In von Bonin's case, the materials she chooses often come precharged with contemporary lifestyle signifiers, either because the prints are identifiable as Laura Ashley or Marks & Spencer, or because here and there she appropriates an Yves Saint Laurent

shopping bag or adds designer Martin Margiela's signature X stitch to a composition. This X even recurs on the back of the exhibition catalogue, putting the book itself and all its contents under the sign of couture. At once folksy and luxurious, DIY and gallery-friendly, von Bonin's expensive rags extend a territory where art and fashion immediately abandon their difference. And this isn't merely a

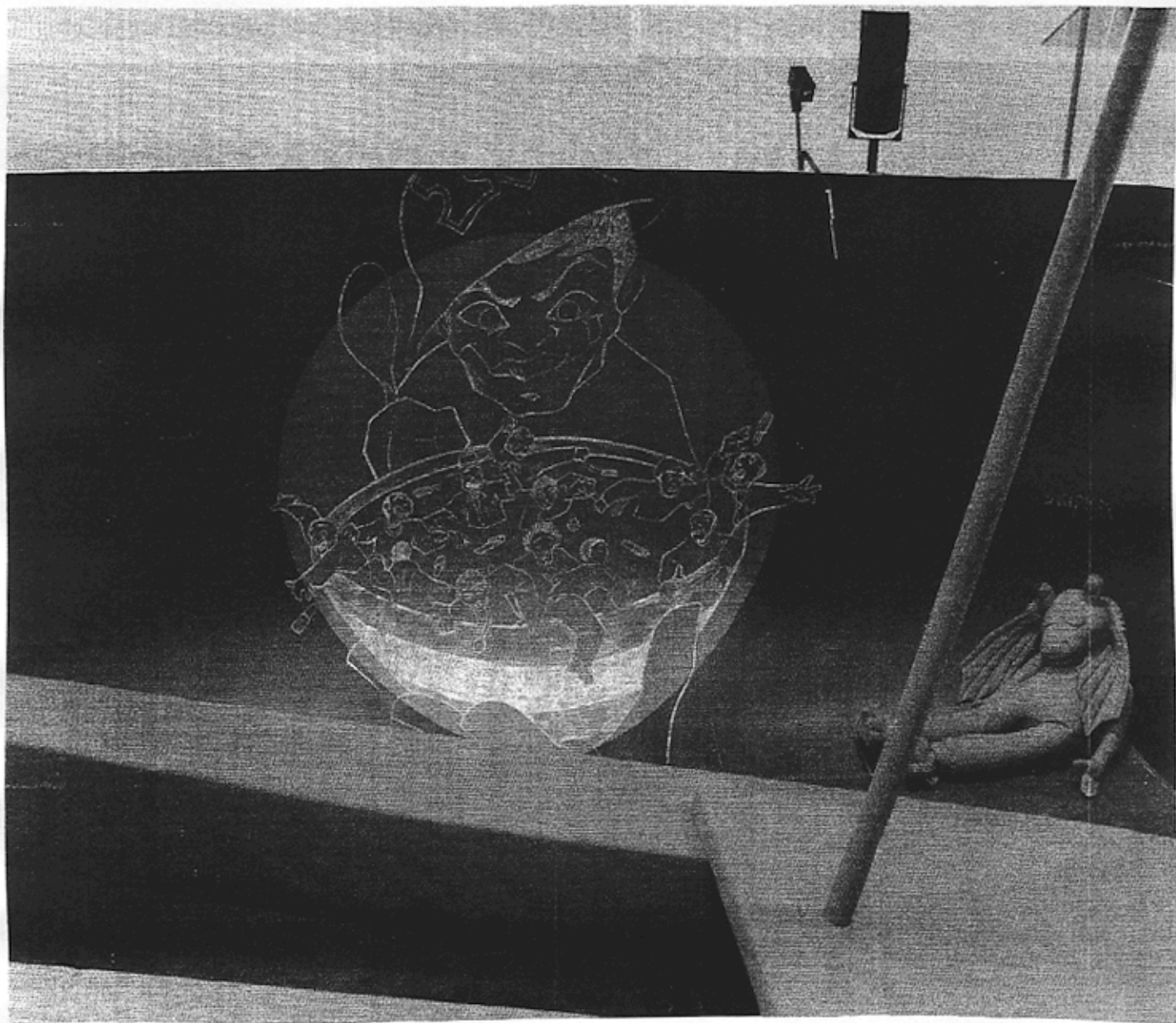


This page, from top: Cosima von Bonin and Josef Strau, *Installation Münzstrasse Hamburg*, 1990/2007, balloons and ink. Installation view, Ausstellungsraum Münzstrasse 10, Hamburg, 1990. View of Cosima von Bonin, "Roger and Out," 2007, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Photo: Brian Forrest.

return to a formative '90s moment when the figures of the designer, the DJ, and the artist joined forces in the production of what was once experienced as participatory urban "subculture." Glancing back to a time when von Bonin escaped her own instrumentalization by deferring authorship in incomplete and overpopulated works, or by elaborating a paradoxically (and glamorously) non-productive workaholism typical of Cologne in the '90s, her post-'90s work also anticipates the professional artist's return as full-time manager of her own brand-image today.* It seems there is more than one way for a contemporary artist to disappear. Sometimes it's by doing nothing, sometimes by doing too much, and von Bonin has a way of keeping this difference problematic and undecidable.

The House of von Bonin is built around contradictory qualities: soft and hard, tame and rabid, personable and inscrutable. Appropriately, then, cartoonish dogs—stitched into compositions like *Ja, ich bin's. Ich bin dein Hund* (Yes, I Am It. I Am Your Dog), 2003, and in the form of oversize soft sculptures—began to proliferate throughout her oeuvre a few years ago; as a sort of logo, the floppy

puppy is clearly in attack mode at MOCA. The fact that these products coincide with what Graw describes as the dissolution of the social context that grounded von Bonin's early work, and that the artist's recent shifts in scale and strategy respond to increasingly opportune market conditions, seems to announce the end of bohemian life-as-art in Cologne and the global spread of the empire of life-style (or what Hal Foster has called the "designed subject" and the perverse and cynical return of modernist design



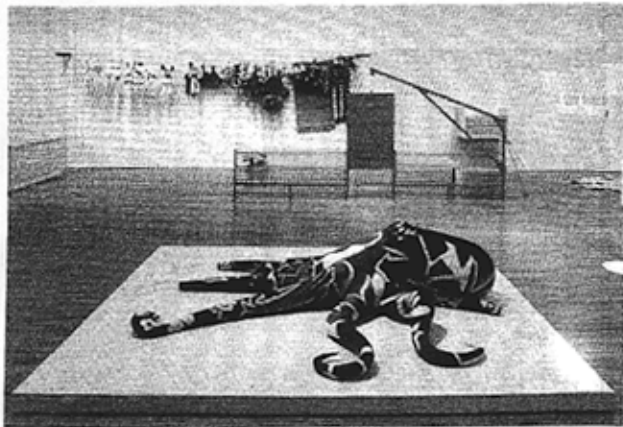
Cosima von Bonin, *Kapitulation*, 2004, mixed media, 35' 1 1/2" x 27' 2 1/4" x 14' 1 1/2".
Installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2007. Photo: Brian Forrest.

utopias in the form of, for example, the computer-assisted virus of Koolhaas-Mau-Prada). If von Bonin is now "outperforming" the absorption of her world by market forces, it is not only through her many references to lifestyle consumption but in the way her elaboration of a signature style becomes an actual styling and making-over of the museum itself. Standing guard in the galleries, one of many possible stand-ins for the artist is *Untitled (The Grey Bulldog with Box & Aprons)*, 2006, sitting blank and sphinxlike atop a closed wooden box. We're not sure whether it wants to be hugged or left alone.

An extremely deluxe-looking object that has been making recent appearances (in other versions) at galleries and art fairs is *Decoy (Der Krake #3)*, 2007. She is a large, soft octopus sewn from colorful Japanese sailcloth, with delicate, glinting glass-tipped tentacles. Known for her intelligence and inky escapes and for the fact that she decorates her own home, the octopus suggests a number of things about the conditions under which she now appears: the sticky clutches of capital, the shape-shifting and multitasking of the contemporary artist, the subject's strangeness to itself as it trades places with the commodity . . . or perhaps she is what the poet Paul Valéry once called the "all-powerful Mollusk of Reference." Here and elsewhere, the octopus remains camouflaged in her bright colors and seems to recoil from explication. She is a must-have, delicately sprawled on a white plinth amid an installation of very hard, severe new sculptures in white powder-coated steel, including *McD Gate*, 2007, a bright, blank, inverted L, self-illuminated by three fluorescent tubes. As cool as a Cady Noland and taller

than the average gallerygoer, this sculpture shares qualities with the bland efficiency of drive-through architecture, high-security prisons, and Minimalist design, and is joined by others in a similar vein, including *Off Minor (Balcony & Tires)*, 2007, a wall-mounted condo-style balcony that holds two readymade race car tires behind its white, jail-like rails, and *Reference Hell #1 (YSL Fauteuil)*, 2007, a chair, also wall-mounted (but too high for sitting), fitted with two stacked cowhide cushions. Sculptures based on fences, classroom furniture, "traps," and other disciplinary devices fold von Bonin's ongoing practice of quoting high-end lifestyle culture back into Kafkaesque images of enclosure and biopolitical control. Fashion, at the end of the day, is not just about looking good. Contemporary design unleashes a fear-inflected monoculture that extends from cashmere sweaters to the structural invisibility of government interrogation rooms, each somehow implying the other. Von Bonin's new work not only suggests the artist's complicity in design's job of dressing up violence, it hijacks the museum as site of pedagogical

Even though the collective and critical ethic of '90s Cologne is now performed as an ironically romanticized ritual—part fashion show, part music video, and part training camp—it persists, acting out the nope or surviving its own perversion.



This page, from top: View of Cosima von Bonin, "Roger and Out," 2007, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Foreground: Decoy (Der Krake #3), 2007. Photo: Brian Forrest.

communication in order to say something about official culture as entertainment as control. Greeting viewers at one end of the gallery is a soft Mighty Mouse skewered on a powder-coated steel pole (*Reference Hell #2 [Mighty Mouse]*, 2007). Above the mouse, a gigantic "bikini" cut from flag fabric festoons the show's entryway. Hung up as if to dry, *Untitled (Bikini Loop #2)*, 2007, dresses and sexes up the institution as a very big, absent girl.

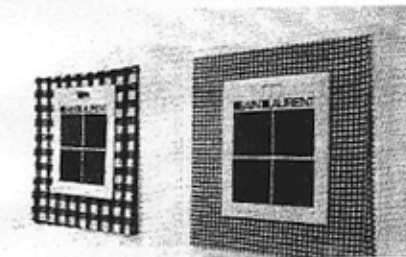
Also on view is *Kapitulation*, 2004, an installation that functioned as a set for von Bonin's video *2 Positionen auf einmal* (2 Positions at Once), playing in a nearby black box. Comprising two cell-like rooms paneled with inscribed chalkboardlike surfaces, the installation's walled-off, impenetrable decor is only visible from above, a vantage attained by climbing a set of aluminum steps, or from below, by manipulating a rope-operated, cantilevered mirror. The structure houses

a tweed-covered catamaran and its pilot—a soft Jar Jar Binks figure, also covered in tweed. The video involves von Bonin's longtime collaborators Dirk von Lowtzow and Thies Mynter (of the electropop group Phantom/Ghost), Yvonne Quirnbach (who also designed the catalogue for "Roger and Out"), the artist's dogs Lord Jim and Boy George, and many others on camera and off. Ritually collaborative, the video choreographs fashion-styled bodies to music performed by von Lowtzow and Mynter, both wearing plastic dog masks. Actors enter and exit, work and pose, write on the walls, and finally destroy the sailboat's pontoons. Like the twin hull of the catamaran and the set's divided rooms, the "two positions" in the work's title might signal von Bonin's

strategically ambivalent relationship to the programmed trajectory of an artist's career. She is still part nonartist. And even though the collective and critical ethic of '90s Cologne is now performed as an ironically romanticized and melancholic ritual—part fashion show, part music video, and part training camp—it persists nonetheless, acting out the hope of surviving its own perversion in the present. Is this another way of saying "relational aesthetics"? In any case, von Bonin's use of style as a means of elaborating games between subjects and objects, between the artist and her works, is as controlling as it is evasive. It is where the contemporary subject loses its distance from the commodity, but it is also the place where distances can be reappropriated and made strange again. It is how the octopus moves through museums. □

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"In 'The Non-productive Attitude,' a text written on the occasion of the group exhibition 'Make Your Own Life: Artists In and Out of Cologne' (which was organized by Bennett Simpson at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, in 2006 and included von Bonin), Josef Strau writes of the uneasy 'fusion of glam and politics' in a context where critical strategies were often infected by envy and fear.



Cosima von Bonin, "Roger and Out," 2007, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. From left: Yves Saint Laurent, 1997; Yves Saint Laurent (Decoy #1), 2007. Photo: Brian Forrest.