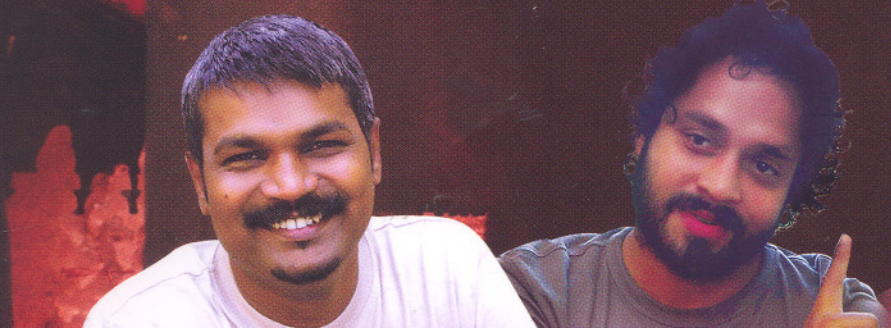
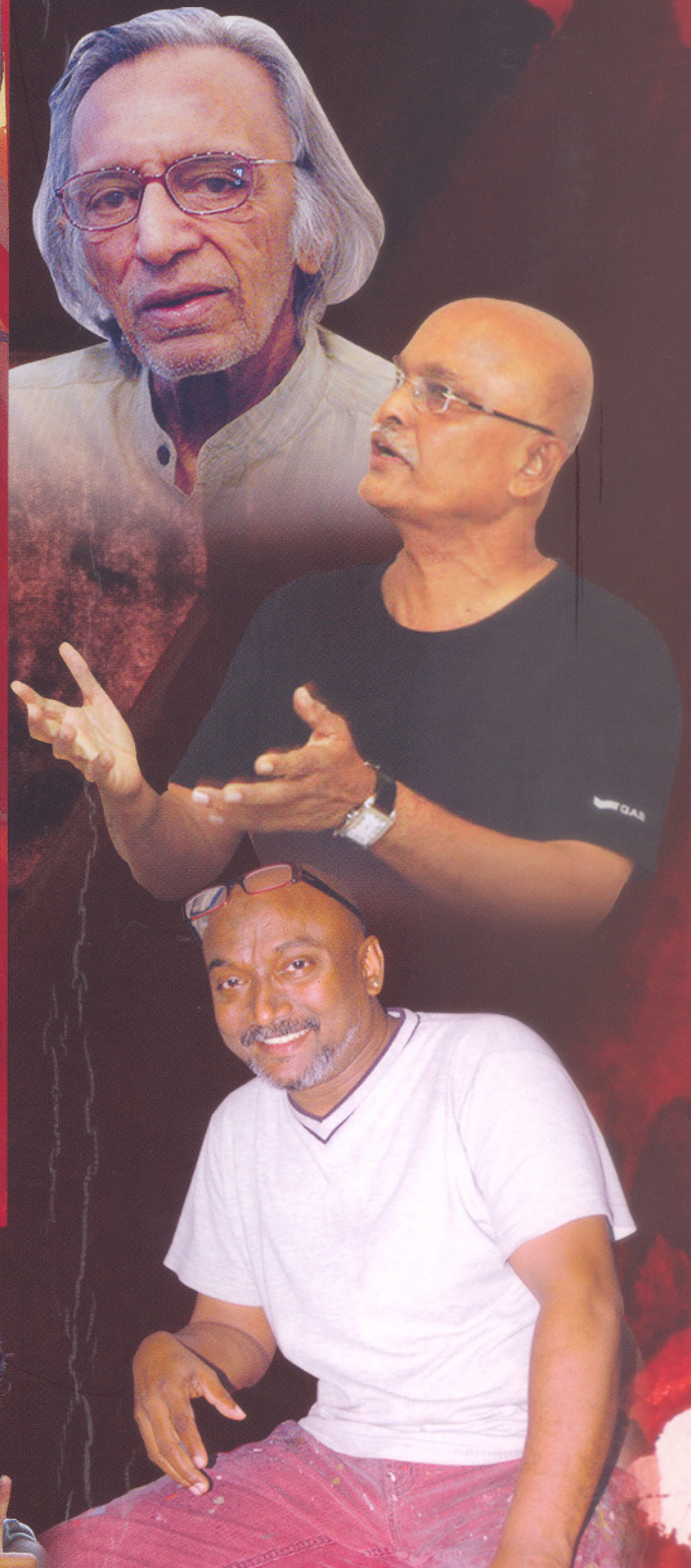
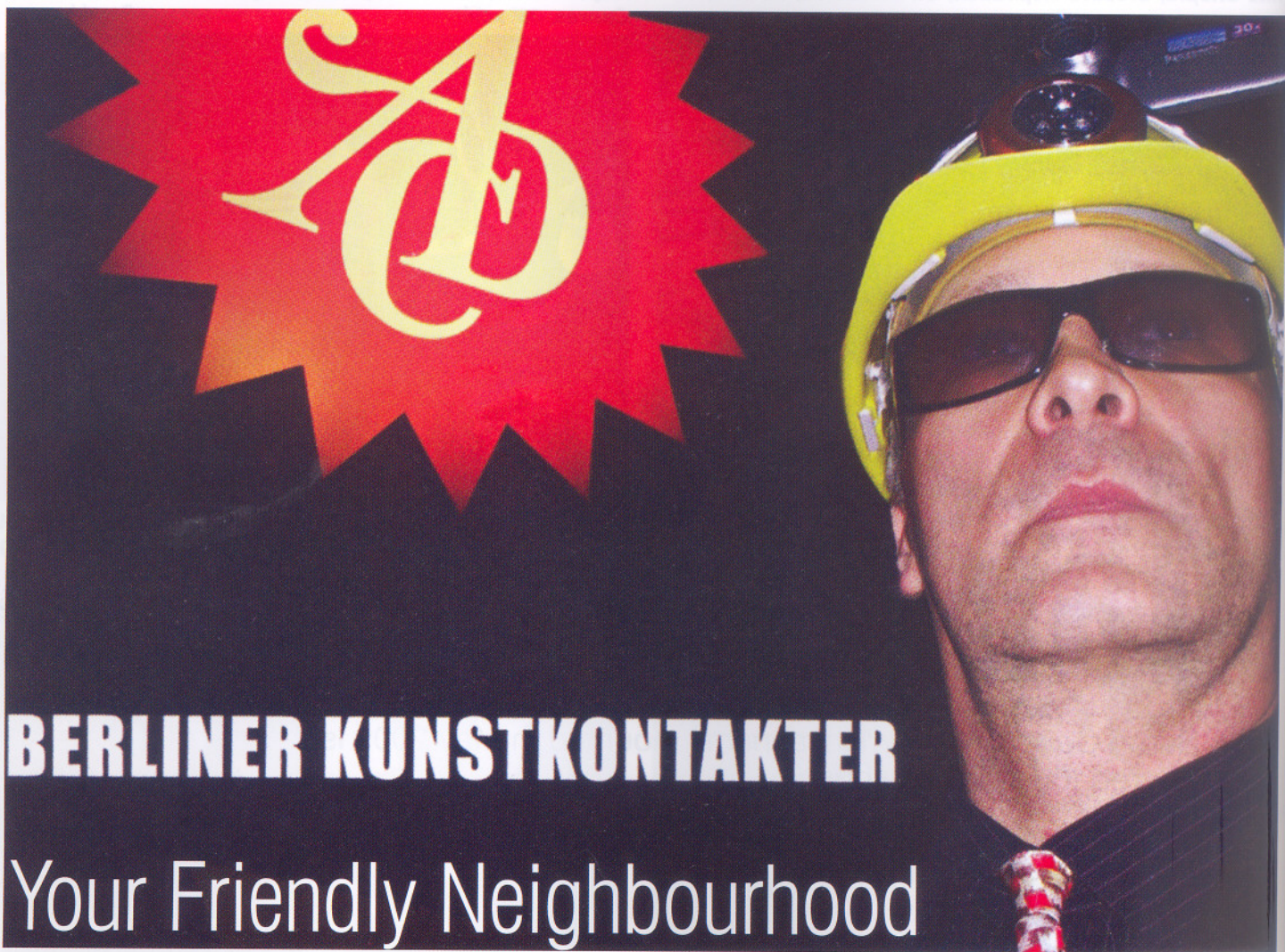


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BERLINER KUNSTKONTAKTER

Your Friendly Neighbourhood

Art Ambassador

When Konstantin Schneider initially started out his helmet adventures, the Berlin art world reacted with a raised eyebrow but accepted him and now regards him as an institution

◀ Gillian Da Costa ▶

A signature sight at all the well heeled art openings in Berlin and the biggest international art fair vernissages, Konstantin Schneider as the Kunst Kontakter (Art Contact in German) cannot be missed. Wearing a canary yellow helmet that is fitted with a digital camera, he walks around the display stopping ever so often to zoom in on a few details. Filming the chatter and the clinking

of glasses, he works his way through the crowd to get to the art and the artists, which are his primary concerns. This footage once captured is edited and put online on his website www.berlinerkunstkontakter.de which apart from videos also lists the most fashionable upcoming art events. What makes him special is that even though he's always dressed in black and looks very ex-CIA-like, he has a kind unassuming manner that allows him to cut through the fat. What you get in the end is

a walk through the exhibition space, a close look at the artworks on display, and even perhaps an interview with the artist. Schneider strictly avoids any jargonesque narration and allows the natural sound in the exhibition space to flow through. And the videos, though amateur, are crisply edited to give you the perfect layman's perspective of art you wouldn't have been able to access otherwise. Sitting here in Mumbai far away from all the international art action, I am happy to report that Schneider has profiled many of the names our city has been lucky to host including Norbert Bisky, Jonathan Messe and Julian Opie. Among our own he has filmed the opening of the Shilpa Gupta exhibition at BodhiBerlin, the highlight of which is his short conversation with the artist whose amusement is rather evident. And he just had a selection of his videos exhibited along with the photographs of Jan Sobottka at the German Consulate in New York as part of 'Berlin Artspotters'. Schneider is now in the midst of getting ready for Scope Basel where he will be part of the Berlin Lounge, and it seems to me that he finally is getting at least some of the kudos he so rightly deserves.

If you happen to throw a friendly look his way, Schneider always stops for a chat and often asks you to give him a byte. His instructions are precise as he tilts his helmet to focus on you - look straight into the camera and give your honest opinion on the work. While I did turn down that opportunity at ShContemporary08 last September, I enjoyed my short conversation with him. And apart from his thoughts on the contemporary art scene, I asked his reasons for doing what he did and a bit about the reactions he's received, all of which I take the liberty to paraphrase below.

On what makes Konstantin Schneider the Kunst Kontakter

Schneider has had an over twenty-five year love affair with art and over the last three years has decided to use the technology boom to share with the world his experiences of the Berlin art scene. He believes that art is for everyone even though the common man might still have to climb over the remnants of old power structures that make art inaccessible. By making a form of 'art-comedy' or a travel guide through the art world, he wants to facilitate the rise of the creative class. And in doing this destroy the last of the preconceived notions that art can only be refined and esoteric. Schneider's background is a mix of foreign languages, media and advertising that honed his interest in creative communication processes. And with a little experimentation he developed his helmet-camera not knowing that it would become such an iconic element of the art world.

Schneider initially started filming art openings rather spontaneously and enjoyed the uninhibited view his helmet-camera gave him. He slowly developed the reputation of being quite blunt with the artists he encountered, often

catching them off guard with his blunt questions. On meeting Norbert Bisky at the opening of his Berlin exhibition '*Es tut mir so leid*', which roughly translates into 'I am so sorry', Schneider was quick to ask 'Mr. Bisky, I would like to know what you are so very sorry about?' To which Bisky quipped 'Oh, everything. I've always wanted to say it.' By capturing these rare moments in an art world so filled with trite refinement, Schneider does provide an amusing take on the art scene. But he takes himself very seriously, and knows that with the recognition comes great responsibility to be true to what he initially started out doing. And that is to provide an impartial, unbiased view of art as he sees it.

On the funding for his work

Schneider does have a day job, though the details of these are rather vague. His trips are rarely sponsored and most of the funding comes from a small group of art patrons. He still hasn't reached the stage of galleries and art fairs giving him all-expenses-paid trips in return for a spot on his website. But for the sake of art lovers like me who enjoy unique and maverick perspectives, I really hope this happens soon.

On the reaction of the art fraternity to him and his yellow helmet

When Schneider initially started out his helmet adventures, the art world reacted with a raised eyebrow. But famed for its tolerance, the Berlin art scene quickly accepted him and now he is regarded as an institution. His attendance is seen as a stamp of approval, of event being important enough for him to make an appearance. This is much to say in a city with the largest concentration of galleries and an average of five art openings a night. Schneider tries to fit into his schedule at least five a week, and at times even attends a wedding or two. His videos have become very popular and at the age of forty-eight he has a long list of artists he wants to film before he turns his helmet in.

When asked recently about the changes he has seen at the art fairs in light of the recession, Schneider ruefully notes that there was a lot of space left over at ARCOMadrid09. And ArtBaselMiami08 wasn't very different with a lot of the big players toning down the pomp and splendour of their displays. But the economic downturn does have a silver lining in the sense of the opportunity it gives the new players to rise above the crowd. The next few years will definitely be the most interesting ones for the contemporary art world.

So look out for him at the next art fair you go to and rejoice if you see a yellow helmet across the hall. And even though you might think the Kunst Kontakter a little strange, every fraternity needs a few oddballs to keep things interesting. For without them we turn superfluous and intoxicated with our own auras, forgetting in the end how important it is to keep things real.