

Montez Press Interview

Football and Twilight – a conversation between Aleen Solari and Christiane Blattmann



Hamburg, November 2017

This past month Christiane Blattmann visited Gallery Melike Bilir in Hamburg to meet Aleen Solari and view her exhibition 898989. They discussed the show and the background of Solari's work. Upon entering the gallery the viewer is immersed in a dim half-light. The wan light emanates from certain works throughout the space which incorporate LED elements or light bulbs, while a central spot light draws ones attention to a circular installation placed in the middle of the room like a stage.

CB The first thing I encounter upon entering the exhibition is a giant ceramic mussel. It had an immense magnetic power over me, which I first had to try to gauge for myself.

AS Ah, really? (smiles)

CB It sits there in a niche, but still it is the first thing one encounters. Knew from before, though I have the feeling I see it here in a completely different way. In a couple of different situations and always in daylight. Now it seems that the force that comes from it is a very new moment. The work has a much more erotic tension to it—it's all of a sudden a mussel that can clasp around something else, size it can also become



a scene. A location, like a grotto. And the light bulb inside is of course the pearl. I feel drawn to this female force and energy, but at the same time, I am not so sure if this might be some sort of unsafe situation. A risky attraction or a moment of security and calm? Not sure what to do with this...twilight.

AS For me this piece is slightly left out when I think about the show, as it is an older work. But apparently it blends in fine and transmits something that is inherent to the other works as well: a femininity, but it also crosses over to its opposite; something familiar and something obnoxious.

I often stage older works in a different way later on. In this exhibition I really wanted to include the mussel, as the way I had shown it before was so different: in a bedroom, where it was placed on a plinth like a bedside table that spun across the entire bed. Here, it acts as more of a light source.

By staging objects very differently, I feel it also becomes more obvious that I see them partly as place markers for performers, and that the installation around can be looked at as a set in which the focus is directed mainly on the objects.

CB If we go back to the term twilight, I think it can serve as a good tool with which to approach the show in its entirety. The other works included in the exhibition also have this face or that face in the half-light. You seem to work strongly against a white-cube moment, against the idea that the viewers see what they see.

The objects you've created can be menacing—or cute—both aspects are suspected, and I find myself in a twilight, not knowing. Almost as if I



AS Well, you meet those fans at the same demonstrations where you go yourself. But it's not so much about left and right. Those stickers, those tags, that's a townscape that I pay attention to. When driving on the highway or in the suburbs, you can see exactly which neighborhood belongs to whom. This fight about the pasting and tagging over is a constant one. And then I simply took this "89" and made a pun out of it. A joke or reference to this coding of letters.

CB For the club, the number is really only the foundation year? The coding of letters in numbers like 88 or 18 then becomes a real political statement.

The tagging on the street...is it mostly done with stickers?

AS Yes, in this case it is only stickers that were pasted in St. Pauli and around there.

All the fans from out of town that at one point came through here have stuck their decals on—and then they get ripped down from opposing fans.

CB So the practice is to paste your own stickers in other places and take down the stickers from foreign clubs at home?

So it's a practice of marking your hunting ground or territory. Just like Penny, your Mini Bull Terrier: she pees to mark, but that's a little less complex than the case with those football stickers. There, people not only leave marks in the city, but also these layers are constantly being overwritten and deleted, just to be marked again.

AS Yes, and this making-clean also follows specific rules: between some clubs there is more of a bond, so those are left out. One makes distinctions.

CB So it's a certain geography that gets drawn.

AS As a matter of principle, you can read how youth culture works and spreads in a city, in a neighborhood, according to how you move and

were to walk down a dark alley at night, unsure of who's coming towards me. Could be fine, or could be really fucked up.

Your title: 898989. 9 in the alphabet is which number? An "I", ah: *(laughs)* it means "hihihi" *(laughs)* [A lot of Solari's previous work also plays with subcultural codes and the use of numbers in right wing scenes. As an example "18" as first and eighth letter of the alphabet stand for "Adolf Hitler"; "88" for "Heil Hitler".]

AS The situation is this: all the stickers you encounter in the works throughout the show are taken from the street. I worked with all these stickers from the football scene. I'm sure we'll come back to this later.

Melike, my gallerist, asked me, "hey, what about the title?!" when I was on my way to the airport. I was on the train going through all the Hamburg suburbs, and there you see the "89" and tags from Poptown on walls. Poptown is an Ultra Fanclub from HSV, which are the competitors of St. Pauli. Those are the two biggest football clubs in Hamburg, continuously fighting against one another. The tag PT89 stands for this Fanclub's name, Poptown, and the club's founding year, 1989.

Between the Ultra Fan clubs, you always have fights in the neighbourhoods. And a delegate war when it comes to the pasting over of those fan stickers and the overwriting of tags.

CB What role does a political attitude play between clubs and fans?

how you look at stickers and tags.

In Salzgitter for example—when you arrive there, you only see anti-Antifa stickers. Of course, it is not only about football, but also about political contexts.

Or you look at the language: my favorite example is “Schweinefotzen” [*pig cunts*], an Anti-Cop sticker from Magdeburg. The way language works. Also in football you act for or against sexism. And “Schweinefotzen” takes the cake in one extreme.

CB Do you feel football is a terrain where these attitudes—political/unpolitical, sexist/anti-sexist, racist/anti-racist and so on—stand out much more clearly, because certain codes and messages surface much sharper? Stickers, merch, posters, protests, violent fights, etcetera? And through matches that are held in different cities, fans travel from place to place where these conflicts are fought out? Or do you think that football is simply a place that is more politicized than others?

AS I think the exciting thing here is—and this comes back to my personal relationship to football and what intensified it—this artist existence that one leads is no common context. You meet at openings and one person says they make art and somebody else says they make art—this can be very diverse and different, it can have NOTHING to do with one another.

If you say somewhere, “I am a fan of this or that club”, then somebody might be your enemy, but in this moment you are still so much closer, because this football thing is a binding link in such a different way.

It’s about a mass, a common consensus, a common interest. I like this about St. Pauli a lot: you have 30,000 people in the stadium and say, almost everybody who goes there knows exactly in which fields they are residing: that their common ethics are against racism or you name it. In no other culture or sub-culture do you reach that many people with one elementary thought. One person is living this intensely in their everyday life, while the other might live in a world of

luxury, but still both share the same thought. And sadly this also works in a negative way: in reverse you have clubs where the common thoughts are negative.

What interests me most is the collective, the things shared in common.

CB So in fact the rules are very clear: When you are fan of St. Pauli, and I am too, we know that we share common moral concepts?

AS Yes, and it means that if somebody wants to come to the St. Pauli stadium, he can’t wear a Thor Steinar [*fashion label closely associated with far right and neo-nazi scenes*] pullover. That’s rooted in the values.

CB The rules under which people work as collective are spelled out quite clearly. If I am a fan of St. Pauli, I can’t wear a print that has a right-wing connotation. This decidedness seems particular.

But let’s go back to the stickers again: if you assume we can write or mark some sort of geography with them, that you can read who went through here or resides here and so on—if we now find the stickers on your pieces in the exhibition space, no matter if they are stuck on a canvas or on pillows as part of an installation, in this moment, the objects become carriers of information. This way, part of the work gets to be background, replacing facades, lampposts, and so on. The stickers are placed on those surfaces, but unlike on the street, you can carry the



objects themselves to other places. Normally, the wall which carries these inscriptions is inseparable from a neighborhood, and therefore clear to read.

The moment you move those carriers, they lose their territorial trait.

AS In fact it doesn't matter. If you are deep into the subject, you could even recognize it without the location: all these stickers are assembled—which ones are missing? That way you could distinguish where they were ripped from originally.

But that doesn't play an important role for me. What plays a role is getting reality into the exhibition space—a calculated contrast to what happens in this space otherwise. It is still a protected space.

In this case all the stickers were taken down within a radius of about 2 km from the gallery. A parallel world that exists and is super real, but simply totally parallel to the protected exhibition space. So it's a calculated move and contrast that I let in here.

CB We could say that the walls outside have a maximum density of information stored within, whereas gallery walls function exactly in reverse; a gallery constantly erases the traces, and makes the walls white again after every show.

AS Absolutely!

One thing that I would like to come back to is that this world, let's call it the football world, is an extremely predominantly male one.

CB Well, good point. That brings us back to the mussel in a way as well.

AS A predominantly male world to which you have to respond. You respond automatically by moving inside. With football that's extreme, but I'd claim that you can completely translate that to other places and contexts. You have potential rules of the game that have evolved differently, but I guess the main principle is the same. You respond to something—and that's simply pre-

dominated and coined in a male way.

For me it's quite exciting to follow such socio-political approaches. In another work in the show I glazed little animal shaped ceramics in baby blue and baby pink. Things have evolved in such a way that those colors have become ascriptions. Even the ceramic glazes are named accordingly.

CB Are these ascriptions in the way a football shirt is an ascription?

AS Yes, in fact, that's exactly how you can see it. In my work it's important to me that if I use something like baby blue and baby pink, I don't lay it out as if there is a right or wrong way to interpret these colors.

I'd find it much more exciting if somebody with a totally different cultural background came in to look at those baby blue and baby pink ceramics and had no idea to what background the colors are linked.

Regardless of ones origin, these symbols can show how our cultures evolve and categorize themselves.

