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# HYPERALLERGIC

*The Twilight States of Jonathan Meese*

By Natalie Haddad

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Jonathan Meese, "Untitled" (2006), acrylic on printed paper, 8 x 11 3/4 inches (© Jonathan Meese, courtesy Jonathan Meese, photo by Jan Bauer)

Since the early 2000s, Jonathan Meese, who is based in Hamburg and Berlin, has cultivated a persona as a propagandist for what he calls the Dictatorship of Art.

The last time that New York saw Jonathan Meese, it was in 2011, for a show at Bortolami Gallery titled *Hot Earl Green Sausage Tea Barbie (First Flush)* and an opening-night performance, *War "Saint Just (First Flash)"*. For the performance, Meese — a striking figure with long black hair and a thick beard, a black leather overcoat cloaking his signature Adidas tracksuit — preached the doctrine of his Dictatorship of Art in urgent, piercing English and German. After the crowd dispersed, what remained of the spectacle looked like a DIY film set for an intergalactic battle between James Bond, the Nazis, and some mutant-alien femme fatales.

For *Jonathan Meese: Dr. Trans-Form-Erz*, the artist's first exhibition at the David Nolan Gallery, Meese's self-made world is this time contained within a relatively streamlined installation, one that offers the viewer an opportunity that can be hard to come by in his practice: unmediated contact with the

imagery, with attention given to the artist as a painter and collagist whose work has developed over time.



Installation view of "Jonathan Meese: DR. TRANS-FORM-ERZ" (October 27 – December 17, 2016), David Nolan Gallery, New York (courtesy David Nolan Gallery, New York, photo by Stan Narten)

The exhibition is primarily a survey of collage-drawings, starting with the early 1990s, when Meese was a student at the Hochschule für bildende Künste in Hamburg, and ending in 2016. There are also a few paintings (the most recent fixated on John Wayne) and mixed-media sculptures, as well as the artist's sketchbooks displayed in light tables. The closest the exhibition comes to the sensory chaos of Meese's performances and installations is a complete room, covered from floor to ceiling in artwork, constructed in the gallery's second-floor landing.

Since the early 2000s, Meese, who is based in Hamburg and Berlin, has cultivated a persona as a propagandist for what he calls the Dictatorship of Art — his philosophy of art as a self-generated and amoral libidinal flow independent of ideological structures — mounting performances like the one at Bortolami throughout the world. Accompanying his performances are paintings, collage-drawings and sculptures merging pop cultural and historical figures (and photos of himself) with political manifestos and his own, often untranslatable or German-English neologisms. Stylistically, the paintings, especially, owe a debt to the German Neo-Expressionists of the 1980s, such as Albert Oehlen (with whom Meese has collaborated), Jörg Immendorf, and Martin Kippenberger. An untitled painting on a photocopy of a man with a red face in a chartreuse suit recalls the lurid colors and faux-naivete of these artists' paintings, as does Meese's send-up of decorum and good taste. In another work, titled "Erzmarshall II" (2016) and emblazoned with the name John Wayne in thick green paint, Meese paints the gun-toting icon as if he's melting into a golden blob.



Jonathan Meese, "ERZMARSHALL II" (2016), acrylic on paper, 19 x 14 1/8 inches (© Jonathan Meese, courtesy Jonathan Meese, photo by Jan Bauer)

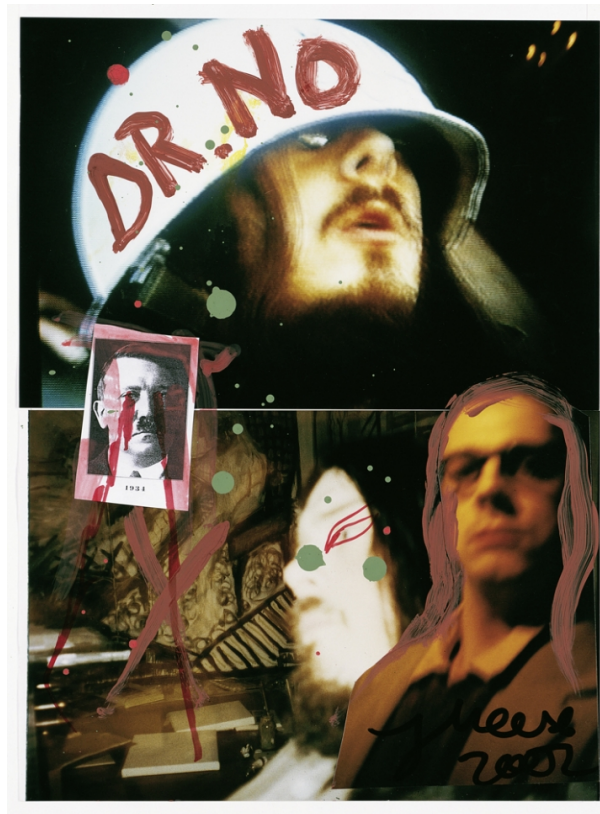
Yet, unlike Oehlen, whose craft is dedicated to the complexities of paint, or Kippenberger, who had no stable medium or persona, Meese's style across a range of media is directed toward the artist's overarching project of the Dictatorship of Art; his oeuvre as a whole is very much a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In the drawings that comprise most of the exhibition, almost all of which include some collaged elements, Neo-Expressionism remains a visual reference point, but conceptually the work favors German Expressionism and Dada.

Meese is partial to thick, heavy lines and angular shapes in his drawings and paintings, both of which are characteristic of German Expressionism, particularly the paintings and woodcuts of such artists as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Erich Heckel. And despite the differences between their eras and aims (the Expressionists were looking to the future with their art, Meese to the past), the Teutonic thrust is palpable in both.

Teutonism has been a thorny issue in Meese's career. Associated with imperialism and fascism as well as the mythology of Richard Wagner — known as much for his anti-Semitism as his music — it has led to charges ranging from Nazism to general bad taste. Meese has claimed political neutrality — it's central to his message of art as a force beyond good and evil — while his over-the-top persona makes a mockery of fascism's anesthetized aesthetic.

But there's a fine line between parody and provocation that is not always exempted by the title of "art," even if the title legally protects the work. In 2013 he was tried in court for making the Nazi salute at an event called "Megalomania in the Art World," organized by a German magazine in Kassel. He was acquitted based on a clause in the German constitution that allows for artistic freedom. In a 2014 interview he defended his act, stating, "in an object there is no ideology, it's a projection." His argument rids the artist of social responsibility, something that is, by its nature, at odds with artistic freedom. It also puts the burden of responsibility on the viewer, implying that he or she chooses (consciously or not) to empower a symbol like a swastika.

Without the theatrics of a performance or a large-scale installation, *Jonathan Meese: Dr. Trans-Form-Erz* gives the viewer ample mental space to consider Meese's argument, showcasing the artist less as the propagandist than as a skilled collagist and colorist who creates ambiguity through his style and juxtapositions. In her thoughtful catalogue essay, Pamela Kort writes of "a kind of 'twilight state' that exists between representation and its dismantlement." A collage that includes, among other things, a pizza, a female model's eyes, and a well-known photograph of a uniformed skeleton from World War I ("Untitled," 2002) exemplifies this twilight state, where incongruent symbols react to one another.



Jonathan Meese, "Die Kapitano-Bligh Serie" (2002), cut-and-pasted photocopy, acrylic, and felt-tipped pen on photo-collage laid on paper, 16 1/2 x 11 3/4 inches (© Jonathan Meese, courtesy Jonathan Meese., photo by Jochen Littkemann)

Although social responsibility can and sometimes should outweigh artistic freedom, little ground is gained by vilifying a collage pairing a photo of Hitler with one of Meese in a helmet bearing the name "Dr. No" ("Die Kapitano-Bligh Serie," 2002) or a cartoon drawing of the German author and decorated World War I veteran Ernst Jünger as a space alien with glowing yellow eyes ("Untitled (Ernst Jünger 1)," 2013). The artist undermines his own provocations in these works through their absurdity and adolescent humor. That figures like Hitler are part of a bricolage of images that includes pop cultural icons like John Wayne and Scarlett Johansson (another Meese favorite) and fictional characters such as the *Clockwork Orange* protagonist Alex de Large, points to another issue that may be more timely, in the United States at least: the collapse of boundaries between politics and celebrity. The phenomenon is not entirely new: Hitler exchanged facts for self-made mythology in his campaign to lead Germany, culminating in 1933. But Meese exposes another level of this entanglement, enabled by the American cult of celebrity.

For his installation, "Fort d'EVOLUTIONSKNOXOZ de ZARDOZEDADADDY 2 (ERZ JOHNNY WAYNE IS DADDY COOLISMEESE)" (2016), Meese immerses the viewer in pop culture images (i.e., Scarlett

Johansson magazine photos, a *Zardoz* movie poster) as well as cut-out photos of body parts (lips — presumably Johansson's— hands, and noses), and black and red graffiti of hearts and penises, along with phrases (i.e., “High Noon”), names (i.e., “John Sinclair”), and Meese-isms (i.e., “Dr. Kunst,” “Sheriffmeeseeldoradoz”). In the center of the room is a small shelving unit holding ceramic figurines of monkeys painted with the names Nero and Zardoz.



Jonathan Meese, “Fort d’EVOLUTIONSKNOXOZ de ZARDOZEDADADDY 2 (ERZ JOHNNY WAYNE IS DADDY COOLISMEESE)” (2016), mixed media installation dimensions variable, overall approximately 7’ 8” x 12’ 9” x 13’ (© Jonathan Meese, courtesy David Nolan Gallery, New York, photo by Stan Narten)

While Meese rejects ideology in favor of a Nietzschean type of amorality, he fetishizes people — real, fictitious, and actors who tread the line between both — who embody ideological positions: not only Hitler and John Wayne, but Alex de Large and Caligula (both Malcolm McDowell characters); iconic Japanese author Yukio Mishima; and the eponymous hero of Wagner’s 1882 opera *Parsifal*. In doing so, Meese forces a confrontation that draws out affinities, if not between the subjects themselves then between those aspects of their lives and personae that fascinate us. More often than not, those aspects emerge from the side of moral ambiguity or darkness: John Wayne’s hyper-masculinity; Mishima’s attempted ultra-nationalist coup d’état and ritual suicide; Wagner’s anti-Semitism as embodied by an opera that ends with the baptism of a Jew. The Nazi party needs no explanation. And today, Isis — a reference to the Egyptian goddess in “Untitled (ISIS-SELF),” a 1999-2000 watercolor of a woman, and other works including the name— has gained a new and destructive meaning that proliferates with the media coverage of each act the terrorist group claims.

In a 2003 *Frieze* review, critic Morgan Falconer refers to Meese’s paintings of warrior-like figures as “accumulations of power.” “It would be wrong,” Falconer writes, “to suggest that Meese is simply spoofing this extravagant mythology: there is simply too much power and persuasiveness in them for that.”

One gets the sense, in *Jonathan Meese: Dr. Trans-Form-Erz*, that the power emanates from the artist's presence in the work. Ultimately, it's Meese's persona — as prophet of the Dictatorship of Art and of history— that prevents the work from “simply spoofing.” In a spectacular untitled work from 2009, mirror images of Meese in a Napoleon hat are at the center of a collage of hands, noses, and Scarlett Johansson's red lips, along with small photos of Meese holding his own (or a fake) penis. The photos are surrounded by doodles of penises and phrases like “Totale Neutralität,” “Kunst ist Totalmetabolismys,” and “Dictatorship of Art”/“Diktatyr der Kunst.”

Jonathan Meese, "Untitled" (2009), acrylic, permanent marker, pen, graphite, and cut-and-pasted printed paper on handmade paper, 41 3/8 x 31 1/8 inches (© Jonathan Meese, courtesy Jonathan Meese, photo by Jan Bauer)

In Germany, where demagogues have exercised real power over human lives, and in the United States, where new demagogues loom, Meese's self-performance forces the viewer to choose sides — between parody and propaganda, between artistic freedom and social responsibility — and to look at ourselves through our perceptions of him.