

## **From the essay L'esprit du mur by Elke Schulze, Berlin**

### **L'esprit du mur**

#### **On the wall images of the French artists Geza and Chérif**

"I'm all for disorder, for not trapping art, not for cutting it off from the rest of the world. I want a painting that smells of decoration, paint, road signs, posters, footprints in the ground. The same ground where art itself grew." Jean Dubuffet

#### **The Ways: Roads, Walls, Façades**

Even Leonardo da Vinci recommended to use façades marked by time, stains and layers of filth as a source of inexhaustible inspiration where one could grasp chimeras of any type and shape. (...) 500 years after Leonardo, Dubuffet also claims the eruption of the road in the creative act. ...

Messages on the walls are ephemeral, both ordinary and funny, impressive and deceptive, anonymous and public.

With their concept of esprit du mur, the Franco-German artists Geza and Chérif weave an imaginary line from which they isolate their artistic creed. In their hands, advertising messages become aesthetic material that – in the shape of a wall – can absorb any kind of signs and traces in the free creative act. Together – sometimes outdoors, other times in their studio – they create large areas using billboards as the processing background they cover in a spontaneous, collective process of symbols and texts to produce the pictorial layers. ...

We are dealing with a lone voice, as it was with Leonardo, Basquiat, Warhol and Beuys. ... For the sake of completeness we should also name the artists who, with the technique of décollage, used thick layers of posters pasted on the walls as pictorial material. Unlike the aseptic and perfect surfaces of abstract or Surrealist images, they try to add something new: the element of everyday life and of the streets. ...

Geza and Chérif enact a kind of seductive inner aesthetics which they named esprit du mur; it is made of advertising relics, and by painting on existing mural figures. Similarly, they change the communication potential of advertising; they taint it and compare it with the traces of everyday life. They create their own universe of images through contact that allows to catch a glimpse of both the archaic cave drawings of Niaux and the scribble on a wall ("You're an idiot!"), as well as graffiti.

These artists accept to be influenced by the ruins of the Berlin Wall and the archaist graffiti in the big cities. The image of the Berlin Wall, once the border among countries given to ultraconservative policy, is shot several times and becomes a true Janus figure: the symbol of division, a wound in the city, but also a space of freedom.

#### **Images for Four Hands**

Although in their work there is the noise of the big city and their projects are site-specific, these two artists live and work away from the urban environment, in an abandoned factory in France. ....

But even if goats and geese roam all around the factory is not an innocent idyll.

It's a Noah's ark run aground we are facing; a shell travelling to the depths. The factory has no heating; its lack of comfort and luxury is compensated by an existence of fullness and reflection.

Prior to their meeting at the Salon des Indépendants in Paris, Geza Jäger (1974) and Chérif Zerdoumi (1958) were actively involved in several art fields. Chérif run a gallery specializing in art and antiques, while continuing to practice painting and sculpture. Among other disciplines, Geza studied history of art, cultural and intercultural sciences, while working also as singer and performer. Since 2003 the duo has lived and worked in a factory in Boissezon, where they have a working space of about 3000 square meters. Here, they have managed to cram some 80,000 advertising posters dating from 1978 to 1990, which they use as artistic material.

The posters are applied on large frames and freely covered with colours and phrases, thus becoming pictorial signs. ...

Geza and Chérif call themselves researchers of traces; they collect elementary human lives, passions symbolic of life and death, which turn into creative expression. They connect the traces of their world of images linked to memory with waste and visual remains of rampant consumerism, thus creating new forms. These two artistes do not follow any specific plan; rather they always try to start a dialogue with new sediments and tangles of images.

Geza and Chérif understand the principle of collective work as the very expression of l'esprit du mur; heir art originates from free collective gestures. Away from the concept of the solitary creator ("artist-god"), the duo defines its work "wall fragments" wrecks that, once combined, create an imaginary wal. ...

The collective creation of a painting, however, does not reset the individuality of the artists; on the contrary, when compared to the sum of their two artistic temperaments, it emerges even more visibly in the creative process. Working with images is both demanding and fulfilling; it also gives rise to accidents and moments of seduction, until it takes the form desired by the artists, reaching a "plastic llevel, inside the very idea of work". ...

Not different from the dialogue started by Andy Warhol with Basquiat. A relationship Keith Haring defined of a "third mind"...

Similarly, Geza and Chérif describe themselves as "an artist with two heads". Up to now they have created the series esprit du mur (2003) and les rues (2004), in Berlin; the works are collage and mural painting and will be presented this year in Leipzig, at the History Museum, along with other works.

## **The Stray Dog, Death and KRM**

... Each piece is considered by these artists as a single fragment of a specific image, but, by adding the different fragments one can feel the rhythm of the esprit du mur universe.

The esprit du mur et de la rue is the source of inspiration of specific topics and motifs; ...

Recent works is the series entitled "les rues" describe both private and collective traumas, violent experiences, articulating elementary anxieties in an exalted representation. Streets become the scene of constant danger, taking us by the throat and showing the horror of a civilized world in the abyss.

Here we meet again death and wandering from one image to the other, in its danse macabre. It speaks a different language than the stray dog, insolent and joyous in its roaming,

zigzagging the images of 2003. In the grey-black world of the streets it becomes an ephemeral, fleeting presence; it is transformed into a ghost. While remembering the anarchy in the streets throbbing with life, death becomes the looming witness of the cruelty and faceless horror of this world; vague and impotent it wanders in the bleak scenario the dark images have built.

...

The colour layer is a sad scraped coating reminiscent of walls darkened by smoke. Occasionally, red ochre manages to make their way in the dusty grey, similar to the air after the rain in Pompeii. The pigment layer and colour of the wall become one; a single surface covered with scratches, wounds, scars, stigmata, a face without eyes seen sideways as it is trying to hide. The walls of these streets have exertion as the archetype of bitterness.

Also the urban landscapes in the previous series, however, show resemblances to the states of the soul. In a wild whirlwind of appearances, disappearances and reappearances, a public discussion approaches and the image of the wall becomes the arena of a non-hierarchical speech. In such an organization, images are, too, involved in the contrast of dynamic cryptic signs.

Deliberately “naughty” actions create an important image in the series: the motif of the stray dog. It roams the streets incessantly following the mysterious roads and tracks left behind by itself. ... A graphic sign the artists create with stencil accompanies its muzzle: KRM. Instead of a signature, a travelling ghost and a spirit of reunited streets...

The wall images of Geza and Chérif aestheticize the signs of consumer society to make them icons; but they should neither be read as graffiti, or devoid of the subversive charge of the past. With their concept of the esprit du mur, these artists make up a creative flow adhering to urban identities, to the objects and sensations of the world...

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