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JIM AVIGNON “NOTHING I PAINT IS MEANT TO CREATE VALUE”

LET'S KEEP IT A SECRET

~~PHOTOGRAPH~~
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has been a main protagonist of the post-Wall art scene since 1986, when the illustrator, painter and musician of the one-man band Neoangin became known for his bold, cartoon-style murals across the city – including one he painted on the East Side Gallery in 1991. Avignon lived in New York between 2005 and 2012 before returning to Berlin, where he has been based ever since. He has worked with a number of galleries, including Neurotitan, Köppe Gallery and Urban Spree in Berlin, as well as Heitsch Gallery in Munich and Galerie Nomade in Montreuil, France.

THEY ARE CLOSE TO BOSTILLE NOW

the time ran E-Werk, basically the Berghain of the 1990s – and Marc Wohlrabe, who published Flyer, a biweekly pocket-sized zine for parties. The three of them had an investor's view of Berlin's potential, but they also represented the end of an era.

Are you nostalgic for the Great 1990s? Yes. Looking back, the 1990s were a golden age. The Wall had come down and suddenly there were new opportunities everywhere in the East, where you could just occupy abandoned flats and live

The iconic Berlin multitalent and EXB cover artist – best known for his bold, colourful, cartoon-style murals, and electro dada parties – talks to us about his tumultuous relationships with the city whose creative spirit he's come to epitomise, making art for fun, not fame, and his enduring mission to gently disrupt the art market. *By Wanda Sachs*

On June 5, 2002, the first issue of Exberliner hit the newsstands with a signature Jim Avignon cover – the first of many to come. It showed three odd characters plotting Berlin's future. What looks like it could have been EXB's three hopeful founders, was actually a sharp criticism of the changes happening at the time.

Can you tell us more? The illustration, titled 'The New Berlin' is the most concrete artwork I have made dealing with the changes in Berlin towards the end of the 1990s. At this time, Berlin shifted from being a playground for all kinds of subcultures to a pure marketing tool. Many realised they could use the city and its subcultures to benefit their own careers. It felt like everyone just wanted to do big business as quickly as possible. The three people depicted are Klaus Biesenbach [founder of the KW Institute for Contemporary Art], Ralf Regitz – who at

there for free. No one had to earn money and everyone could go out all the time; there was no pressure on the weekends because every day of the week was equally exciting. Everyone was making art, playing in a band, DJing, making films or just developing something new. It was like a creative frenzy.

Berlin in the Nineties – I still love you. And then came the new millennium. What did "The new Berlin" look like for you? Between 2001 and 2005, I could watch myself becoming a living anachronism, a relic of the 1990s. One that was appreciated for reminding everyone of the good times but that wasn't expected to produce anything relevant anymore. My reaction to this was to make a lot of music; I did only concerts for a year or two and no exhibitions at all. I also noticed that the off-galleries I liked were disappearing and that Berlin was turning into a springboard for a really good art career – but there was no place for me in those galleries. They knew what I represented, and they didn't want that. I felt myself drifting into insignificance. I had an identity crisis.

How was that identity crisis reflected in your work?

In 2005, I released a song called 'It's Not Easy Being Easy' and the lyrics went "Berlinton is going down" – so naff (laughs). I came up with that song when the first *Popkomm* [a yearly conference for the music and entertainment industry] was on and all the big record companies were hyping up Berlin as the new place-to-be, with a lively underground culture. That's when it became clear to me – even clearer than when I painted 'The New Berlin' – that the final step had been taken,



ACTUALLY THIS WAS IN 2004



IT WASN'T MY BEST IDEA TO TAKE MY PORTRAIT IN FRONT OF THIS TEGEL SKYSCRAPER. THE ONLY WAY

MAKES ME LOOK LIKE A GRUMPY OLD DOORMAN

“The art market is much worse now than it was 20 years ago. But my attitude towards it hasn't changed.”

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and that what I and my scene stood for was now just some kind of colourful background on which to build a career or a business. I just wanted to piss them off, that's why I made this song (laughs). But then people from the scene started attacking me, saying that I was disparaging Berlin. The feedback was pretty much: "If you don't like it, then go".

And you did. What was that like to move to New York in 2005? I thought I was done with Berlin, I left with a feeling of bitterness. I actually had a great time in New York. People had those prejudices about New York that it was all about making money, but it wasn't like that at all. In fact, Brooklyn was like Kreuzberg back then, I felt like I fit in there and ended up staying. I did exhibitions and started

I had always kept a small flat here, to have one foot in the Berlin door, so to speak. But I was convinced that I'd only be here for half a year and then go somewhere else.

Having to come back felt like I failed to make it as an artist. A few journalists did actually ask, "Didn't make it in the US, did you?", but I think it's mainly how I saw myself. It was also during this time that I understood that I didn't want to climb the ladder of success at any price, that I just wanted to live. I think, above all, I found myself again, and I refined my style a lot.

Would you say you needed New York in order to appreciate Berlin again, or do you think the city also changed during the time you were gone? Both. When I came back, I realised that Berlin has a special energy. An energy that I like and that I've never found anywhere else in Germany or really anywhere in the world. I also noticed that in 2012 there were many more young people from all over that were moving here. And they didn't come because they thought they would make it big here; they came because they were looking for this "crazy life" that we'd lived in the 1990s. I realised that there were still a whole lot of small, illegal bars and underground clubs and people who were just doing amazing things and didn't give a shit whether they made money from it or not.

Berlin was also attractive for its music and clubs, the techno scene, Berghain...? When I came back the big techno boom

of the 2000s was over and there wasn't much going on in Berlin anymore, in terms of music. What is Berlin known for now? Rammstein, maybe, or Berghain, but those are actual fossils, they're institutions. I don't mean that in a negative way at all, but when you think about all the mad and small things that got world fame in the late 1990s or the first half of the noughties - it's unbelievable! That time is over. But it also has to be over, because every heyday only lasts a few years. In the end, you have to be thankful to have been a part of it. But to be fair, I'm seeing a lot of people nowadays trying out great things. It's very possible that a heyday like this will come again.

Berlin has changed. Do you think your art has changed over the last 20 years? There are a lot of new topics, but my *handwriting* hasn't changed really. To a writer, you wouldn't say, "You're still writing in German?!", but rather: "Oh, you're interested in this topic now," and that's how I see myself, as a writer. Of course, content-wise, there are many things in my paintings now that I didn't paint 20 years ago, such as smartphones or what digitalisation and social networks do to people. I also think that the public's perception of me as an artist has changed. Back in the day, I was viewed as the happy-go-lucky painter because all that

people saw and expected were bright colours and cartoon characters. Today, I think, people appreciate me as a social critic who comments on what he sees with pictures rather than words. I really like that.

You've never played by the art market's rules, auctioning off your artworks at quiz events and cutting up big paintings to give the pieces away for free. You referred to it as "gentle destruction" in a past interview... It's not so much about "destruction" as it is about creating an image, showing it and then taking the value away again. The idea remains, so to speak, only the value is no longer there. It is ultimately an eternal, gentle criticism of the art market. I just want to show that nothing is painted, at least not by me, to create value. For me art is information, communication, exchange, stimulation.

Do you think that you can change the rules at play on the art market? Nope. To be honest, the art market is much worse now than it was 20 years ago. But my attitude towards it hasn't changed. Of course, I also exhibit in galleries and rely on selling paintings now and again. But in the end, society almost always defines the value of a work of art by its price: How much does an artist sell for? Aha, very expensive, then he must be a good or important artist. Cheap? Then he can't really be any good. As long as I live, I'll try to show that there are other ways...even though I realise that neither the artists nor society seem to have much interest in going down that path!

In your 2003 interview with EXB, you said you "stand somewhere in a vacuum between the mainstream and the underground". Does that still hold true? Yes. I mean, you can never say so definitively, because it might change entirely in five years, but I think I can surf both oceans without feeling like I am selling my soul or that I can no longer pay my rent. Many customers from the mainstream world now understand my attitude quite well and the galleries I work with also know that I might choose to do my next exhibit in an underground club, where the paintings will go

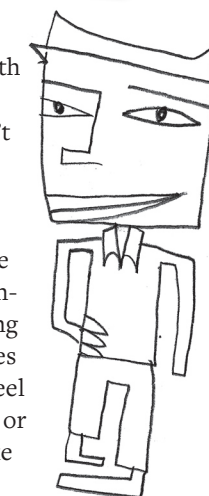
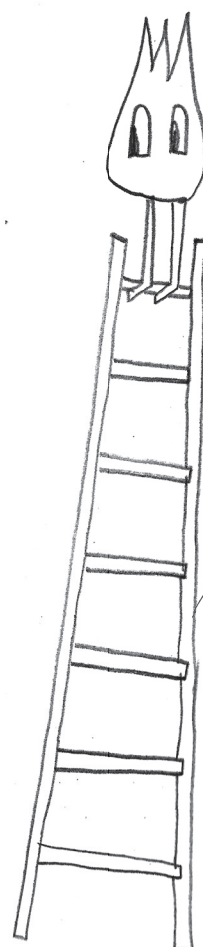


Since illustrating *Exberliner's* very first cover in 2002, Jim Avignon has been one of the magazine's signature artists.

for €40. Compared to other artists, my expensive paintings are still very cheap. But I'm not under contract with any gallery, and they all know that I give art away for free or that I put up paintings in a friend's bar where they just won't cost much, because I know that some people really have to think about whether they can spend €50 just like that.

Do you know other artists who do it that way? To be honest, I actually don't know anyone who would even be interested in living like that. I think a lot of people are waiting for the day when they finally arrive in the big, great galleries and can stop bothering with all that other shit. But I just feel so comfortable in an underground café or on a small stage or somewhere where nothing is right and nothing works. I like that. That's where I'm at home. ■

Avignon will be at **EXB's 20th anniversary party** at Zenner on 18 June where he will do one of his legendary live paintings.



Paula Ragucci

“ Between 2001 and 2005, I could watch myself becoming a living anachronism, a relic of the 1990s. One that was appreciated for reminding everyone of the good times but who wasn't expected to produce anything relevant anymore.

THE BIGGEST ONE I EVER DID, 70 M LONG, 1,6 M HIGH

painting murals. My gallery in Bushwick [Brooklyn] told me "Your style just begs to be painted on walls," and I realised that was something I really enjoyed doing. In 2011, I painted a panorama of my view of the USA, a huge societal portrait. I think that was my breakthrough; that's when I started getting requests from all over the world.

Sounds like you were having a blast. Why did you return to Berlin? I did a few nice trips, too many and got ~~like~~ out, that's why (laughs). But when I came back to Berlin in 2012 with my New York-glasses on, I thought it was much more lively and likeable than the Berlin I left in 2005.

YOU DON'T WANNA KNOW