

## Chez Che?

### Thoughts on two Art Works by Adidal Abou-Chamat

“I think Kurt Cobain’s really good and I’ve read that Cobain also liked Che Guevara. That impressed me, and then I read a lot about Che Guevara and found ...we’re all on the same wavelength.” Simon Berger<sup>1</sup>

‘Identity does not come from the quasi-biological unfolding of a person’s core, but through identification in the literal sense of the word’,<sup>2</sup> stated the philosopher, Wolfgang Iser, in his important essay, ‘Identity in Transition’. Identification is now a process that can occur not only in various degrees but also in different ways. It is also a process that in its specific manifestations is historically and socially conditioned. The Italian historian, Carlo Ginzburg, was one of the first of his profession who determined the ‘historical and social variability of the reader type’ for ‘popular culture’.<sup>3</sup> The changing process of reading, the interpretation of texts, images, characters and even significant actions, is constitutive for precisely the identification that creates identity/ies. And this process refers to a very broad (postmodern) spectrum of possible modalities, a spectrum that ranges from active, critical-analytical discussion to pleasure-oriented-playful consumption. The cultural studies theorist, Lawrence Grossberg, once described the consequences of identification functioning through music reception using the example of the transition from (protest) rock to (hedonistic) disco music thus: ‘We no longer dance to the music we like, we like the music we dance to.’<sup>4</sup> Not least, the increasingly dominant role that a capitalistic commodification plays in ‘our’ society is readable in this spectrum of possible forms of identification. Identity has here long since threatened to degenerate into ‘goods subjectivity.’<sup>5</sup>

“I’ve had my tattoo of Che for over 30 years. My skin has aged, and Che with it. I’m pleased that many of today’s youth are looking at him again and, in this age of predatory capitalism, think ideals that he and the revolution in Cuba represent are good.” Alexander Kahn<sup>6</sup>

Che Guevara, born in Argentina and shot by Bolivian soldiers in a military camp in 1967, was (and to some extent still is) a national hero in Mid- and South America.<sup>7</sup> As an anti-imperialist revolutionary leader, this charismatic man, usually referred to as ‘Che’, also quickly became in the late 1960s and 1970s an idol of left-wing youth and students in Europe and the United States, not least because of his early death. In recent years this reverence that, after 30 years in which ‘Che’ could almost be designated a ‘pop idol’, began to wane, has again begun to increase in intensity. The reasons are obvious: on the one hand, neo-liberal globalisation allows capitalism (again) to operate in its most asocial form, which evokes reactions such as a reversion to ‘leftist ideology’. On the other hand, a generation is appearing in the political arena for the first time that has very little experience of ‘real existing’ communism, either portrayed in the media or ‘in the flesh’ - glorifying projections of any kind know almost no limits, and capitalism obviously readily uses these glorifications in that it makes the necessary range of goods for the ‘living out’ of these identifications commercially available.

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<sup>1</sup> Quote displayed by Adidal Abou-Chamat on the wall in her installation, ‘revolutionary heroes’.

<sup>2</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *Identität im Übergang*, 1990, quoted from: the same, *Ästhetisches Denken*, Stuttgart 1993, p. 188

<sup>3</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, *Der Käse und die Würmer*, ed. Berlin 1990, p. 19

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, *Is Anybody Listening? Does Anybody Care?*, in: *Microphone Fiends*, pub. Andrew Ross/ Tricia Rose, New York/London 1994, p. 56 (German translation R. St.)

<sup>5</sup> Read also: Marius Babias, *Ware Subjektivität*, Munich 2002

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Note 1

<sup>7</sup> The most famous ‘Che’ fan is the legendary Argentinean footballer, Diego Maradona, who has a portrait of ‘Che’ tattooed on his upper left arm.

The multi-media installation, 'CHE, no more heroes', 2007, by Adidal Abou-Chamat assesses exactly this point of post-modern hero worship. The artistic project started with a major internet research with the aim of interviewing as many different people as possible about their approach to the icon, 'Che'. Later, all possible forms of memorabilia were collected, ranging from sexually charged fan merchandise such as bras and tangas printed with 'Che's' legendary black and white, almost logo-like portrait, to ties or black-white-red doormats. Printed T-shirts, sneakers or glasses also belong to the diverse repertoire of the 'Che' range, just like hats or entire door curtains. Adidal Abou-Chamat finally presented these objects of 'Che'-craving in her installation in a setting that, in parts, reminds one of a private living room with cupboard, amateur painted fan poster, monitor, aforementioned door curtain and, for example, a wall clock-like object that is made from cigars. Then, suddenly, the design of the impressive installation alludes to the didactic corporate design of the typical folk museum. Thus the visuality of 'CHE, no more heroes' oscillates in a well-calculated way between 'subjective' sentiment and supposedly 'objective' science. The impression of the latter is possible because the artist has installed along one whole wall a strictly ordered series, whose upper third is composed of a repetitive pattern formed from a linear succession of the said portrait that, by the way, traces back to a photo by 'Korda' Guitierrez from 1960. Underneath is a series of large-format photos of 'Che' fans, which are combined, in typically folk museum fashion, with textual quotes from these fans, who make clarificatory comments on the photos.

So let us have a closer look at one of the images from this series, namely 'Hermann'. The image presented shows a man in his mid-40s; he is a bit overweight and leans on his Harley Davidson motorbike. 'Hermann', as a 'man in black' (Johnny Cash), is wearing black shoes, black trousers and a black leather jacket, together with a black and red T-shirt with the said likeness of 'Che' and is thus virtually 'in his skin.'<sup>8</sup> The (aggressive) striving for freedom, for which, among other things, 'Che' famously stands, here enters a symbiosis with the 'wild' riding 'of a Harley' and thus with the old rock-'n-roll promise: "Get your motor runnin', head out on the highway, looking for adventure ..." (Steppenwolf<sup>9</sup>). This heady promise, which has long been revealed as a chimera not only by speed limits and oil crisis, but is also hardly more than a cheap cliché that, above all, serves as the ideological basis of a hobby that in the first place is indulged in by not so young anymore men. Even if one should be careful of pushing such all-too-quick double-bind identifications like that of 'Che' and Harley Davidson into the corner of a merely hedonistic lifestyle, it is nevertheless clear that in such identifications the explicit and theoretically underlying political requirements are missing.

The concomitant moment of the political loss of utopia can be read repeatedly in the installation, 'CHE, no more heroes' - nomen est omen - not least in the deconstruction of the relentless commercialisation of the 'Che' myth carried out by Adidal Abou-Chamat. This deconstruction leads the artist straight through the presentation of the enumerated memorabilia I have previously described. To wit, it is not the intellectual confrontation with Che Guevara that constitutes the identification with him, but the purchase, the collection and thereby the possession of (the most ridiculous) goods. The dominance of buying and owning - this process is known as commodification. This succeeds in, as Colin Crouch writes, 'bringing human activities that are outside markets and the system of accumulation into this sphere.'<sup>10</sup> That the activity of identification in postmodernism increasingly underlies exactly this form of commodification becomes thus visible in 'CHE, no more heroes'. And that this commodification that creates subjectivity to a capitalistic commodity, that is also possible in an identification with a socialist revolutionary, shows how vacuous, indeed absurd, this identification can be today.

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<sup>8</sup> Read also: Beat Wyss, *Die Welt als T-Shirt*, Cologne, 1997

<sup>9</sup> Steppenwolf, *Born to be wild*, 1968

<sup>10</sup> Colin Crouch, *Postdemokratie*, Frankfurt am Main 2008, p.104

At one point in the work, however - one seeks authoritarian unambiguity even with Adidal Abou-Chamat in vain - this absurd brainlessness becomes relativised, and that is in the documentary film shot in Havana in 2004 that can be seen on the monitor in the 'living room' of the installation. In it, Cubans of different generations explain very lovingly their, for them still important, relationship with Che Guevara.

"Leila, what traces have you left?"<sup>11</sup> Roula Balhas

The 18-minute long video, 'Dear Leila', 2010/11, presents in a sense the counterpart to the installation, 'CHE, no more heroes'. The video shows footage of the Palestinian, Leila Khaled. She became world famous in the 1970s, but had already in 1969, together with an accomplice of the 'Communist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)' carried out the first politically motivated airplane high jacking. The 'pretty' young woman quickly became an icon of the left wing student movement. The video, 'Dear Leila' collages together documentary material about her from the 1970s as well as from today. Edited twice in between is a shot in which a young German-Lebanese woman puts on the legendary 'Palestinian scarf' and then poses in front of the camera with a gun. It is Roula Balhas, who can also be heard together with Adidal Abou-Chamat off-screen. Both women are talking, each of them, about their relationship to Leila Khaled. These relationships and this is why the video is effectively a counterpart to 'CHE, no more heroes', prove to be extremely reflective and touch not only upon mere sentiment. For example, gender-theoretical questions are raised, or the problem of the justification of 'terrorism'. Both women also come round to talking about 'Che': for Roula Balhas, Leila is "the female version of Che Guevara", the 'older' German-Syrian, Abou-Chamat, confesses, however, that she had a 'Che' poster hanging in her room in the early 1970s, that she later exchanged for one of Leila Khaled.

Even here it is clear that the positions of both speakers to the Palestinian freedom fighter are different: Balhas admires Khaled, even when she distances herself from Khaled's willingness to use force. Abou-Chamat's relationship, in contrast, proves to be one that sways between "fascination and bewilderment". Common to the two narrations, however, is the attempt "to find a term for Khaled" (Abou-Chamat). In addition, Khaled's history interlaces with the biographies of Balhas and Abou-Chamat, whose own experiences and the historical information about the "role model Leila Khaled" transmitted by the media clash almost dialogically. Balhas often considers, for example, that her father was also a Palestinian freedom fighter. The US sociologist, John Fiske, has called such a strategy 'Heteroglossie'<sup>12</sup>, which succeeds, nevertheless, to not only react passively to media messages, but also to productively revise and rewrite these messages with subjective reflections and experiences. The pure consumer behaviour which degenerates identity construction into commodification, and the identified to a (mimicking) fan has, in fact, no place in this form of (critical) iconisation.

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<sup>11</sup> Roula Balhas, in: Adidal Abou-Chamat, Dear Leila, Video 2010/11

<sup>12</sup> Read: John Fiske, Power Plays, Power Works, New York/London 1993