

Saint Martin

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In retrospect, the title of Martin Kippenberger's 1991 debut exhibition in London, *The Beginning was a Retrospective*, has an ironic twist that even Kippenberger, the master of layered innuendo, could not have predicted. Until recently, it seemed that this 'retrospective' at Karsten Schubert's gallery would be both beginning and end, as no other appearance of Kippenberger's work took place in the city for well over a decade despite the artist's prolific production until his death in 1997. Although the brevity of his London appearance probably says more about the now well-documented events of a navel-gazing London art world in the 1990s than about the late artist's work, the decision to devote a survey to his work in 2006 raises the question 'why Kippenberger now?' After all, along with an absence of Kippenberger exhibitions in the UK, we could add a long list of others from his generation in Germany who have gone similarly unnoticed – Albert Oehlen, Georg Herold, Michael Krebber and Werner Büttner for example, to name just a few.

Kippenberger's loudly performative self, prolific production and early death, as well as the endless anecdotes that surround any mention of him, guarantee an art-world notoriety, and his attraction as a father figure for countless artists from the last generation is no doubt partly a result of this cult of personality. The intense interest in his work from younger artists is perhaps argument enough for the current exhibition, but the dominating persona that appeals to many now is probably what deterred institutions from embracing his work during his lifetime. The museum was anyway too slow for Kippenberger's work – its stylistic pace, and running commentary on the present environment, be it artistic, social or cultural – and his output was arguably too large to be satisfied by intermittent museum displays (despite his desire for institutional acknowledgement). Kippenberger, like Jeff Koons and Andy Warhol, was, in any case, a consummate commercial gallery artist: his work exposes the process of art production, the market and the art world in its broadest sense as a network of interrelated structures, and it was best suited to the environment on which it commented. As with all Kippenberger's activities, a dialectic was established in his relationship to the commercial realm, and his immodest participation implied a critical mimicry of the self-celebratory operations of the market.

By the 1990s Kippenberger averaged a show a month, and in addition to the work he made for exhibitions there were the catalogues, posters and announcement cards that were an integral part of every presentation, the artist's books, multiples, and other projects or ephemera that emerged from one idea or another, including such conceptually, if not literally, massive projects as his own Museum of Modern Art, Syros, in Greece (see fig.4), and the world-wide subway system METRO-Net. Kippenberger was prolific in almost every sense; this extended also to the work's content, which is characterised by an endless abundance of mutating references and cross-references.

The scale of Kippenberger's output, its referential topicality and, above all, the role of the artist's personality in the making and presenting of the work are, ironically, reasons both for and against its showing now. The work's stylistic, linguistic and cultural allusions can be written off as fashionable one-liners, relevant as a humorous reaction to the moment but