

**Walter Seidl, Do it with Obsession! – Three examples of (young) contemporary art practices, pH – new international illustrated edition on contemporary art, Issue 2, 2003**

“Young, gifted and skint,” this expression is not only the title of a track on the album *No Rest for the Wicked*, which the British rock group New Model Army released in the mid 1980s, but also corresponds with the fate of many young artists who try to win a scholarship or a gallery show in order to sell some of their work. In the song, however, the British idiom *skint*, an equivalent for being broke, denotes the dilemma of those who have to survive in an economically deregulated world, where the gap between the rich and the poor constantly grows, and where the monopolies of power lie in the hands of a limited number of so-called “global players.” The onslaught of this neoliberal movement took place in the 1980s, when bands such as New Model Army tried to fight against the social injustice inflicted upon the British population under the phenomenon called Thatcherism, leading to the result that their songs were banned from the play lists of radio stations or that the band was even denied touring the USA. With her devoted friend, the president-actor of the United States, Margaret Thatcher and her colleagues set the standards for company privatization and thus for the hegemonic forces of economic globalization, introducing a number of right-wing politics, which seemed to loosen in the 1990s but have increased more than ever at the beginning of the 21st century. The eighties, however, have also been the time when a number of young British artists appeared on the scene with the meanwhile legendary “Freeze” show of 1988, which was curated by Damien Hirst. Almost a decade later, the works of these and other artists of their generation had been collected by advertising mogul Charles Saatchi and traveled Europe and the US under the title “Sensation. Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection.” Although no longer really young on a biological level, with the exception of artists such as Richard Billingham or Darren Almond, the show reflected the status of the young and successful, who, by then, were no longer in dire straits but had already become major figures in the international art world. In terms of the shockingness with which the imagery of their works has prevailed over the years, “No Rest for the Wicked” could be a wisecracking slogan applied to these artists by the non-complicit outside observer. Hence, their art could still be labeled “young.” From a more critical perspective, “No Rest for the Wicked” would rather be appropriated and conferred upon the figureheads of our global and political industries, who do not accept a praxis of life deviating from their political, economic and moral agenda. This is where art comes into play. Whoever has come of age in the 1980s and thereafter, experienced the ambivalence with which art practices intervene and/or participate in the existing political realm and the rhizomatic art market structures, which have spread from the New York art scene in the 1980s to the entire western or western-oriented hemisphere. How is it possible for today’s artists to enter the hard-to-unravel entanglement of synopses and loopholes of the artistic arena and at the same time claim the position of being young? Could it be the age limit set by scholarship application forms, which is usually the age of 35, or rather a never-ending sense of wickedness which keeps the artistic and reflexive potential alive? The following text will present three examples of artists who are considered “young” according to most application criteria, but whose artistic agenda either confronts, submerges or plays with the outcomes of the present political and social realities. Considering the turmoil which has been caused around the meetings of the international World Trade Organization in Seattle, the IMF and World Bank in Prague, or the G8 in Genoa, there has been an increased reflection of the anti-global and anti-capitalist battles, which have been taken up by artists around the globe, such as the documenta XI participants Allan Sekula or Lisl Ponger. In Austria, there happened to be the summit of the World Economic Forum in the picturesque city of Salzburg on July 1, 2001. The Sound of Music, which this city is famous for especially among American visitors, had to give way to the drumming sounds of the police forces in Robocop uniforms, who encircled and captured the peaceful demonstrators for several hours without letting them eat, drink, or pee. The Austrian artist Oliver Ressler captured this event, and with additional footage and the comments of some of

the protestors, created the esthetically and psychologically moving video *This is what democracy looks like!*, blending the physical body and the body of power with scrutinizing density. This not only led to the video's showing in several video festivals, cinemas and TV programs throughout Europe but also to Ressler's winning the media prize by the ZKM in Karlsruhe. Now, at the first height of his success, when it can no longer be claimed that Ressler could not live from his art, would he automatically be disqualified from producing young art? As with the young Brits, there are no biological criteria to measure art, rather the status with which a sense of wickedness and contemporaneity prevails throughout artistic practices. This is also what saved Ressler from the conservative painting classes at the art university and almost made him fail with his graduation piece consisting of a text-based video installation on ecological issues. Ressler's latest video in collaboration with the Italian writer Dario Azzellini again confronts the issue of civil disobedience, as seen in the Italian anti-capitalist demonstration unit "Disobbedienti," which evolved out of the Tute Bianche and played a major role in the demonstrations at the Genoa G8 summit in 2001. Here, the same old question, which the American Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau posed in his famous essay *Resistance to Civil Government* more than 150 years ago, is still at stake: "Is a democracy, such as we know it, the last improvement possible in government? [or] Is it not possible to take one step further towards recognizing and organizing the rights of man?"

Individuals in our society, which, in a Freudian sense, emanate from early childhood experience, can be seen in the work of St. Petersburg-born and Vienna-based artist Anna Jermolaewa. With her cunning sexualization of the everyday, Jermolaewa leads us into the world of desires, which make the absurd, obscene, or hidden look normal. Revealing our inner drives in a wicked game of corporeal objectification, Jermolaewa's swift and capturing video loops always obtain a very fresh and thus "young" quality. Just take her graduation piece from 2002, *Flower Bed*, where a woman's hand takes a watering can to sprinkle the genital zones of male bodies, whose penises suddenly become erect and thus grow like the flowers in the backyard. This interference between natural and physical phenomena shows an affinity to the genre of Russian ultra-short films and makes critics like Joshua Decker see Jermolaewa as a kind of "(postmodern) Russian philosophical prankster."<sup>2</sup> Although having graduated quite recently, Jermolaewa's first work at the academy, *Hendl Triptych*, from 1998 found immediate response by curator Harald Szeemann and was presented in his *Appertutto* show at the Venice Biennial of 1999. In *Shooting* (2001), Jermolaewa directly aims at her first video camera with a gun in order to stimulate the desire to give up things past and enter new fields of artistic practice. The double projections show Jermolaewa with headgear and stretched out arms, until she pulls the trigger, while the projection to the side shows the camera upon being destroyed. Here, we are dealing with a form of desire which entails a certain kind of loss. In a Lacanian sense, desire is constituted with the entry into the world of language and a loss of the previous state, the so-called imaginary order, in which the subject primarily relates to the world of objects. The loss of the video camera as the most important device for Jermolaewa's artistic practice, however, does not keep her from returning to the stage, where objects and especially toys are meant to achieve some kind of wish-fulfillment. Oscillating between childhood connotations and their reverberations in adult sexual desire makes Jermolaewa constantly go back and forth between the stages of psychological development, thus allowing *No Rest for the Wicked*. The exploration of the psyche and its functioning within economic constellations is explored by Bulgaria-born and Berlin-based artist Plamen Dejanoff. While Ressler overtly criticizes the malfunctioning of economic globalization efforts, Dejanoff skillfully intervenes into the structures of global enterprises, which can be seen as a subtle undermining of social and economic mechanisms as well as a successful play with the rules set by those entrepreneurs who are willing to deal with art. Transforming the output of today's capitalist and artistic production, Dejanoff's graduation piece, for example, consisted of a picture bought from Austrian artist Heimo Zobernig, who currently has a major retrospective at the Viennese Museum of Modern Arts. Using his own labor force to earn money and buy art and design objects or letting institutions buy the space allotted to him in galleries was Plamen Dejanov's and Svetlana Heger's strategy during their common artistic work, leading to the fact that BMW offered the duo a Z3 roadster to Test the

World. Now, Dejanoff went one step further in advertising his Berlin home and studio in a building complex for fashion and advertising companies in magazines such as Flash Art. With the logo of his name and the coordinates in the photos, he entered a sponsoring deal with the owner of the building to position himself as an artist within the global network of company advertising and the inherent economic relations. Looking at the three artists and their strategic methods to approach the art and capital markets of today, each of them has their own reflexive potential that may differ from the others, yet their success as young and emerging artists on an international scale cannot be denied. Although they are all about the same age, it is not their youngness which characterizes their art, but a sense of wickedness that makes them zealously pursue their goals in a time of con-spatial and contemporaneous expression.