

Chicago



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Judith Russi Kirchner reviews "Compassionate Images"

distributive network besides those that service conventional commercial product. In Germany, however, film funding is somewhat more generous, encouraging a kind of quirky gathering of independent productions. Supported by ZDF (Second German Television Network), ARD (First German Television, a consortium of regional television networks), and private production setups, these films comprise over a decade's worth of so-called New German Cinema and represent what might be labeled "progressive" film activity. Unfortunately, in some cases the "progress" involved is merely the transformation of sweet and trendy film ideas into actual product. Nevertheless, this availability of funds is far removed from the meandering phantasms of American independent filmmakers, their brains chock full of baroque fabrications of big deals in L.A. and lately, because of the futility of dealing with the mostly brain-dead American film industry, of big deals in Berlin.

And as the Americans look for movie money in Germany, so the flirtation with the American "scene" has been a constant in recent German film: from the rangy use of street slang to the incessant play of stateside rock 'n' roll. Like a pack of Lucky Strikes in wartime Europe, these "commodities" have become the vectors of a suspiciously irresistible fixation.

The latest entry in the "I love America and rock 'n' roll" sweepstakes is *Asphalt Night*, which was written, directed, and edited by Peter Fratzscher, and produced in collaboration with ZDF. The recognition and mimicry of cultural "otherness" that saturates this film connects it to the work of Wim Wenders (in those of his projects that do not involve Peter Handke), in that one seems to be waiting for Rudiger Vogler to appear and draw "Hey, bebe, I take your peecture mit my Polaroid ant ve go for a ride in mine Cutlass." This, surprisingly, does not occur, but oodles of other homages to the U.S. of A. do: from characters named L.A. to a chorus of "Oh yeah man." But this entry of American cultural imperialism into the scenario does not function critically, and, worse yet, seems to carry a nervous claim to franchise.

Angel (Gerd Udo Heinemann) is a record producer, a veteran of 1968 who is nostalgic about political "action" and the pop music of the '60s and early '70s. While his coworkers float around the recording studio, smoothly ironing out the blips in the disco-rhythm machine,

Angel pouts, slouches on the sofa, plays with his glasses, and bleats out his very own rock 'n' roll anthem, "No welcome, no place, no chance, no choice," a maudlinly saccharine dose of MOR. This is the kind of music he, shall we say, *believes* in, and it is this belief that charts his alienation from the rest of the unsavory creeps in the record biz. How is this alienation pictured? Angel repeatedly storms out of the studio, indulges in bluster but adorable rampages, climbs into his Mustang (What! no Cutlass?), on which is emblazoned "Born To Run," and cruises the city with the radio/tape deck blaring. On one of these picaresque jaunts he meets up with Johnny (Thomas Davis), a young man in a punk outfit. From here on the film reads as a cute boy-bonding tale, with the motley couple stalking Berlin like an unholy alliance of *Rolling Stone* and the *New Musical Express*. Angel plays the liberal, tweed-sport-jacketed sage to Johnny's leatherette cynic; their opposition is defined almost totally through their colliding musical tastes, with Angel patronizingly allowing for Johnny's self-portrait of the cool-cat musician/street urchin and Johnny facetiously grimacing at Angel's powerless liberalism and love-rock proclivities. But both can agree (in their own fashion) on what they refer to as the 11th Commandment: Let It Rock.

For over three decades rock 'n' roll music has functioned as a cathartic, a seductive escape from the specificity of daily life into an elaborately Edenic cushioning of desire, conspicuous fun, and, sometimes, pleasure. It is the rebellion that staves off "adulthood." But while this rebellion skirts the specter of the fully grown, it never escapes the law of the father and its inscription within the phallic arena of rock. That fans regard the music with an avid religiosity is not to be ignored. But the notion of rock 'n' roll as a vehicle of dominant economic and social determinants is not dealt with in *Asphalt Night*. Conflict arises not through the directives of power relations but simply through some messy misconstruing of the fabric and feel of the everyday—it is a minor disruption of the seamless fashion show of life. Fratzscher never gropes behind the drapery to grasp at the constructions of power.

And unlike other rock 'n' roll movies (from *The Girl Can't Help It* to *Diner*, with many between) *Asphalt Night* presents its music in strangely weak fashion. Perhaps with the exception of the MC5

group we hear nothing but heavily commodified rock, far removed from a music of supposed noise and narrative. And here, this deadening effect is not to be confused with any conscious distancing process.

Asphalt Night shares its fall to the thrall of Americanism with some of Wenders' films, but its unpleasurable complicity and unsubverted stereotyping connects it more to *Smithereens*. Susan Seidelman's attempt to convince the audience that the transgressions and gender play of punk's female figures gel not into an Adele Bertel, but into Seidelman's heroine Wren, a simulacrum of Pat Benatar. So punk displacement fades into a corporately hewn "New Wave," which is further elevated, ironically, by a supposedly "independent" movie. While independent film practice deserves increasing support, it might be helpful to keep in mind just what this independence could mean. Does it mean scrounging around for money until a studio decides to let you become what you want to be—the next Paul Mazursky? Or could it mean a joining of the ingratitude of narrative-film conventions with any number of possible displacements: the recognition of the spectator as subject, a critical look at the market and at power relations, a puncturing of stereotypical fictions, or perhaps merely the suggestion that the things that make Angel mope and give Wren headaches about money are not natural disasters, but old familiar riffs? Listen to the words. It's not the singer, it's the song.
—BARBARA KRUGER

Chicago

"Compassionate Images," N.A.M.E. Gallery:

The theme of "Compassionate Images" for an exhibition of contemporary figurative painting reveals more about curatorial idealism than about the ideology of that art. What was most striking about this carefully selected and modulated exhibition, curated by Paul Krainak, was how much it looked like a show of portraits of people engulfed by sadness and loneliness. The emotional response one had to the images was not so much compassion as a matching sadness and confusion. The question then became that of who was demonstrating and who receiving the compassion—the artist, the subject, or the viewer? And here the exhibition's premise,

though provocative, ultimately does not persuade. Since these images do not communicate compassion, yet are curatorially intended to evoke it in the viewer, one had to read the titles of the works in order to determine the reason for the vague atmosphere of melancholy here. Until we know their identity, for example, we cannot be expected to feel sympathy for Mike Glier's murdered Atlantans, for without labels they are merely portraits generated from media photographs of black children.

"The nobility of the compassionate instinct," remarks the curator in his catalogue essay, "tends to subdue its formal depiction." History is not called upon to prove the all-too-obvious contrary. In another essay in the catalogue, the search backward for retrospective corroboration yields Renaissance iconography—the Madonna della Misericordia and pieta. But the conflation of 15th-century images of piety and 20th-century images of desperation is pure anachronism. We are as numbed to the meaning of these earlier icons as we are distanced from their contextual signification.

What distinguishes the work here from the more usual package of anxiety-ridden expressionists is a mood of restraint, of contemplation approaching passivity. One feels curious about what Jane Dickson's nicely rendered, withdrawn types are thinking about in their Hopper-like isolation. Wonsook Kim's stylized drawings, which recall Ludwig Bemelmán's illustrations for *Madeleine*, suggest less a compassion for lonely children than nostalgic autobiographical recollection. Ron Cohen's intense self-portrait, luridly illuminated with green lights, graphically confronts self-preoccupation. Michael Zwack's images are not decipherable as compassionate; their haunting quality depends on their purposeful formal elusiveness and emotional ambiguity. They resist categorization.

The exceptions to these subdued depictions seemed to jump off the wall. Thomas Lawson's and Glier's subjects are victims deserving of compassion, and paradoxically their portraits are the most strident formal statements here—Lawson's because of his high colored, belligerently awkward faces, Glier's because of his dramatic presentation of black-and-white-mask portraits. The inclusion of these images under the rubric of compassion raises the question of the motives of the artists and of the implied

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The exhibition derives much of its polemical thrust from an idealistic position calculatedly posed against two adversaries: the cynicism and nihilism of some media-based art, and the self-indulgence of neo-Expressionism. The work here is neither sensational nor histrionic. Depending on mass media to define its criticality, so that what was once a position is now a convention, it favors a contemplative mood over neo-Expressionist fervor and conceptual cynicism. But when the show took on the tone of a moral primer, it verged on ersatz liberalism and conservative esthetics. According to the curator, “paint provides a more substantive dimension in which to recall symptoms of societal adversity than photography and other conventional methods of reportage, which are often manipulated to produce a series of interchangeable fictions that parade as facts.” This passage, echoing Roland Barthes, misses the mark, for if we have learned anything from Barthes it is that all culture (including compassion) is fiction posturing as truth.

These images were summoned as models of behavior, representing the good and true art in the face of superficial fashion and the media—bogeymen whose domination and power have been blown way out of proportion in order to justify a constant cannibalization of them. The contrasts here—photography versus painting, cynicism versus simple truths, careerism versus good intentions—were polemical and artificial, since some of these artists by necessity are engaged with the same concerns as their opponents, and ironists in the media are probably as “compassionate” in intention as they are. Photojournalism, indeed modern photography, has its own well-developed history of compassion, and can evoke compassion in the viewer as much as these painted images of societal adversity. By now we understand the twin perils of the media—desensitization and manipulation. The show obscured more troubling artistic and moral issues, and although the quality of compassion seems emotionally necessary, it appeared artistically insufficient. The fact that compassion is a noble expression didn’t make these images more noble, but the fact that they had to confront this new label made us scrutinize them more closely. Compassionate images may have intuitive appeal, but their artistic instantiation in this exhibition was self-effacing.

—[*Judith Russi Kirshner*](#)

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—JUDITH RUSSI KIRSHNER

Los Angeles

ALLEN RUPPERSBERG, "Art Rolls/Head Rolls," James Corcoran Gallery:

The title of Allen Ruppertsberg's exhibition here, "Art Rolls/Head Rolls," is a matrix of double meanings and deadpan puns. In this it is like much of Ruppertsberg's work since the early '70s, and like the installation itself. Still, the second half of the equation is concrete: a hundred cast-cement heads are scattered—rolled—across the gallery floor. Starting rather unnaturally around the Adam's apple, they are neither masks nor busts; they are severed heads, as in "heads will roll."

Three paintings, one a diptych, frame the field of severed heads. Each bears a newspaper clipping—or rather an image that is both a representation and a reproduction of one. The clippings have been copied by hand in pencil, letter by letter, then enlarged and silkscreened onto the canvases. Beneath them are large titles; the title of *Art* is printed in helvetica bold, while that of *The Human Figure* is done in "brush script," a lettering style that often appears in posters and advertisements with a hand-painted look. At the bottom of each work is a caption in a sans serif medium type. "Translated by Allen Ruppertsberg."

Still Life, the diptych, shows an account of a man hired by a friend to kill his mother. The headline reads "Young Killer's Price: \$10,000 Classic Coupe"; continued as if torn from another page, an interior head runs "MURDER: Killer's Price." The two parts of the article are presented twice in each of the canvases of the diptych, doubling a doubling, and the hired killer in the story is a double too, a stand-in for the victim's son. Lettered in red spray paint, the title, *Still Life*, is repeated almost drip for drip in each panel. Ruppertsberg's repetition pulls any emotion or immediacy from the act of painting, and in any case the script has already been doubled; like the titles of the other works it is in a "designer" face, a style used in printed media to connote graffiti.

With his pointed titles Ruppertsberg

makes it clear that art's function and the artist's pose are among his subjects, that the first part of the installation's title is to be read "Art Roles." His paintings, with their tales of violence and death, are surrogates for a certain brand of expressionism, the deeply felt expressions of helplessness and concern that purport to make meaningful the chaos of modernity. "Translated by Allen Ruppertsberg" is their uncomfortable and embarrassing signature; it is the artist's signature, a declaration of self, self-advertising in fact, yet it is a signature that is not signed but screened. And translated from what to what? The doubling of *Still Life* suggests Robert Rauschenberg's doubled *Factum I* and *II*, and his paired domains of life and art. The clippings illustrate the process: Ruppertsberg does not simply reproduce them but redraws them, hand-fashioning each letter as though to feel its weight, to perceive it slowly in the language of his medium—and, in so doing, to take it from life into art, and reveal its truths. That is the translation Ruppertsberg's signature claims he has performed, yet with the same signature he condemns it as not original, self-serving, something of a placebo. The method fails in part, Ruppertsberg suggests, because the translator's signature overwhelms the text.

Around the clippings and titles the paintings are supplemented with commentary in marking pen. Here is Ruppertsberg's handwritten—unscreened and formally unmediated—voice: "The great contradiction between personal experience and social patterns." "In the right hands, fear is the deadliest weapon of all." "Family as the source of the monstrous." Against the newsprint facts and the redrawn translations the commentary is an attempt at conscious, studious understanding, at forging a causality. But even Ruppertsberg's understanding is a collection of quotes, being by turns scholarly opinion, aphorism, and cliché. These are not solutions but more script.

Murder, the subject of Ruppertsberg's script, has a paradoxical relationship to life; it underlines the reality of existence even as it ends it. The act of killing affirms the fact of life. But Ruppertsberg's criminals are self-conscious, his crimes committed by surrogates on preordained victims. The matricidal son and his hiring murder for matching sports cars; a writer who is not a killer poses as a bank robber to relieve the fictionality of both his fiction and his occupation. The

final pun, the last case of mistaken identity, is the actor's role.

The unavailability of life runs through Ruppertsberg's paintings. He is a self-conscious artist, who paints surrogate, doubled paintings of surrogate murderers. The well-taught lesson is textuality; the clippings are presented as meaning and as mediation in objects ironic about their own mediated failure. The lesson ties Ruppertsberg's work to much of what for convenience's sake has been labeled Post-Conceptualism, but his work is less strategic, less elegant, and, not coincidentally, more in earnest. Finally, the difference is that for Ruppertsberg language is benign—as though it were being fooled rather than doing the fooling.

—HOWARD SINGERMAN

PATRICIA PATTERSON, Newspace:

By force of their execution in a style wholly dependent on almost academic realist drawing, and of their content—recollections of the Irish countryside and the hearthside life there—Patricia Patterson's paintings should collapse into a muddle of sentimentality, but they don't. To the contrary, when her scenes of a small village and its residents combine with the larger, more patently evocative quotations from an Irish kitchen she created within the gallery, significant questions about realism, depiction, and the subjects of art come into focus more clearly than in more consciously stylized, aggressively Modern work.

I would consider Patterson's effort here a disingenuous ploy but for the pictures' plastic candor about themselves and their making. Patterson draws like no one else: thumbnail sketches are repeated, sometimes appearing in the final work as penimenti, until an absolutely accurate gesture is arrived at. The characters of the people in the paintings fall into place around these physical essences. So it is that Patterson paints these rural folk in their everyday activities: smoking, reading the newspaper, washing dishes, cooking. They do not pose, and we are not obliged to judge them.

To reinforce the quotidian that she has studied so closely Patterson put a small tableau at the center of each of the gallery's three uninterrupted walls and joined the lot together with a waist-high pippin-green dado. The most imposing of the three, a tall blue-painted break-front bearing shelves of china, was situated in the middle of the longest stretch