

## **ZEVS** **THE LAST COWBOY IS DEAD**

Sound piece in collaboration with Scanner.

The Last Cowboy Is Dead is a corpus created by Zevs, consisting of urban action, exhibitions, content available on Instagram and by QR code, as well as an unauthorized advertising campaign. It began on December 24, 2020 and will end at the New Galerie in April 2021. It has taken place in Berlin, Mallorca and Copenhagen.

The Last Cowboy Is Dead begins with an urban action performed by the artist in Berlin. He shoots with paintballs the monumental advertising character which surmounts the Philipp Morris factory of Neuköllnische Allee and which represents the Marlboro Cowboy. The action is a continuation of the Visual Attacks series, initiated by the artist in 2001, where he empties a can of red spray paint on the eyes—or in the middle of the forehead—of faces appearing on advertising posters. The long streaks of paint evoke tears of blood or an execution, a liquidation, of the advertising figure. The use of paintball, if it is a nod to the Hollywood sniper imagery, is also an operational necessity of the action: the Marlboro Cowboy is located on the roof of the factory and is inaccessible.

The action was documented and put together in a short video of 3 min 57 sec using the codes of action films. In the voiceover, we hear the reading of an email sent to the artist by the Korean branch of the Leo Burnett DT advertising agency asking if he would be interested in creating an exclusive pack of Marlboro cigarettes. This is the same agency that in 1953 invented the figure of the Marlboro Cowboy in order to “virilize” filter cigarettes. The video was immediately posted on Instagram.

In the communication of the New Galerie, on Instagram as well as on posters pasted in Paris, there is a QR code. It gives exclusive access to images of a mortuary chamber produced at the CCA Andratx in Mallorca. The walls are covered with an imposing wall painting featuring the words Phillip and Morris, both “liquidated”. The video is projected on curtains at the back and, in the center the arrangement of the sheets of the “death bed” features the famous stylized red M from the pack of cigarettes.

The urban action was an execution, the QR code gives access to a funeral space. Zevs uses the codes of the funeral process. If the representation of death is a constant—even a role—of art, it takes on a very particular meaning in Marlboro storytelling. Five of the Marlboro Cowboys actors died of lung cancer. And in many countries, tobacco is the only product whose marketing packaging has first been neutralized by having to present medical and funeral imagery. Visually and socially, the imagery associated with Marlboro is on a path to extinction. The Last Cowboy.

During full lockdown in Copenhagen beginning February 4, through the window of the Collaborations Art Gallery you could see the “funeral” of The Last Cowboy. A human-sized reproduction of the liquidated Berlin figure was presented in a coffin-shaped transport case. The city health code prevented going there in person.

The New Galerie is the last stop of this smoke and mirrors adventure. Zevs presents a series of canvases inspired by Van Gogh’s tragicomic painting “Skull of a Skeleton Smoking a Cigarette”. The original work was painted by Van Gogh during his last year at the Antwerp Academy. The artist hoped to find a source of emulation and work on live models. There he saw the conservative practice of reproducing human structure from skeletons. Adding a cigarette is a student

gesture, diverting from a classic exercise. Van Gogh painted his background canvas in a dark brown in the manner of the Flemish masters, the technique usually used for portraits of the bourgeoisie of the time. The work is adorned with a surrealist aspect before its time, which the tragic fate of Van Gogh only retroactively reinforces. Today, the work is regularly printed on T Shirts intended for a Gothic clientele.

The reuse and re-contextualization of classic pictorial works is a constant in Zevs' work, like a Pierre Ménard or a situationist. He covers over Van Gogh's replicated painting with a liquidated "Kool" logo. The addition seems to be a comment both on the specific posterity of the painting and on the evolution of the image associated with Kool cigarettes. For many years, the brand has done everything to make cool be spelled with a K; recently it was convicted of specifically targeting African Americans.

Van Gogh's initial painting measures 12.6 × 9.6 inches, within the standards of a portrait painting at that time. Zevs' remakes measure 59 × 47 inches, a classic size for a contemporary canvas. A series of small paintings on objects accompanies them. Zevs bought packs of counterfeit cigarettes near his studio in Barbès. Reproducing the process of legal neutralization, he first immerses them in a "bath" of white road paint, a recurring material in the artist's work. Meticulously, it reproduces the design of the original package, associated with the QR code referring to the corpus. Some variations occur. Ironically, the counterfeit Marlboro packs are more real than the real ones, and still retain the original design. From the fakes (restorations?) Zevs makes real fakes.

A stereo soundtrack inhabits the exhibition, created in collaboration with the sound artist Scanner, whose practice involves the use of sounds "stolen" from the street or from the airwaves used by the police. On one of the tracks, the artist subtly distorts the most common prefix of mantras: om. If the song seems to ooze sincerity—the phonemes of the mantras are supposed to have an imprint—given the context, one cannot help but think of a sonic resemblance to Marlboro. On the other track, the noise of the black market for the Barbès cigarettes is humming in the background. An audio montage of the ads by the sellers becomes a Dikhr song.

Simultaneously, a street marketing campaign in Paris using the graphic and editorial components of the Le Monde, Beaux-Arts, Télé Z and Paris Match magazines, is creating the big splash of big splashes, the fake news of fake news. As a final coffin nail, the inaugural video of the Berlin city action is shown in the basement of the New Galerie.