

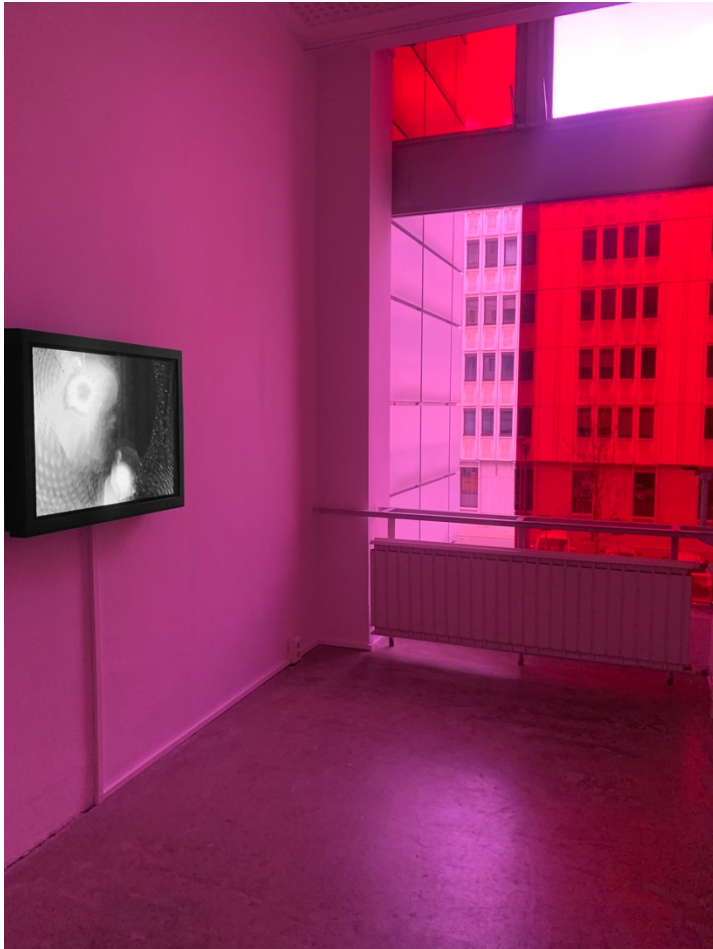
CRISTIN TIERNEY

# ARTFORUM

## NORMAL PEOPLE

Kristian Vistrup Madsen at Berlin Gallery Weekend

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PEACHES SERENADED HEATHCLIFF from atop a table at the Julia Stoschek Collection last Wednesday after Caique Tizzi's "singing dinner," where, in the name of art, I ate a raw leek and was triggered by a live rendition of John Lennon's "Imagine." Next door at Sweetwater, Luzie Meyer read her Lacanian poetry to hundreds of Städelschule alumni, and across town at CFA, Francesca Facciola distilled all the sex and kitsch of Catholicism into a deranged painting of Jesus certain to appear in my nightmares. As for celebrities, in lieu of Kanye or Keanu, over the weekend someone somewhere spotted Wolfgang Joop—all to say that, after two years of seeing exhibitions alone with gallerists and eating takeout

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in the street, Berlin Gallery Weekend is back to business as usual, for better and worse.

At Saturday's gala, the Neue Nationalgalerie held a spectacular mirror to the sunset and later glowed like a lantern in the dark, the glass box completely empty save for Barbara Kruger's bold-font floor. It is a great treat to have this building back, and with a new director, Klaus Biesenbach, who seems to enjoy having people over. Perhaps in him Berlin has found its own Emmanuel Macron: beloved, at least, for not being insane. Joined by a woman wrapped in an enormous Ukrainian flag, he stressed the special importance of art in "times like these," a truism that sounds hollower with every reiteration.

While I approached the festivities with an almost manic energy, I couldn't escape the creeping sense that the Gallery Weekend returned to its former self as one returns to an old outfit, to find that it no longer quite fits. Certainly no one wore the right clothes that night, as the masses shivered over small plates of ceviche on the terrace. Covid measure or animal cruelty? I for one couldn't help but recall a work by Amalia Pica on view in the Boros Bunker group show that opened two days prior: an immense and cluttered infrastructure of metal enclosures that guide sheep to their death, outfitted with rubber toys to help lull the condemned into a false sense of calm. No one in Berlin minds rubber toys, but *crémant* was more apt for the occasion.

Across the thirty or so shows that I saw, the compromised centrism of the newly reelected French president also applied: Almost nothing very good, almost nothing very bad. This is probably typical of times of crisis; Wilhelm Uhde described Picasso's conservative turn after World War I as "an interlude . . . which the hand made, while the soul, worn out on its long journey, rested." This came to mind when seeing Louis Fratino's exhibition at Galerie Neu. His pictures of naked guys, landscapes, and flowers are atmospheric and enormously appealing, trafficking in a fantasy that beauty could be less ambivalent, or sadness more picturesque. Like the novels of Sally Rooney, consumed quickly and with great appetite, they don't leave you with much to think about. Of course, the Sally Rooneys of the world have the last laugh. What is the painter's equivalent to having your novel turned into a TV series?

At Barbara Weiss, Ser Serpas—another American twentysomething—had collected trash cans, mattresses, and shopping carts from the street and arranged them into sculptures, collapsing references to formal and financial precarity in a supposedly punk gesture. But the more I thought about it, at this point, IKEA's Kallax shelf balanced on a baby car seat reads more like a form of trolling—bleak beyond intention.

The best works were dark, too, but undefeated. At Galerie Buchholz, Trisha Donnelly took the prize with double-exposed photographs of forests and clouds that were turned on their sides to look like ex-rays or Rorschachs, at once impenetrable and uncannily familiar. Donnelly's way of constructing through obfuscation spoke to another favorite of the week, on view in the Stoschek collection's new display: Mary Lucier's *Bird's Eye*, a 1978 video that shows a laser beaming directly into the camera, burning up its internal vidicon tube

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over the course of ten minutes. At a moment when most are busy making their own center hold, Lucier's elegant consideration of destruction's crucial role in creativity felt urgent. At New Toni in Prenzlauer Berg, Vera Palme's dense and eclectic paintings lined the walls like a difficult sentence, providing another rare example of art that takes a real and decisive step in terms of developing a language for itself—and of how small that step needs to be in order to matter.

On Sunday night, I saw the sun set on the Gallery Weekend from the balcony of Fluentum, a private collection focused on video art located on the plush perimeter of Grunewald. Housed in the former headquarters of the Nazi Airforce, the building served as a seat for the US Army during the Cold War, and, briefly in 1996, as the set for a comedy-horror flick titled *Killer Condom*. There, a new video installation by Anja Kirchner used Unica Zürn's book *The House of Illnesses* (1958) as the basis for thinking about the effects of catastrophe on individual and collective bodies in relation to technologies of total immersion. Zürn, who once worked as a typist at the Third Reich film company, had intimate knowledge of how societal and personal sickness reproduces itself in pictures and even architecture. Amid the black marble and freedom-loving quotes adorning the upstairs "Kennedy Saal," conversation naturally turned to the nation's past. The exhibition held last year at the Deutsches Historisches Museum, acclaimed for uncovering the Nazi entanglements of the early iterations of Documenta, could have gone much further, argued HKW curator Anselm Franke. More than merely critiquing the curatorial line of cofounder Werner Haftmann, the evidence was there to take him down for crimes of war. "Why just go halfway?" I asked, but the answer is obvious: The logic of institutional critique is homeopathic; it is meant to strengthen, not destroy. And so the center continues to hold as the Gallery Weekend inaugurates another "Super-Kunstjahr." We will be seeing each other in Kassel again soon enough.

— Kristian Vistrup Madsen