

## **Bite Sighs**

### ***A Eulogy for Martin Kippenberger***

Laurence A. Rickels

When Kippenberger opened up his own restaurant in LA (there was no lo-cal, I mean local outlet to supply the spaghetti bolognese he craved), the work on the remainder, on what's left — the rest — could begin again. There wasn't much to go on. And the rest is open only to spookulation, I mean speculation. Because now, in Kippenberger's own spaghetti western, the eternal, internal guest was also the host. This town was big enough for the two of them. He picked up the restaurant not far from his place in Venice, down the street from the gondola. It was a readymade called Capri that washed up onto the Coast from his other coast. "And the good thing about it was, because I lived kind of separated from Gabi, because she was in Venice, and I was in the other Venice [...] Uh, and just that the Americans are more progressive, they used to have canals, too, but when they didn't need them anymore [...] They filled them up. ... And now you can imagine that you can't go by gondola, if you don't have a river. So they placed the gondola in front of the bank. Because everything's a souvenir program. One already thinks of Venice as a souvenir program."<sup>1</sup> But he made the Capri functional: at least — at last! — he could get his spaghetti fix in LA. A new era of separation and connection between California and its other coast — from Germany to Italy and back again — was

underway. Remember, the wall had fallen over there. Right after the iron curtain call, Germany's greatest monument was being dismantled. The Germans, like the Californians, have only one sense of what it means when something's history. What was being metabolized back in Berlin was the city's sudden shift from the allegorical to the functional register. That space of tension is what Kippenberger's life, work, whatever, was all about.

On the allegorical side or aside, "art is no longer being produced, but only watched." Here Kippenberger identified with American techno-feminist artists like Holzer, Kruger, Lawler, and Fraser: "They study art, and do work about it, and this is today's art." Indeed, just like Daniel Paul Schreber, the psycho that Freud told us was the one to watch, he too is woman: "I'm a woman, too. ... I'm no 'real' painter, no 'real' sculptor. I just watch it from outside and sometimes interfere, try to have my good-hearted say."<sup>2</sup> But then there's the functional side to his art: "It's boring whether art is good or not good. The only thing that really matters is what I do with art, how I manage to integrate it into my life, that I think about it, and how I then represent it as my own work. To integrate: OK."<sup>3</sup> He attended this functionalism of his art with a real-time sense of audience and survival: "In ten years, art will just look totally different! Will be viewed totally differently. I hope I'll be able to follow then, or just pretend to be the 'old artist' and say what I am interested in — my juvenile illness."<sup>4</sup>

His art's exhibitionism made him stowaway on and appendage to its interminable tour. But he affirmed the travel and travail of art's exhibition or exchange value as a mode of passing through but also as a way of getting stuck. No place ever did stick. Only LA kind of did. Because it was so hard to swallow. "LA is a flattened down hole."<sup>5</sup> New York

couldn't hold him: the island gave him "the feeling of a small town."<sup>6</sup> LA was all about the "juvenile illness" he looked forward to surviving. It's the place where everyone's an "expert," everyone's the same or more of the same, and everyone knows a story about one famous movie star. "Nothing more happens. Of course everybody's got to tell stories and says, 'I once sat in the barber shop where Marlon Brando had his hair cut,' but nobody is Marlon Brando, I mean, really. A luminary, everybody only knows one. Talks about him."<sup>7</sup> The economy of feeling good about yourself is always also about not being there; it's all dedicated to the one who's getting off when you're precisely not there, like, you know, your best friends, or the star you're near-missing both as direct connection and clean break. There's an absence, then, that nevertheless functions. His juvenile illness, call it group or adolescent psychology, call it California, brought about a change in art, life, whatever. It was no longer about living again, coming back, or getting more life. Now was the only time for doubling: "just another theory: that one doesn't live a second life when one has died, but that one lives twice at the same time! [laughs] See, live once, but doubly [...]. That I'm Mother Theresa and at the same time I'm me! You need not wait for my reincarnation, I'm living inside her. [laughs] Is this possible?"<sup>8</sup>

Kippenberger came from a long line of painters. He was the first professional, however, the first to function as a painter, the first charged with integrating it all back into his life. His father already told him that he was all over the place, style-wise: "Role games wouldn't work with me because I don't have style. There is none. You can even find evidence for this in my childhood. My father always told me that it was important to have style."<sup>9</sup> His father signed his paintings and photographs with "Kipp." "That's why I had an idea at the age of seven: 'Kippi.'"<sup>10</sup> But in time he gave up on that

infantilization of the father's nick in the old name. Even his hometown, Dortmund, began to sound like drawing instruction given a child or *Gastarbeiter*: "mouth over there" ("dort Mund"). Before he made the double Venice connection or disconnection, he tried out, in the name of his father, that retro, repro approach to living on in generations that keep coming down the line. His daughter was born at the same time his father died. A changing of the guard. It was the continuity shot he was all focussed and waiting for: "the proto-ape method."<sup>11</sup>

There were techno chips that came from the paternal line which he was content to shoulder: one chip brought him fame by age thirty. His mortality-timer chip had him programmed for seventy-two years of life. It was a chip implanted by his other father: "God's penis."<sup>12</sup> But another chip off the old block or complex puts his own polymorphous mimicry on the spot, the spot he would be in before his time, before his father's time: "it's just like a sewn-on monkey that takes over the functioning of your liver — that's me."<sup>13</sup>

When the thought crosses Kippenberger's mind that he has set himself the task of adding a happy ending to Kafka's *Amerika*, it's time to read his slips. That's the one Kafka text that does "end" "happily." What ends badly, in banishment, is the big part of the novel devoted to Karl Rossmann's hotel career. Kippenberger's hotel drawings are about moving on but on what's stationary, still within the whole apparatus, network, or chain of connections stopping over, passing through.

He was at home in hotels, restaurants, bars, in all the stations of our crossing, our passing through, passing on, letting go. But at the same time they offered the outside chance of getting stuck there, in the greater setting of

another new city, which introduces itself precisely through these contact points and lines of assembly. He existed in all the outlet stories of the center cities of the art world. Watch his self-portraits edge out his work on what's stationary and interchangeable about life in hotels, bars, restaurants, and hold the edge where the name, the all-out wish to exist, gets signed. Twice.

The work on what's stationary about life and work in the hotel chain — that which is at once postally mobilized to move on and stuck on one name and address — is the labor of love and long distance that gets captured by the name's status as long-distant object, as idealized absence. Walter Benjamin talked about this love affair with the name. When Conrad Hilton made the move from just one hotel, which he doubled internally through space-saving subdivisions, on to a whole chain operation of space rescue, it was love that got him there and kept him moving. "I found myself developing a real crush on each prospective hotel. Love, of course, had its blind spots. It made no difference to me if the hostelry in question was past her prime, down at the heels, her tattered slip showing. In those early years most of the hotels that could be courted on my bankroll were exactly like that. The first gift my dowagers got from me was usually a face lift. Romance blossomed the minute I could see through a frowsy façade to potential glamour."<sup>14</sup>

Kippenberger saw a punchline running his art's tight schedule of layovers: "exhibitions are a 'running gag' for art and the artist, respectively. Nothing more to it. But also a 'running gag' taken literally! It's a good excuse to move. So, I always move with the intention of getting stuck. For example, when I arrive in a new town, I intend to get stuck there. I've never managed it, but the intention still exists."<sup>15</sup> Taken literally — and literally taken in — the gag that had

Kippenberger on the run is the foreign body or object that keeps you quiet, except when, on intake, something just gets stuck: a gag not in the mouth but in the throat. The gag or joke contained a conflict that was bigger than one life, one lifetime. "See, the only real war is telling jokes, this is the ultimate form of war."<sup>16</sup>

When the devil tried his Faust at doubling, at double entendre — something to do with the crown, the ruler and the coin of the realm —, the empire soon doubled over with the punchline, over an abyss of civil, total, suicidal warfare. Faust had better luck with doubling over time. Soon he had it all figured out: it just takes two lifetimes to accumulate all the strength you'll need to affirm life. The Faustian or Frankensteinian doubling of life span is currently coming at us, down the reassembly line of body parts. But Kippenberger's juvenile illness, his alcoholic acting out, kept him from getting a new lease on an other's liver. Was it the p-unitive relationship to his father that condemned him to go ahead of time. To go early: that's murder. But at the same time that chip on his shoulder was gone, the Big One that got him, once upon a time, to stop monkeying around and get with the proto-ape program of living on for, in, as future generations. "Pretend to be the 'desert mouse' and some time you are found there, in the desert, and get sold for cheap money, get sold to a famous movie star. ... One who fucks hamsters. It just lasts, I don't know, five minutes. You get it stuffed into your backside and then your life's over. Someone who's happily married and has two children. This shouldn't be my life. ... Terrible, short life! Aha, well, maybe, because it's lucky too. At the time. In its way [...] Hollywood Hamster. Desert hamster!"<sup>17</sup>

Postwar West Germany had already taken hamster in and turned it into a verb: *Hamstern*, to collect supplies at a cut

rate, to store them in any event, and, by extension, to prepare for catastrophe. Look at those cute postwar Germans hamstering away! Germany was out of the running of the Cold War, just like a victim, and all the losses had been cut between East and West. Kippenberger followed the displacement of that 1989 fall all the way to the fault that always lies elsewhere. Out west the Hollywood hamsters are still real cute and clueless.

Hospitality, as old as prehistory, was, in its original reception and even in the history of its names, at once welcome and uncanny. The guest was originally an unwanted foreigner or, at best, a chance arrival of unknown origin. What was good in "guest" (or "host" for that matter) made it into "hospital" and "hotel." The bad part lives on in "hostile," for example. In ancient times, your host was untouchable, just like the cook, the slave, the gladiator, or, in Egypt, anyone involved in the work of embalming. From guest or host to ghost is no big skip of the heart beat. It's all the same word and world. One ghost, the spirit of some ancestor for example, is friendly; another, still fresh in the minds of the survivors, the Get Well death wishers, is vengeful, out to haunt the near and the dear.

Over time your host was your sponsor: he became a local politician, broker, supporter of the arts, or entertainer. Finally he became a therapist, and the static of haunting could be interpreted and contained in new transference settings. Freud's own first analogies for transference conjoined references to the printing press and to haunting. The original printing press in turn reassembled the wine press it took as its model. Before our era of Freud's interventions, the first major cultural revolution was introduced with the offer of coffee, tea, or cocoa. That new course pulled an emergency break on all-out drinking which had saturated Europe and

spilled right to the border areas where ghostly taverns, known as *Nobiskrüge*, took shape out of the fog. Ever since coffee there's been at least an alternation between drinking and recovery. The *Nobiskrüge* came out of the deepest recess of melancholic drinking where getting bombed gets the undead one inside you embalmed. Luther grabbed our attention when he used these spooky taverns to conjure the underworld and give us Hell. One historian of tavern life gets the picture: "Fantasy given wings by alcohol not only led to the creation of legendary figures out of nothing, it gave rise to the construction of nebulous buildings for the unstoppable drinker: the *Nobiskrüge* emerged outside the centralized towns, out of the reach, therefore, of every administrative, rational control. In ghostly fashion they appeared in the midst of forest and heath; usually they were located near the border, and the reputation of uncanniness was attached to them. The origin of the name is dark, uncertain. ... In the popular mind such an establishment was the meeting place of sinister figures, demons and dead people who had not yet been able to shake their longing for worldly pleasures."<sup>18</sup>

When in Rome there were roadside *mansiones* every twenty-five kilometers offering travelers and horses stopover services. Between the *mansiones* an alternative, alternating sub-chain cut into the stereometric distances with fewer services but just in time for those who couldn't keep standard time. They were called *mutationes* and offered all that's in their name in the line of evolutionary variation on a standard pattern or chain. Mutations were there to serve those just needing one more drink for the road or to crash, whether in the mode of emergency or of spontaneous intermission.<sup>19</sup>

He was in between, but on his own. Not like an heir. Like a mutation. The two standards of German art, Richter and

Polke, had commenced their *Liebestod* right where they did the overlaps they saw coming, saw as their shortcomings. Polke was trying to be a colorist too: not Richter but the sky was to be the limit. Richter for his art was trying out some pop irony, doing the family photo reshuffle to install what's ironically interchangeable with so many lives. Watch them. But the photo walls gave the inside view of a tomb. Pop goes the father judge, the Richter of greatest German painting.

For his final show, "The Raft of Medusa," Kippenberger gave us a series of afterimages. In one of the lithographs, no. 3, we recognize the lanky signature figure of the artist reaching out for rescue with his shadow-double standing right in front also gesturing towards and looking forward to the good ship. But the rescue vessel has smoke stacks. An ocean liner? A hotel on the water? The Titanic maybe? A huddle of figures in a spot of metabolization of reference to the Gericault painting either gesture towards rescue or bemoan their death and their dead or, if death is already upon them, lie collapsed upon the bottom link in the food chain. They're caught up in a gray area of boundary blending that conjures the cannibalism served up on the raft in history. "Despair and Cannibalism on the Raft" is how Gericault entitled one of his studies. Kippenberger's double self-exposure in turn serves a kind of auto-cannibalism. You eat and you are eaten, you drink and you are drunk, you draw and you are drawn. And, it's always some variable of two, quartered.

If Kippenberger was living doubly, twice, then he died doubly, and that means finally. So-called primitive cultures, at least still in Freud's day, kept closer to the pulse of mourning by establishing two different periods of death, the first and the second. After the first death the dead one was still hanging on, stuck somehow, capable of intervening in

life, and even capable, if it was a widow he left behind, of impregnating her surviving body. Once two years had passed the body could be disinterred, the bones put on display, to be mourned over and then buried again. This second or double death was the conclusive one. Something that haunted the Kippenberger line has been discontinued. The guest, the ghost — and most of all the host — are all gone. You only die twice.

#### NOTES

- 1 I Had A Vision. Martin Kippenberger. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1991, p. 143.
- 2 Ibid., p. 18.
- 3 Ibid., p. 94.
- 4 Ibid., p. 95.
- 5 Ibid., p. 17.
- 6 Ibid., p. 14.
- 7 Ibid., p. 15.
- 8 Ibid., p. 95.
- 9 Ibid., p. 19.
- 10 Ibid., p. 53.
- 11 Ibid., p. 45.
- 13 Ibid., p. 99.
- 14 Ibid., p. 119.
- 15 Conrad Hilton, *Be My Guest* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1957), p. 112.
- 16 I Had A Vision, p. 16.
- 17 Ibid., p. 107.
- 18 Ibid., pp. 39, 41.
- 19 Gertrud Benker, *Der Gasthof* (München: Verlag Georg D. W. Callwey), p. 86. My translation.

plates

Untitled (Self Portrait with Cowboy Hat), 1988



Untitled (Saint Martin), 1990



Untitled (Hubert), 1990



Untitled (Dan...Please), 1990





Untitled (BMW Logos), 1990



Untitled (Madre de Adi), 1989



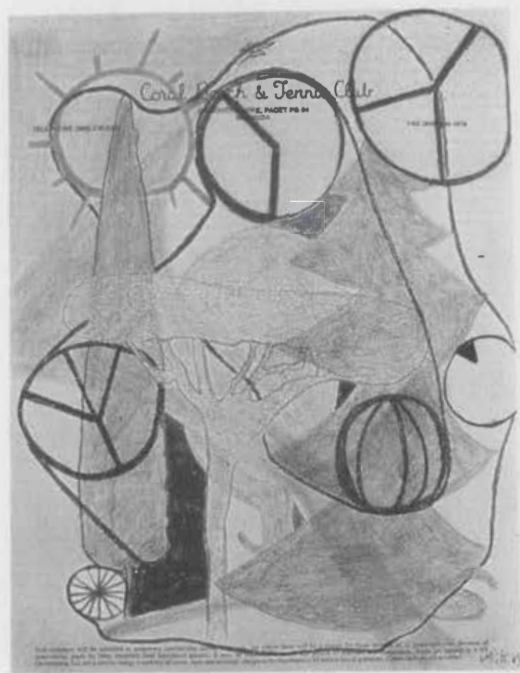
Untitled (Top Secret), 1989



Untitled (Who is She), 1989



Untitled (Trees), 1989



Untitled (Calourfull), 1989



Untitled (Koons/Kippi), 1990



Untitled (Butts Expertly Cleaned), 1990



Untitled (Garfield), 1990



Untitled (Cartier), 1990



Untitled (Chanel), 1990



Untitled (YSL), 1990



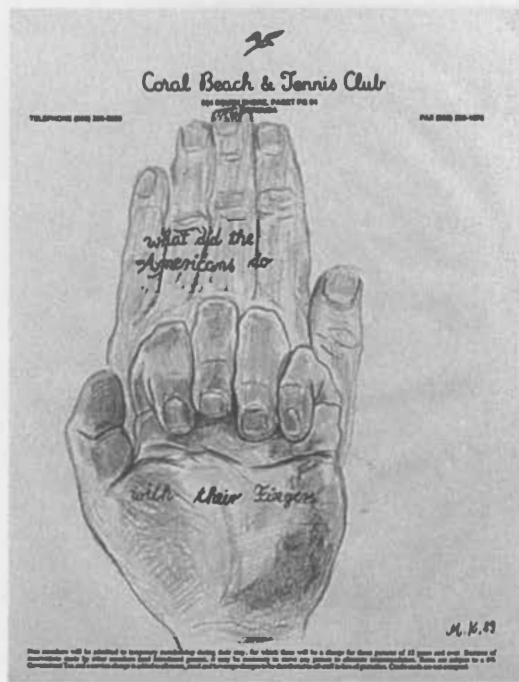
Untitled (Hysteriailand), 1990



Untitled (Tex-Mex), 1990



Untitled (Open/Closed Hand), 1989



Untitled (Michael), 1989

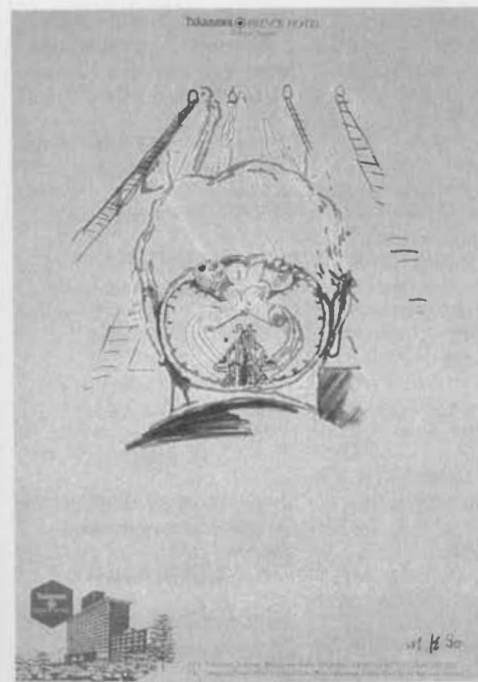




Untitled (Sehr Gut), 1990



Untitled (Sight Diagram), 1990



## Checklist of the Exhibition

*Untitled (Self Portrait with  
Cowboy Hat)*, 1988.  
Ball-point pen and graphite on  
stationery  
11-1/2 X 8-1/4 inches

*Untitled (Calourfull)*, 1989.  
Color pencil on stationery  
11-1/2 X 8-1/4 inches

*Untitled (Open/Closed Hand)*,  
1989.  
Color pencil on stationery  
11 X 8-1/2 inches

*Untitled (Madre de Adi)*, 1989.  
Color pencil on stationery  
11 X 8-1/4 inches

*Untitled (Trees)*, 1989.  
Color pencil and graphite on  
stationery  
11 X 8-1/2 inches

*Untitled (Top Secret)*, 1989.  
Color pencil, ink, graphite,  
transfer lettering on stationery  
11-1/2 X 8-1/4 inches

*Untitled (Who is She)*, 1989.  
Color pencil, graphite, transfer  
lettering on stationery  
11-1/2 X 8-1/4 inches

*Untitled (Michael)*, 1989.  
Color pencil and crayon on  
stationery  
11 X 8-1/2 inches

*Untitled (Hubert)*, 1990.  
Oil crayon and pastel on  
stationery  
11-5/8 X 8-1/2 inches

*Untitled (Dan...Please)*, 1990.  
Oil crayon and pastel on  
stationery  
11 X 8-1/2 inches

*Untitled (Cartier)*, 1990.  
Oil crayon and pastel on  
stationery  
11-5/8 X 8-1/4 inches

*Untitled (Chanel)*, 1990.  
Oil crayon and pastel on  
stationery  
11-5/8 X 8-1/4 inches

*Untitled (YSL)*, 1990.  
Oil crayon and pastel on  
stationery  
11-5/8 X 8-1/4 inches

*Untitled (Sehr Gut)*, 1990.  
Oil crayon and pastel on  
stationery  
11-5/8 X 8-1/4 inches

*Untitled (Garfield)*, 1990.  
Oil crayon and pastel on  
stationery  
11-5/8 X 8-1/4 inches

*Untitled (Hysterialand)*, 1990.  
Oil crayon and pastel on  
stationery  
11-5/8 X 8-1/4 inches

*Untitled (Tex-Mex)*, 1990.  
Oil crayon and pastel on  
stationery  
11-5/8 X 8-1/4 inches

*Untitled (Koons/Kippi)*, 1990.  
Oil crayon and pastel on  
stationery  
11-5/8 X 8-1/4 inches

*Untitled (BMW Logos)*, 1990.  
Oil crayon and pastel on  
stationery  
11 X 8-1/4 inches

*Untitled (Butts Expertly Cleaned)*,  
1990.  
Oil crayon and pastel on  
stationery  
11 X 8-1/4 inches

*Untitled (Saint Martin)*, 1990.  
Oil crayon and pastel on  
stationery  
11 X 8-1/4 inches

*Untitled (Sight Diagram)*, 1990.  
Color pencil, ink, felt-tip pen on  
stationery  
11-1/2 X 8-1/4 inches

Also included:  
Tobias Rehberger  
"The Happy End of Franz  
Kafka's America, 1993" 1997.  
Aluminum, wood  
40 X 90 X 39 inches