

## Martin Kippenberger

### *The Problem Perspective*

MoMA, New York  
1 March – 11 May

The 'problem' in *The Problem Perspective* is nothing more than Kippenberger himself — that is to say, it is the problem of the 'artist' and what it might have meant to be one, or play one, or behave (and misbehave) as one in the 1980s and 90s, primarily in Europe, but also in the US and other locales of the internationalising artworld. The 'problem perspective', in short, is the problem of persona.

Evidence that Kippenberger was uniquely predisposed to working through this problem is apparently given by his early biography: upon quitting the Hamburg Art Academy in 1976, after four years of study, young Martin (now twenty three) decamps to Florence, Italy, with plans of becoming an actor, but returns the following year. After a first one-man show in Hamburg (of a series of paintings, *Uno di Voi, un Tedesco in Firenze* (*One of You, a German in Florence*) (1976–7), the title already indicates his interest in playing roles), he moves to Berlin and founds the Kippenbergers Büro (modelled on Warhol's Factory, but it accretes as an artist promotion and exhibition operation). He manages the underground performance venue S.O. 36, begins the Grugas punk band, performs in three films (*Gibbi West Germany*, 1980; *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*, 1979, and *Liebe und Abenteuer*, 1978) and then decides that the actor's life is not for him. It's now 1980. Next stop? Paris. Occupation? Writer.

That Kippenberger was peripatetic and suffered from something like an aesthetic attention deficit disorder, that his personality was immense and chaotic, that one could not but think him either a genius provocateur or an ass — these are the clichés that govern nearly all accounts of his work. But what comes across in *The Problem Perspective* is how the paintings and, more importantly, Kippenberger's drawings, stand apart from, and over and above, his sculptures and installations (not to mention his books, photographic projects, exhibition posters, announcements and other ephemera).

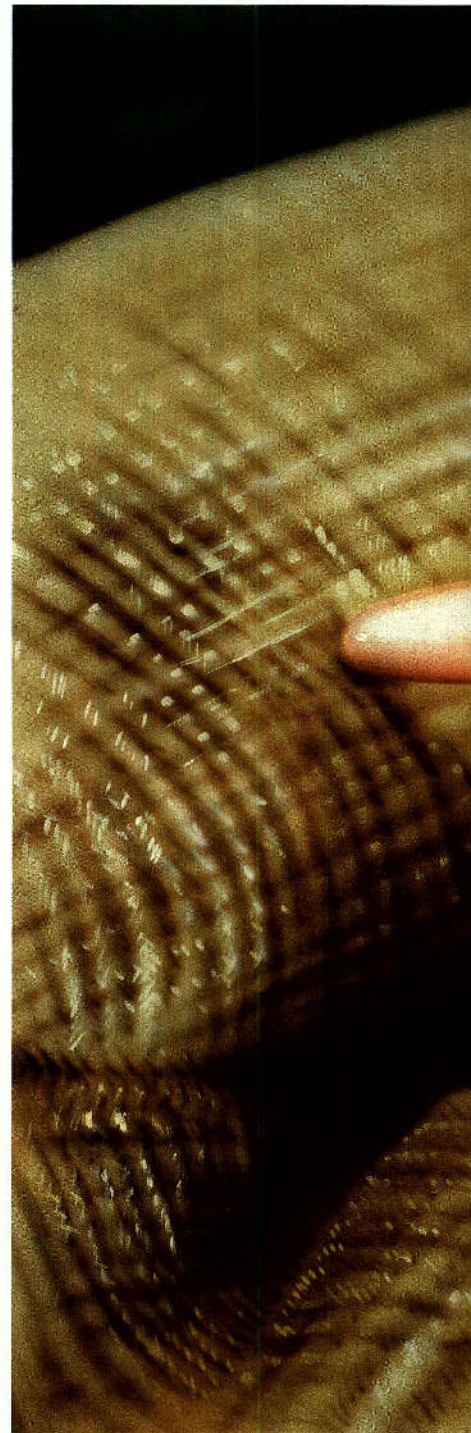
The sculptures and installations are best exemplified by two bodies of objects for two separate projects: *Peter: The Russian Position*, a dense exhibition of sculptures, the first the artist made, that went on display at Galerie Max Hetzler in 1987; and *The Happy End of Franz Kafka's 'Amerika'* (1994), an array of chairs and desks of impossibly diverse style and provenance set up on a shrunken football field and flanked by bleachers.

*Peter*, in the manner that Kippenberger first used it, would roughly translate today as 'dude', though Diedrich Diederichsen, in his catalogue essay 'Kippenberger as Sculptor', translates the word as 'guy'. Kippenberger often dismissed other artists by appending '-peter' to their signature strategies; 'Bröchtenpeter' (rolls guy), for example, could easily stand as a swipe at Manzoni. But it is more the infinitely versatile 'man without qualities' character of 'Peter' that Kippenberger sought out in this series of sculptures, a collection of found and ramshackle furniture and loose assemblages of one sort or another, the whole purpose of which was to remain as undistinguished as possible, even as the commodities that sculptures inevitably become (Jeff Koons's early encased vacuum cleaners, made at roughly the same time, would be the obvious target here).

Sure the *Peters* are sculptures, but they do not stand as 'sculpture' as much as a 'gesture' designed to sucker-punch the belly of aesthetic expectations and artworld decorum (a standard formula for artistic bad-boy-ism). But within the precincts of the museum, in 2009, the gathering of *Peters* resembles nothing so much as a petting zoo for readymades. All of which is to say that the gesture itself is what is interesting; the sculptures are not.

While the *Peters* are outrun by the *peter* idea, Kippenberger's many drawings are much more fleet. The Hotel Drawings are worth mention here, not because the consistent use of hotel stationery (some taken from Kippenberger's travels, some from that of his friends and assistants) indicates some impulse to seriality that reconnects Kippenberger to a family tree of conceptual artists or minimalists, or signifies his own itinerancy, but because even in the face of these banal observations, one cannot deny the sheer diversity of subjects, motifs and styles, not to mention competencies of draughtsmanship, that apparently issue from one and the same Kippenberger. That is, one simply cannot deny the work. Unless Kippenberger was farming out his doodling and cartooning, as he had done with one of his earliest series of paintings, *Lieber Maler, male mir* (*Dear Painter, Paint for Me*), from 1981, what the Hotel Drawings put on display is evidence of the thing that Kippenberger so self-consciously and so often attempted to outrun: himself, or at least his own seriousness as an artist.

Kippenberger's turn in the mid-1990s to projects that would engage with the history of art, and the history of Modernism in particular, might be taken as a sign of maturation. Even here, however, *The Happy End of Franz Kafka's 'Amerika'* appears more like a referendum on the absurdity of collecting than as any serious engagement with the odd promise of a bureaucratic purgatory. Kippenberger's drawings and paintings (and preparatory photographs) from *The Raft of Medusa* series (1996), on the other hand, cast Kippenberger in the role he finally seemed ready, or perhaps resigned, to play: mortal. *Jonathan T.D. Neil*







Untitled (Shoe Title), from the series Dear Painter, Paint for Me (Lieber Maler, male mir), 1981, acrylic on canvas, 200 x 300 cm. © Estate of the artist. Collection Wendy Gondeln. Courtesy Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne





## COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Martin Kippenberger: The Problem Perspective  
SOURCE: Art Rev no32 My 2009

Copyright Art Review, Ltd. USA and Canadian subscription to Art Review are handled by agents: International Media Service, 3330 Pacific Ave., Ste. 404, Virginia Beach, VA 23451, 800-428-3003. Annual subscription price \$79, Canada \$85. Our Internet address is <http://www.art-review.co.uk>