

SEASON: SS 2018

## Johannes Paul Raether: Techno-Alchemical Rituals

words by Elisa R. Linn &amp; Lennart Wolff

Johannes Paul Raether is an identity among others—Transformellae, Protektorama, Schwarmwesen—that are all part of a multifarious practice revolving around what he calls “Identitekture.” Taking the form of performances, texts and installations, his projects move between mediums and formats, with modes of presentation ranging from lectures on critical theory to participatory events in public spaces. Equipped with a shared vocabulary drawn from what appears as an elaborate theoretical project, the identities are both its preachers and its actualizations; Raether speaks about them as giving his research, writing and theories flesh.

With skin tones varying from neon pink to blue, the genderless characters are dressed in outfits assembled from diverse materials (skin-tight latex suits, baby blankets, altered sports clothing) and covered in color or equipped with selfie-sticks. Though they often appear within gallery spaces and auditoriums, the characters are not confined to the realm of art and educational institutions; we also find their ritualistic performances set in tourist sites and everyday spaces of consumption: an IKEA store in Berlin-Tempelhof, New York’s Times Square, a Chinese laundromat, even the Isle of Arran’s ancient stone circles in Scotland. While each ritual finds the characters building communities with outside participants, the work often evokes an underlying tension between reliance upon and critical engagement with technology, embodied by elements of witchcraft that appear at once futuristic and archaic. For example, in 2016, the healing witch Protektoramae, who had “forked” (a

term that Raether uses to describe the ongoing transformation of identity) into Protekto.x.x. 5.5.5.1.pcp, headed a ritual at the Apple flagship store in Berlin. Marrying technology fetishism with spiritual and materialist approaches, the “techno-alchemical” witch brought the hidden “magic” material Gallium, which plays a key role in enabling the quotidian wonder of the touch screen to the store, and distributed it among the bystanders. With a melting point of 29.76 °C—a temperature close to the body’s—the materials bled in the participant’s hands, reinforcing Protektoramae’s double-spectacle of alienation, breaking through the seamless surfaces of the products, at once fetishized and alienating, and pointing instead to the company’s physical processes of material extraction, technologically embedded within capitalist modes of production and consumption. Other rituals, led by Transformella, Transformalor or Transformellae, focus on notions of reproduction. These identities, which Raether calls “repro-revolutionaries,” trigger the creation of a “hostile tribe” opposed to what he describes as the “utero-economy”: industries of bioengineering and surrogacy that turn economic disparities into business models. While the characters address real issues and developments, informed by thorough research, what they present remains purposefully ambiguous. The “psycho-realism” they employ when setting out against the normativity of the commonly perceived reality, built on systemic sexism and exploitation, in turn opposes the pre-existing modes of criticality. Through it all, they remain ridiculous tricksters in this reality. ■



JOHANNES PAUL RAETHER IS A BERLIN-BASED ARTIST AND PROFESSOR AT THE KUNSTAKADEMIE, DÜSSELDORF. HIS PERFORMATIVE WORK FOCUSES ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITIES CALLED AVATARAS, ALTERIDENTITIES OR SELFSISTERS. IMAGE COURTESY THE ARTIST, KRAUPA-TUSKANY ZEIDLER, BERLIN. PHOTO CREDIT: MARCEL NESTLER