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# MARTIN KIPPENBERGER

THE PROVOCATIVE GERMAN ARTIST WHO PASSED AWAY A DECADE AGO LIVED LIFE AND PRODUCED ART WITH THE SAME FERVENT INTENSITY. HIS WIDOW, THE PHOTOGRAPHER ELFIE SEMOTAN, REFLECTS ON THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE MOST INTRIGUING MAN IN THE ROOM

Martin Kippenberger was either the best or the worst dinner guest of all time. Anyone foolhardy enough to invite the prematurely legendary German painter over for some cocktails would quickly discover his favorite party trick—a joke involving a turtle. The joke was that there was no joke, just a story that he would draw out as long as possible, until it became clear to everyone in the room that there would be no punch line.

Kippenberger's career played out the same way: silly, serious, intriguing, and frustratingly incomplete. Among a wave of German artists that rose to prominence in the 1980s, Kippenberger stands out as a painter who lived like a performance artist playing a painter. He didn't project the image of a man trapped in his studio, laboring over a canvas. That would be tragically un-fun. So Kippenberger made his public presence a manifestation of his often bafflingly mischievous art.

His widow, the Austrian photographer Elfie Semotan, recalls first meeting him at a birthday banquet for fellow painter Michel Wuhle: "He was surrounded by so many people, entertaining them, telling jokes. He noticed that he was the only person whose picture I hadn't taken, and he came up to me at the end of this three-day feast and asked me why. That was the first time we talked."

Kippenberger began his career as a young, attention-seeking artist and that's more or less how his life and career ended, cut short by cancer at age 44. During his lifetime, Kippenberger never achieved the acclaim he justly deserved, as a true artist's artist engaged in brazenly direct dialogue with art criticism and history. But the scope of his ambition has been made clear with "Martin Kippenberger: The Problem Perspective," which opened at MoCA, Los Angeles last fall and makes its way to MoMA this spring.

The work on display is enticingly audacious. Kippenberger's sculptures, some of the most deliberately goofy objects to ever be produced by a major artist, practically dare you to take them seriously. A more subtle provocation can be found in the odd, deliberate wrongness of his paintings. Fascinating in their variety and in their precisely sloppy execution, they are the work of a young upstart playing at being an old master (or maybe a young master playing at being a provocateur). Kippenberger is an allusive artist, hinting at more than the canvas can contain, and the styles of his paintings are consistently all over the place. The one thing the paintings consistently don't look like is the work of a young German artist.

Semotan remembers another party, this one for Helmut Lang. "Martin observed everybody, and was displeased that nobody knew who he was. He got bored. Suddenly he decided to get up and tell one of his endless turtle jokes. He told the joke in German, not caring if anyone could understand. Nobody did, but that wasn't the point for Martin. He simply wanted to see how long they would pay attention to him. He went on for hours, testing both the crowd's patience and his own limits. People got embarrassed. He had lots of fun."

The tragedy of Kippenberger's early passing is obvious. But if an upside can be found, it's that he was afforded the luxury of a perfect first act without ever risking a Johnny Rotten-on-*The People's Court* late-career awkwardness. For Kippenberger, persona and creation were inseparable, and as he warned his wife, "I have periods of emptiness. In

those times, I can't talk. I just lie around, totally absent." With no audience there, he wasn't there. So instead, he would nap and dream up new provocations, waking to churn out his stunningly prodigious array of work.

While some of those provocations were aggressively taunting, such as purchasing a painting by Gerhard Richter (one of his idols) and using it as a coffee table or sculpting a crucified frog (a work that has supposedly been condemned by the Vatican), it is the subtler aspects of his output that have better stood the test of time. The tricky thing about being a provocateur is that it's just as easy to be a blowhard or a pest. "He had an opinion on everything, and he always expressed it," Semotan says. "For many people this was a deliberate provocation." Which is why it is somewhat surprising to discover how fluently Kippenberger's work speaks for him.

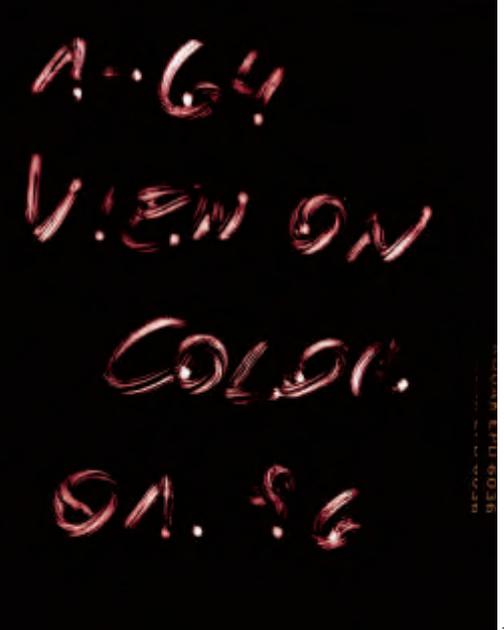
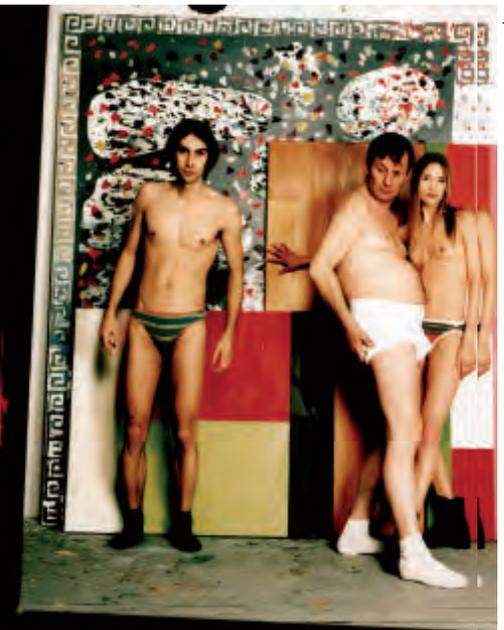
Whether working in one of his Mitteleuropean studios or doodling in a coffee shop while living in Los Angeles, he was a virtuosic technician, fluent in the entire language of 20<sup>th</sup>-century art. Semotan believes that, "You can't separate Martin the man from Martin the artist. He never stopped being an artist. That's how he lived. If he wasn't working on his art he was researching new subjects that intrigued him." Which makes it a bit unfair to focus exclusively on the puckish playfulness in Kippenberger's art and life. Better to also recognize the voracious curiosity displayed by his mastery of so many techniques and his willingness to use all of these tools in order to engage the viewer.

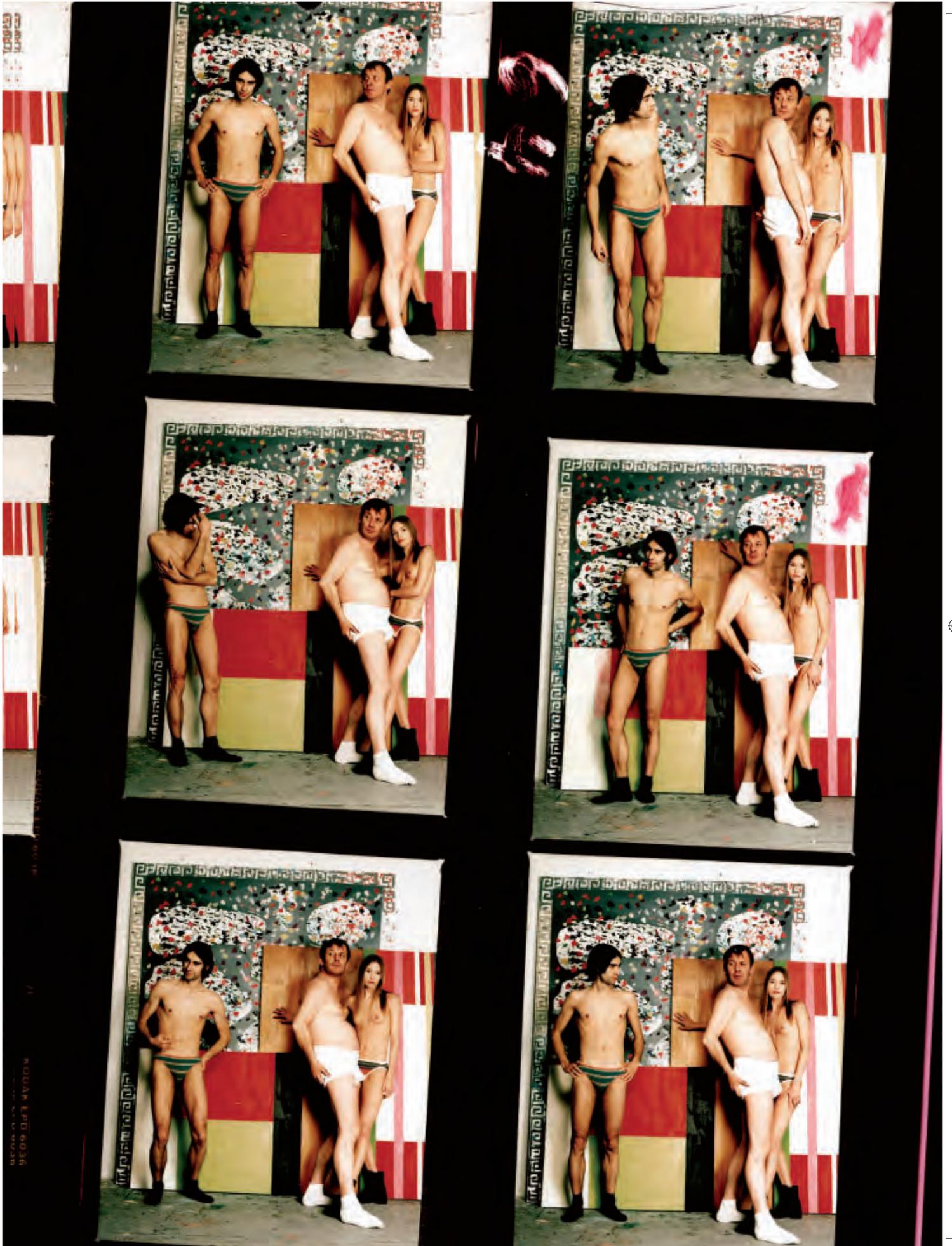
The punch line of the joke is that there is no joke, just a willingness to explore personal boundaries while not taking oneself too seriously. "His goal was to live more. More intensely. Excess was part of his nature. He wanted to explore every corner. He wanted the strength to stay awake longer, to see more, to hear more," Semotan says. "Martin ignored his illness. Even when he had to sit in a wheelchair, he continued working. He even flew to assist me with the installation of my first show. We knew what was coming, but we never talked about it. Until you die, you live. You have to live, and it's useless to waste time thinking and talking about dying. You just live." **Ken Miller. Interview conducted by Jina Khayyer**

"These photos were taken at my house in Jennersdorf, Austria, during an underwear shoot commissioned by *View on Colour* in 1996. I found, to my big surprise, that the material, pattern, and colors of the underwear matched the backgrounds that Martin had just painted. I suggested we do the story in front of these beautiful canvases. Martin had no problem letting me use them—his only condition was that at the end of the fashion shoot he wanted to be photographed with the models, in underwear and with his socks on. As soon as I announced the end of the photo session, Martin took off his clothes. Everybody, except him, felt quite awkward in this unusual setting, but in the end it worked out." —Elfie Semotan

## Photography Elfie Semotan

"Martin Kippenberger: The Problem Perspective" runs March 1–May 11, 2009, at the Museum of Modern Art, NYC





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