Brand-New-Life
Magazin für Kunstkritik

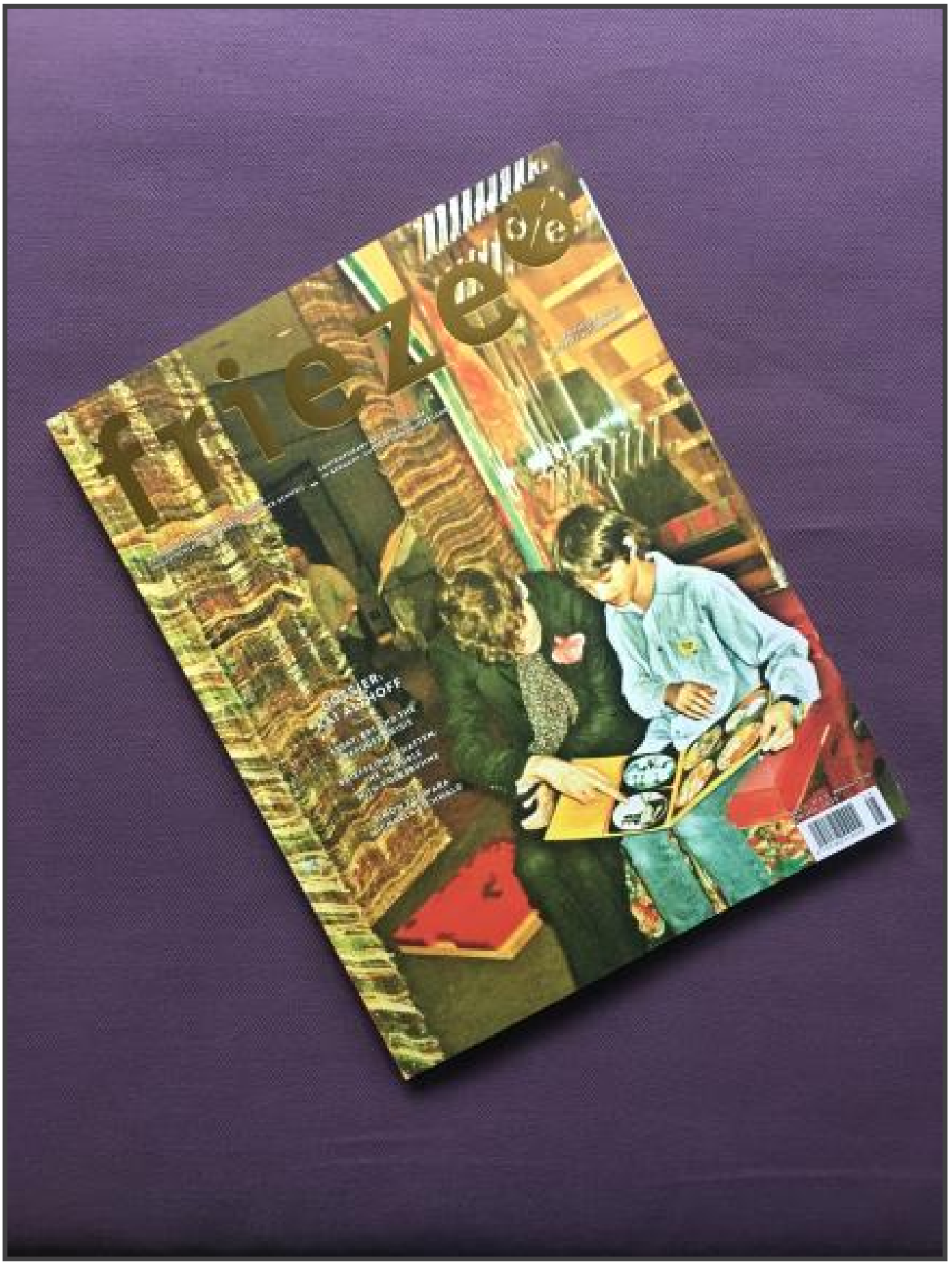
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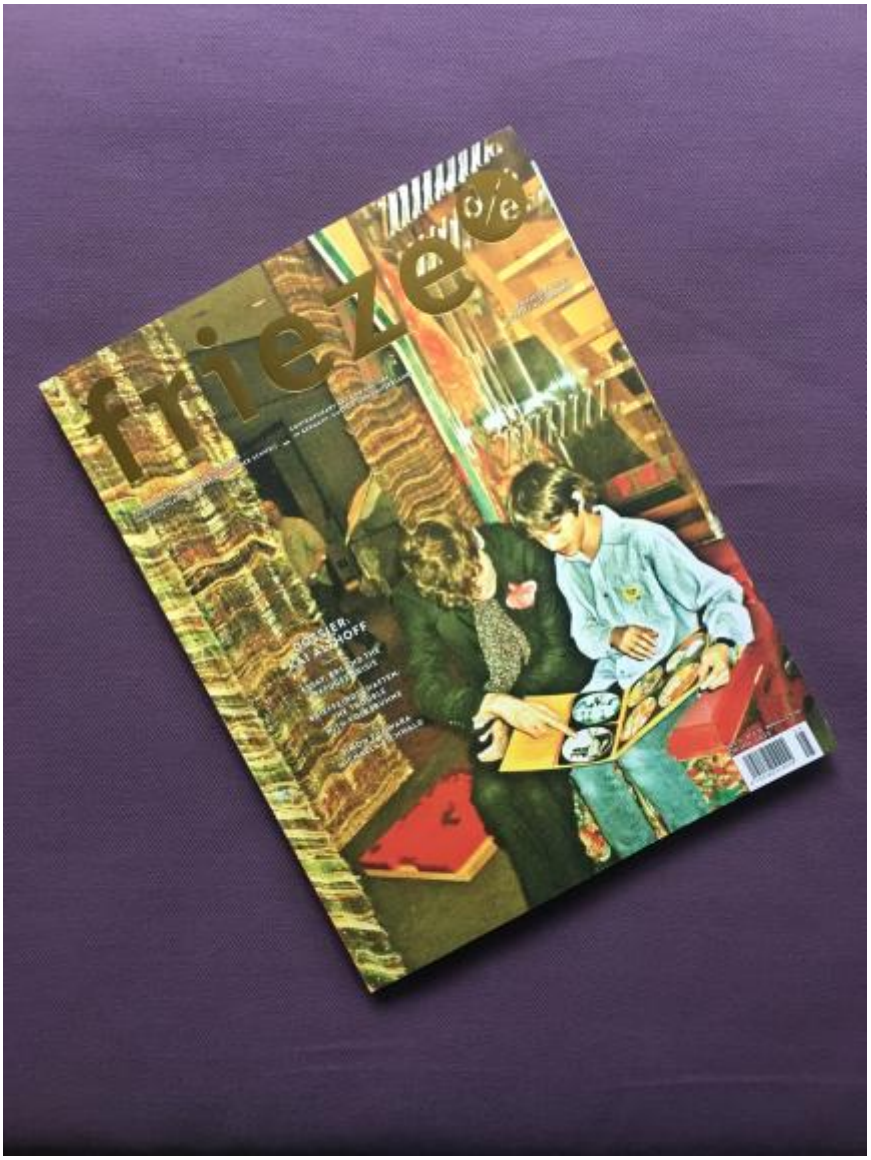


Adieu Frieze d/e – a Reply

Raimar Stange

It is an odd interview alright that Barbara Preisig conducted on Brand-New-Life with Mareike Dittmer in light of the fact that Frieze d/e is being discontinued—odd above all, because Barbara Preisig all too politely failed to ask the co-publisher of Frieze d/e, who was long responsible mainly for selling advertising space, the most obvious question: whether there are, perhaps, also economic reasons for the discontinuation after a five-year, seemingly successful operation.


frieze



Frieze-d/e-Cover, last issue, Photo: Kunstmagazin Monopol.

Instead—and this, too, is odd—it was quickly agreed that Frieze d/e has been discontinued primarily for «strategic reasons», as the magazine's bilingual format—German and English—and its geographical focus on the «German-speaking world» are said to have reached their limits. Allegedly, the «dissemination and relevance» (Dittmer) of the articles was no longer sufficiently «international». Was Frieze d/e not immune to the purported «regionality», if only by dint of the English language?! And has the rigorous, terribly non-dialectic distinction between ‹regional› and ‹international› articulated here not long since become obsolete in a global word, especially in the art world and in the metropolis of art, Berlin, where Frieze d/e was published?! Clearly, an actual analysis of the problem of Frieze d/e is being avoided.

More crucial is precisely what is not asked by skipping the question of possible economic reasons for the discontinuation: did Frieze d/e have too little public resonance? Was it simply bought too seldom, as was most likely the case with the art magazine Monopol, which a few months ago changed owners—apparently for free? And was the number of advertisers too low as a result? In any case, remarkably few ads are to be found in the final edition of Frieze d/e—and in the scene it is rumored that the magazine incurred a loss of 150'000 Euros. If this is true, the reasons for this may very well be content-related. Perhaps readers were simply no longer interested in the magazine.

In order to consider the latter assessment let's take a quick look at the final issue of Frieze d/e. The lead feature is a 32-page ‹dossier› on the Cologne-based artist Kai Althoff. Why is it that Althoff, an artist who mattered especially in the 1990s, is presented so prominently at this point in time? To which of the «discourses» repeatedly mentioned in the Brand-New-Life interview, but never specifically identified does this contribute? The question remains open, because the occasion for the article is, instead—avowedly—Althoff's retrospective at MoMA in New York, which means it merely accompanies a museum event. Then there is a conversation about the discussion revolving around the appointment of Chris Dercon as head of the Berlin Volksbühne theater, a topic that is currently discussed most extensively in the press not just in Berlin. A horribly indifferent essay on the subject of ‹Art and Refugees›, a topic that is currently addressed in the culture sections of every self-respecting (civic) newspaper, is similarly interchangeable. Added to this are three additional artist's portraits. They, too, favorably accompany the current art scene and its protagonists. Apropos favorably: rather than critically challenging the art scene, the reviews in this issue keep celebrating it more or less reflectively—and this was no different in the previous issues. Accordingly, only two of fifteen reviews are in effect negative and these are two articles that once more blast the 9th Berlin Biennale and Manifesta 11, exhibitions that already have been badly bashed by critics. Other than that: thirteen reviews of exhibitions, well-written, to be sure, but all of them most notably sympathetic to the subject under review. Last but not least, we again look in vain in this issue, too, for a decidedly theoretical text that shines a light on «art and its discourses» (Dittmer).

«De te fabula narratur», Horace wrote: «Your story will be told». But are all the articles briefly outlined above really my stories? That is, stories that establish tension between art and culture and my daily life in a neoliberal globalized society? Or do they, instead, represent ‹business as usual›—hardly distinguishable from publications of a similar nature—which valorizes and legitimizes a contemporary art increasingly degenerating into an overpriced object of speculation with the added value of alleged reflection?! Legitimizes it, since nowhere in the issue are art and its involvement with power and money really critically challenged. Instead, the art that is primarily discussed is one which agreeably situates itself within those structures. Yet it is precisely the entanglement of art and power that, as I would like to argue, more and more people have issues with, at least readers of ambitious art magazines who expect from it a gripping critical reflection on the options of art. And ever since the avant-garde of the twentieth century those options are, if nothing else, ones that point out alternatives to existing power. And sure enough, even Martin Roth, the renowned London museum director who is surely anything but an activist, has said in a recent interview [http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/martin-roth-direktor-des-londoner-victoria-and-albert-museum-im-spiegel-gespraech-a-1111705.html] with the German news magazine Spiegel: «This is why contemporary art annoys me, because it is often inconsequential knick-knack, […];more than ever we need resistance of sorts.» In Frieze d/e, however, resistant, political art remains all but invisible, the one awfully seemly article about ‹refugee art›, which runs just a little bit longer than the Saint Laurent ad in the same issue, notwithstanding.

Back to the interview. From now on Frieze acts very much in line with globalization and its form of ‹internationality› in its approach to language: Mareike Dittmer candidly admits that, after discontinuing Frieze d/e, Frieze acknowledges English as «the lingua franca of the contemporary art world». While Frieze d/e had still tried to oppose this cooptation toward English common in the globalized art establishment through its German-language texts, the magazine now wants to inscribe itself in a streamlined manner into «an international discourse» (is there really just this one discourse?), instead of operating «essentially regionally» (Dittmer). Dittmer, however, doesn't just question the German language, but German-language authors right along with it. Asked about the difficulties of finding German-

language authors (how does Barbara Preisig really know this?) Dittmer doesn’t disagree and, instead, even tries to explain them, claiming this is the result of the superior «Anglo-Saxon education», which puts greater stress on entertaining analysis, rather than on pure factuality, as the German way of thinking allegedly does. This is as arrogant as it is infamous: rather than admitting to homemade conceptual mistakes, the co-editor insultingly detects a weakness of the authors.

This is not what self-criticism looks like after the demise of a magazine project, yet that is exactly what is needed now. To put it briefly and pointedly: the issue of the need for art magazines is more urgent than ever in times like today. Because mere conformist accompaniment of the art scene is a futile affair given the refugee crisis, neoliberal globalization, renewed racism and climate catastrophes, and it is obviously something that induces ever fewer people interested in art to buy a magazine. If this self-critical inquiry remains undone, then I fear that the demise of Frieze d/e will not remain an isolated case in the world of art magazines.

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Raimar Stange, geboren 1960 in Hannover, studierte Germanistik, Philosophie und Journalismus. Er ist ‹freier› Publizist und Kurator in (Ost-)Berlin und schreibt unter anderem für Artreview, Frieze, Kunstbulletin, Artmagazine.cc und Artist.