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frieze<sup>d/e</sup>

Steffen Zillig

FOCUS

Social streaming



*Was bisher geschah*, (detail), 2013, inkjet print, 60 × 300 cm

One of the popular battle cries of the British Conservative Party rails against the ‘something-for-nothing society’. One memorable invocation of this notional demographic of layabouts enjoying free money at taxpayers’ expense came at the Tory Party Conference in 1992 when then Social Security Secretary Peter Lilley cried out to the delegates: ‘I’m closing down the something-for-nothing society!’ In the style of a song from Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Mikado* (1885), he then launched into a gleeful attack on the socially disadvantaged, including young mothers who apparently get pregnant ‘just to jump the housing queue’.

A video of Lilley’s speech uploaded to YouTube forms one of the points of departure for Steffen Zillig’s installation *Was bisher geschah ... (The story so far, 2013)* shown this winter at Galerie Conradi in Hamburg. Within a multi-perspective, non-linear, multimedia narrative, the work deals with the children of the very mothers being reviled by the Conservatives back in 1992. In his montages, Zillig explores the way neoliberal imperatives of performance and creativity are spread via TV talent shows and how the tension generated by social inequality is discharged in suburban riots. Alongside a comic strip that tells an apocalyptic science-fiction storyline, through German text inserted into redacted speech bubbles by the artist, and a series of photographs showing mysterious homemade server farms, six synchronized half-hour video loops were projected onto the wall. The videos, assembled out of material from various sources and in various styles, seem to follow a cryptic choreography, culminating in a dramatic finale. There are clips from the *Rudi*

*Carrell Show*, Dieter Bohlen footage from *Deutschland sucht den Superstar* (Germany's *Pop Idol* franchise), ultrasound images of an unborn child, video tutorials on how to make your Sims avatar, clips of stag and hen night gaffes from social networks, footage of looting from the London riots of 2011, scenes from a porn film audition, and excerpts from a training video of a management coach giving advice for job interviews.



*Was bisher geschah...*, 2013, Installation view, Galerie Conradi, Berlin

While remaining vague, *Was bisher geschah ...* makes links between politics, society and zeitgeists: Carrell's talent and comedy show is representative of Kohl-era television; trashy television personality Bohlen has forged the neo-liberal ideology of self-optimization into a successful format since the Schröder years and the porn audition bears a creepy resemblance to the interview training video. For all its baroque wealth of sources and references, the installation radiates no sense of cultural pessimism or disgust at the world. On the contrary: the oppressiveness resulting from its closeness to reality is punctured again and again with help of the fantastical. Whereas other young artists use the psychedelic slickness of a Post-Internet aesthetic, Zillig sticks churlishly to an emphasis on the political. At some point in the torrent of images, a Guy Fawkes mask appears: 'We are Anonymous. We are legion. Expect us.'



*The Children*, 2012, Film stills

The children of the 1980s and '90s, who started the so-called 'BlackBerry Riots' in London, who celebrated the tragic last Love Parade in Duisburg, and who fill social networks night and day, have already featured in earlier works by Zillig. In the multimedia installation *Pessimismus Organisieren* (*Organizing Pessimism*, 2012), the 'old' hierarchical pop relationship of fan and star, represented by a dying Michael Jackson, is contrasted with a 'new' faceless online culture, represented by the website 4chan, an extremely popular unmoderated image board where hundreds of thousands of teenagers post obscure and often pornographic material. Zillig installed a live stream that made both the random flood of image posts and the associated comments part of his work. The soundtrack, on the other hand, is a recording made by Jackson's dermatologist a few days before the death of the ailing entertainer: the medicated 'King of Pop' fantasizes in a frail, wobbly voice about the success of his planned concert tour and the foundation of a children's hospital that will bear his name. But the old heroic narratives of pop are no longer functional. The dark heart of today's teen culture beats online.





*The Children*, 2012, Film stills

In terms of seeking, finding and using found material, Zillig's installations, too, are permeated by an 'internet state of mind' (as curator Carson Chan once called it), an approach to thinking and linking learned through the internet and its mechanisms. At the same time, they contradict everything that is fashionable, any fascination with the purely technical, any unbroken pleasure in the contemporary. 'The aesthetically new', Zillig wrote in a text recently published in *Kultur & Gespenster* magazine, 'is itself already corrupted; as the ultimate accelerator, it has entered into a union with the dominant economy'. Zillig's work, too, speaks of the digital breaking into the material world. But his interest in this world remains political even where it seems concerned 'only' with aesthetic issues.

*Translated by Nicholas Grindell*

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## About this feature



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*by Kito Nedo*

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