

FLUXUS IN COLOR AND PLENTY OF LIGHT

"When too perfect, liebe Gott böse" Nam June Paik

Welcome in Bethang

Actually, if you wanted to, you could call Bethang also Nürthen. This would sound and look more familiar to us. But this effect of strangeness is of course intended and well calculated. This strangeness is part of Karsten Neumann's paradoxical mind -expanding techniques which he likes to use for doing one thing without leaving the other out: i.e., to paint without touching a brush or colour, creating new forms of art by submitting oneself to strict rules of recycling, think global and still fight the local jungle war with regional authorities, spanning an utopian globe and dragging oneself through the everyday suburban slut.,.

To put it short: Karsten Neumann brings together things that seem disparate but belong together and, thereby, often resists any attempt to document comments about him in written form. It is almost impossible to write about him in a coherent and structured way. But then, what is more challenging than to attempt the impossible?

What you always wanted to know about Bethang

What is Bethang? The artist's manifest defines it as follows:

„When you are in one of these cities nürnBERg, fürTH or erLANGen , you are in the middle of bethang because bethang is the fusion of the three cities..

Bethang is an urban utopia and a project of concept art.

So, it is an utopical vision that affects a local patriot either on a heart - warming or anger- evoking level. It would probably be appealing to one or the other city official in Munich, Berlin or Brussels: Tri-City! What a cost reduction program! What could be left out and reduced! What synergies could be obtained!

Indeed there have been such city- fusions in Germany and elsewhere in Europe but most of them failed because of protests by local patriots who saw their identity disappear (remember the fusion of Gießen and Wetzlar to Lahn in the late seventies). This occurred on January 1, 1977 – But – due to massive public protest – lasted only until July 31, 1979 . Thereafter, almost everything was reversed to the old state.

On a global level we can watch the phenomenon of Mega Cities like Sao Paolo or Mexico City or Singapore which led to the development of theories about these molochs. Hardly anybody, however, can find too many favourable aspects in these cities, not even the wildest urbanists. So, why is

Neumann then saying : Go to Bethang?

And which routes lead us there? Bethang seems to be everywhere. Especially when you consider the surprising global implications. Even though, Bethang is an existing geographical reality – in contrast to the exterritorial state of the artist group NSK, i.e. – it appears on postcards from all kind of countries which carry the imprint of the official Bethang - logo. These postcards do not only come from different historical areas, sometimes from earlier decades, they also show on their front side motives from Berlin, Lake Constance, the Lascaux caves or from Kappadokia.

Neumann is not so much interested in the creation of an urban mega structure but rather in the stretching, widening and perforation of existing boundaries within the social framework of a city .In his imagination, a changed place also becomes a place for change .This is the reason why we should: Go to Bethang! Because change is absolutely necessary. Not in the future and not somewhere else but right here and now!.

And this is the focus point where all artistic interventions of Karsten Neumann start. There is, on one hand, the shrewd and humorous line of proof that leads to the conclusion that Bethang is already existing .On the other hand, there is his radically different artistic approach which never ends up in market conforming or museum-like products of art.,

Self Assertion

That Bethang already exists in contrary to Bielefeld for example remains fact without doubt. For, how can such an abstract community which represents a larger city (in contrast to an easily accessible and experiential villages) assure its existence?

On one hand, there are the insignia of power, which constitute something like a corporate identity, emblems of sovereigns. In traditional heraldic forms these emblems were represented by flags and coats of arms, which attempted to mark every public property and decorate each public event.

On the other hand, by all means of self assertion in written form thus providing a name for the city which will be exclaimed, written and distributed by as many as possible and as often as possible and thereby assures that it is aligned inseparably from the city. In the case of a new installment, regardless whether it is a test-tube city or a city of sovereign residence or whether it is a forced renaming as an adaption to new circumstances (what happened to be the former name of Chemnitz or St. Petersburg?) the normally slow evolving process of anchoring the identity has to be speeded up in public awareness. This happens by an enduring process where the name is – similar to brand names in advertising – recklessly launched and relentlessly repeated over and over again.

This does not only apply to Leningrad and Karl-Marx-Stadt, but also to Bethang. Because of that Karsten Neumann has made a bundle of photos (in the chic style of digital photography, rather designed than developed), which provide lasting evidence that Bethang actually seems to exist. There is a picture of city hall by night, public advertisement posters and numerous city signs of Bethang, signs on railroad platforms, new street names, freeway signs and signposts which point the

way to Bethang,.

The routes are not leading to Erlangen, Fürth and Nürnberg anymore but rather to, Bethang North, West or to the Southsoutring. And may those be silent who say that this is not a proper name – giving that there is after all an area in Germany officially titled Eastwestphalia.

The only remarkable difference from the usual appearance of these signs are the colours, instead of blue, white or yellow they show a shocking green or pink. Thereby, Neumann is undermining the plausibility that he had created before with great effort, which one may regret.. Rather he presents the launching of a not yet existing project called Bethang, looking into the future where everything will be different and this applies to the colour of street signs as well.

About Traffic – A Short Introduction to Signs

Let us stay awhile with the topic of street traffic.: There is a complete banning of new cars in the planning for Bethang.. The old ones – already in use – may be driven in the mean time until their time has passed.. But since there are binding rules for necessary repair work which allow changes on the body of the car only in colours other than the original, the flow of traffic in Bethang will soon change into a steam of colourful rusty vehicles.. This esthetical enrichment of the city streets has already been envisioned by Neumann in some pictures..

The gradual elimination of noise and fine-dust-soot-particles and CO₂-pollution is almost a winner nowadays with most people but it will still take awhile before the time has come. For the time until then, Bethang is already possessing an own license plate., two different ones to be precise. It is still not decided which one will be the series product. However, that a license plate is an especially suitable instrument for branding your area in a car-crazy society is evident. And it is always a political issue.

Let me refer again to the story about the city of Lahn, which – as long as it existed –was bestowed with the license plate identification „L“ which was interpreted as a de – facto recognition of a divided Germany. One must know that the “L” had been reserved for Leipzig in the case of German reunification, In the meantime Leipzig has received it..

A similar confusion is not expected for „BTG“ – also not with the the kyrilian „B“ as in the second version. But again there is some potential provocation in this.

Another similar prototype character - like the license plates who will not really become a series product yet but only exist in mini – edition of three pieces – is the telephone book of Bethang – still a beginning has been made.

In official terms it could turn out to be even more important for Bethang's existence that there is already a correspondence with public servants, e.g. in Nürnberg, which deals with the regrettable water quality – which makes swimming impossible- in the rivers of Bethang..

This rich bouquet of indicators aside, there is a proof for Bethang's existence which has been spread widely, already: the city's coat of arms, which, due to its strange form should rather be called „logo“. In

its complete form it is round and shows on its poisonous green ground the outline of the city Bethang as a shrieking pink area, accompanied by three small squiggles the same colour which could – under other colour constellations – provoke reminiscences of the blind's three spots on yellow. But in reality they are just a finger - point to the three former existences of the capital city of Bethang.

This totally non - heraldic coat of arms decorates literally everything that Karsten Neumann is producing or exhibiting. Most of the time in form of a stamp, as an outline with a blue tone or more spread – out in neon - orange. Together with “Ka I eN” and the date of the year according to the Bethang calendar in pointed brackets it serves as a signature for the artist..

No Lo Go?

This signature is of course especially important when an object from the artists hand leaves the house. In Neumann's case his most traditional works like the hubcap – paintings or the unisex ornaments jewelry carry this signature only hidden or – if there is no room – not at all. The importance of this coat-of-arms-stamp-signature is far more relevant for another group of works :

One of the most essential artistic strategies of Neumann is his concept of „direct recycling“. He takes on simple found objects and declares them to art. This means that his objets trouvés do not necessarily have a value due to rarity or freakiness, neither do they possess as a particular esthetical charm as it is assumed for other objects referred to in art history (e.g. Picasso's bicycle handle and saddle). It could be simple material like buttons, screws or paper – clips. These will sometimes be sorted in small bags but always will a cardboard piece be attached that carries besides the signature a commentary which defines the object to a certain work category: It could be a mere foundobject, then it is simply “found in Bethang“, or it is a repaired found – object , then it is „reparé à Bethang“, or if turns out to be changed in practical function, then the object gets the label „Direktrecycelt in Bethang“.

Especially interesting is the group of those objects which have been batched by Neumann under „No-Logo“ form : Here he has taken off, tore off, painted over or erased brand names, company logos and the like from found – objects. But this connotation “No –Logo” is a pure case of label fraud. For, the ballpoint pen or plastic cup may not be a carrier for a certain company's advertisement (and thereby simultaneously a statement against cult status brands in the progressing capitalism) – but it receives promptly a new logo, remarkably the Bethang logo and will therefore be embodied in the artistic cosmos of Karsten Neumann.

That this is a close relative to Fluxus und and all its elements – thereby deeply rooted in the sixties – becomes immediately evident on the esthetical level when you force yourself to forget the shrieking colours of our plastic era. The hand - packed, stamped, and written-on „nothings“ packed in small packages, bags or boxes of the Fluxists look very much alike to the found-objects of Bethang, very often, however quite dark - white - gray, at least in the catalogues and publications about them but often also in the original.

This just for clarification. More important is certainly the mental attitude towards Fluxus, to artists like the early Nam June Paik or Robert Filliou, whose work categories reach one step further into basics. Because in the case of Filliou the alternatives are: „bien fait“, „mal fait“ and „pas fait“, good, bad or not made at all – and everything can be a work, especially the ones only thought of which were never made..

Mental closeness becomes evident on yet another level.. Without dwelling on this further in this context it should be mentioned that one of Neumann's moving forces for his artistic practice is the buddha term of „Awareness“ towards everything, which also includes the so-called minor things

No Lego – Social Plastic!

This mentality also becomes obvious in his more free – stylish works which have to be called “handmade in Bethang“ or even “painted in Bethang“, Where, as already mentioned, Neumann's idea of painting corresponds strongly to that of Kurt Schwitters, who wrote: „material is most of all sausage“ which means “material doesn't matter at all” in order to integrate in his pictures all possible and impossible found – objects. Neumann limits himself to the found – objects and leaves canvas, frame, colour and brush aside in the first place. Thereby, he makes use of the unbelievable diversity of our everyday waste from affluence, favours the neon colour tones which are especially shrill. From the point of view of art history this can be subscribed to the psychedelic eruptions of the late sixties as well as Rupprecht Geiger or the Neo-Geo abstracts of the eighties.

In the end according to the motto “somebody has to screw things together that do not belong together“ Neumann is following a maxim of radical Bricolage. This has technical – practical reasons: since many synthetics can not be glued or with great effort only they need to be screwed together to make them stick together.

This can result in a colourful mixture, strange creatures like the multi – tailed blue shark, who however is not called like that but rather „the circus comes to town“ (a title which only tells us something when we know that once there were circus posters hanging on the integrated cable binders). Or crude agglomerations like the three self – made pink light-boxes with Bethang – logo, including a transformer for model railway trains and colourful wire tangles. Sometimes pure beauty slips in almost unintentionally when yellow or green plastic remains (probably half – bottles) turn into a lampshade or a bouquet of flowers - well out of what, actually?

And sometimes: pure poetry!

Karsten Neumann creates strange light objects from used canisters for water, gasoline or even more poisonous substances and an electric chain of light bulbs as it is used for shopping window decoration, party lighting or the electrical mutilation of Christmas trees.. He punches holes in the

canister and puts the little light bulbs from outside into the interior of the container so that the tangled – up wire remains as a black network but the light shines through the in– to the outside muffled and softened by the plastic.. This inner light does not necessarily indicate an enlightenment, lighting is enough, but beside the surprisingly poetic visual effect there stands the idea that you can fill something immaterial like light into a gas canister and carry it with you all the time to pour it out in drops or litres if there is need for enlightenment. And the need is definitely there.

Stephan Trescher