

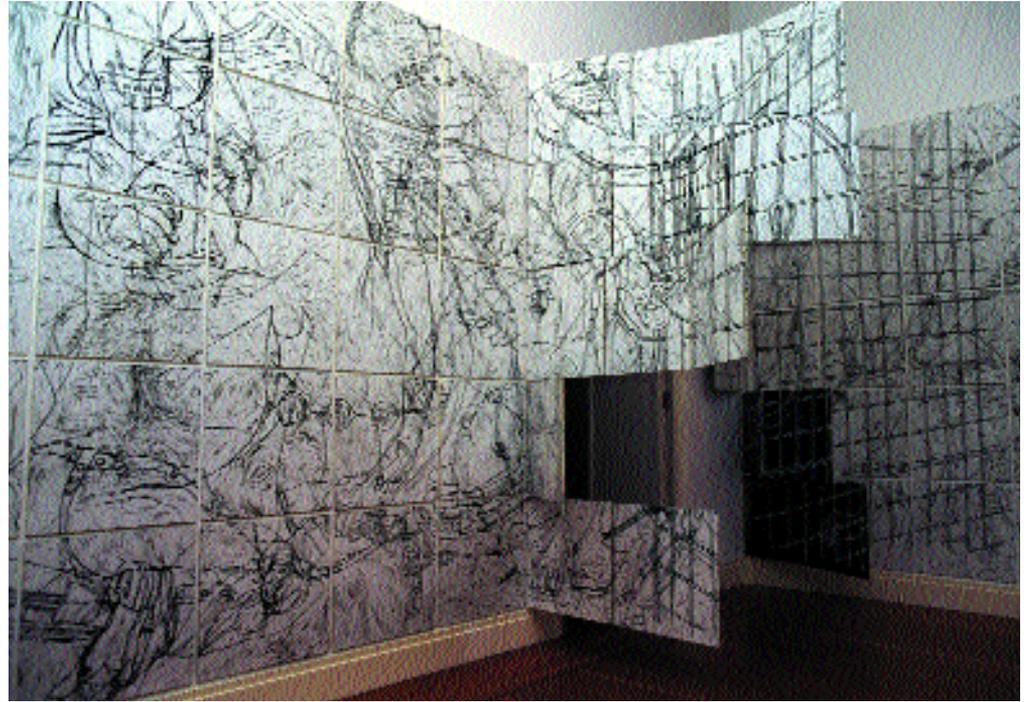
Berlin

Berlin Biennial 2004

Biennials are platforms that engage the international art community in a discussion of contemporary topics including the implications of globalism, nationalism, postcolonialism, consumerism, the relationship of center to margins, and the fate of Modernist ideals in a post-postmodern world. Hou Hanru, in *On the Mid-Ground*, describes the process as follows: "Art, like a virus, penetrates into the dominant system of global communications to provoke a consciousness in flux." Biennials as carriers of this creative and intellectual discussion have the possibility of disorienting the "center" by transcending the established cultural wall and provoking a movement that mimes current instability and multiplicity. The strength of this calling, however, can in many ways be undone: for instance, by a curatorial strategy that reduces art to an illustration of an overriding theme.

At the third Berlin Biennial, Ute Meta Bauer's curatorial strategy, using a wheel, with subcategories designated as hubs and the artworks representing spokes, overpowered and made pawns of both the art and the viewer's imagination. The sections of the biennial were titled Migration, Urban Conditions, Sonic Scapes, Fashions and Scenes, and Other Cinemas, among others.

Piotr Nathan, a Polish-born artist who now lives in Berlin, created one of the very few sculptures presented here. His room installation was composed of black and white square tiles, etched with abstract drawings. Old benches were scattered about, places to rest and contemplate the drawings, which slowly revealed a homosexual component. Nathan's multi-dimensional works seemed at first to be heterogeneous, but, on closer inspection, they related to one another through themes of the body and identity. Lying in a field of tension, between being graspable and slipping away, they



challenged and surprised the viewer, and therein lies their strength. Nathan attempts to give a place to the fleeting, transient, and disparate without depriving these moments of their specific and complex qualities.

Designer Walter van Beirendonck was the best among those in the fashion hub. Whereas other artists in this group bordered on the very dull, he, the wild one of a group of innovative clothing designers called The Antwerp Six, offered excitement. His work relies on antic theatricality; once in a fashion show at The Lido in Paris, his models were choreographed to fall off the stage. Fascinated by toys, computers, and new media, Beirendonck presents colorful and weird collections. The video here was comic and rhythmic: a fashion show, a runway of moving

sculptures and live cyborgs dressed in a head-to-toe combination of futuristic street garb that broke down genre and gender boundaries.

Fanni Niemi-Junkola's narrative video was definitely "best in show." Finnish artists, located on the peripheries of both East and West, have an interesting take on the globalized outlook. *a horseman's story* recounts the life of a horse dealer and trot-racing jockey, Jalmari Svarti. The artist focused on the horseman's relationship to his daughter and son. The brilliance

of the artist/editor moving the work back and forth between a personal and a formal, Muybridgean, rhythmic exercise was stunning.

Sculptor and video artist Judith Barry explored the complexities of competing systems of representation. She typically engages the spectator with alienated depictions of profane reality, ideologies, and the physical spaces of an exhibition. Her work here took the form of experiential video installations that highlighted the use of technology and representation within larger ideological contexts.

Above: Piotr Nathan, *Die Weberei der Düfte*, 2003. Etched foam board, 400 x 1,430 cm. Right: Akira Suzuki, *Workshop for the newspaper dome*, 2004. 800 kilos of newspapers, 200 x 200 x 200 cm. Both artists represented in the Berlin Biennial.



The works of Belgian artist Fernando Bryce consist of copied historical documents—language and images from the media and illustrations about history that he collects from populist literature—in this case, from the Marxist newspaper *POUM*, a journal that documented portions of Franco’s dictatorship. This “mimetic analysis” serves to weaken the original statements, thereby converting them from propaganda into a kind of lost and found.

For Bauer’s architecture and communality hub, Akira Suzuki (a collective workshop for architecture) portrayed shelter buildings using common materials, such as plywood and wastepaper. These materials, originally employed for the emergency living quarters erected during Japan’s earthquakes, were here used in a seven-day workshop with children and conveyed to participants the basics of architecture.

Berlin is a city struggling to keep up with a growing multi-cultural and nomadic society. Made up of countless minorities and marginals, vagrants, refugees, rebels, pilgrims, heretics, and artists of all stripes, there should be sufficient materials to make a diverse story. Yet except for a handful of good works, the biennial contained few of the marvelous works that I’ve seen in and out of Berlin in the last 10 years. Where were the artists shown at the Hamburger Bahnhof, NGBK, and Mitte galleries? Where were the likes of the knock ‘em dead artists in the first Berlin Biennial, “Berlin, Berlin”? The third Berlin Biennial’s undermining curatorial pedagogy allowed the artworks to be superseded by a lesson plan.

—Carolee Thea

Cologne

Art Cologne

Art Cologne is the largest art fair in Germany and one of the most significant in all of Europe. An annual event for the past 37 years, it has remained one of the most important places in Germany for communication among artists, gallery owners, collectors, and



critics. The focal point for this year’s sales exhibition, which has always been a mix of modern classic, postwar, and contemporary art, was decidedly on paintings and installations; around 250 galleries from 22 countries were chosen from almost 400 applications. Considering Germany’s difficult economic situation, the motto for the times could be “No Experiments.” The included works were of consistently high quality: many top-class names were present, but even in the booths attempting to foster young artists there was nothing startling to be found.

With “Sculpture Cologne,” three-dimensional art has always had a special forum here. A row of generously dimensioned booths serving the promotion and presentation of sculpture has always taken up a large amount of space on the ground floor. Unfortunately, such engagement was reduced this year; these booths had only half of their original presentation space and will be completely eliminated next year. Some gallery owners particularly regret the lost exhibition space, because it has especially served young artists.

In the past, “Sculpture Cologne” provided a special flair to the fair, because the booths were not only accessible from the ground floor but could also be seen from the second-floor gallery. Even though this year’s presentation had been whittled down, the sculptures still dominated. This particularly applied to the moving, inflatable horses by Max Streicher.

For Streicher, a Canadian represented by the Fabrice Marcolini/Artcore Gallery from Toronto, Art Cologne marked his second showing in Germany this year; the first was the “Current Canadian Art” exhibition in Erfurt. In Cologne, he showed two of his *Four horses*. The large white horses made of fabric panels sewn together and filled with air were constantly in motion. Stretched out on the floor, as if they had just gone to sleep, the giant bodies snuggled together. Their monumental heads, however, gently floated up and down, as if the horses would rise up on all fours at any moment. Streicher uses the sheer size of the work to overwhelm observers’ normal perception of space; the utter immensity of the horses went far beyond the borders and walls of the display space.

Max Streicher, *Four horses* (detail), 2003. Vinyl, electric fans, 8 x 10 x 2 meters each. Work shown at Art Cologne.

A tree by Jacob Hashimoto, in contrast, was poetic and quiet, but it still filled the space of Verona’s Studio la Città with its presence. The 30-year-old artist lives and works in Los Angeles and produces works based on natural forms, which he translates into serial repetitions that reach a room-filling density. Spheres or disks are transformed into spatial cloud-like experiences. The work on display in Cologne was created for the space. It was Hashimoto’s first work not only to include natural elements, but also to take on a natural form—a tree. The leaves, however, were his well-known spheres; trunk and branches were formed by pieces of an untreated, light-colored wood riveted together. This completely artificial tree, with neither leaves nor birds nor smell nor color, actually just a synonym for tree, had a meditative effect on visitors.

Arcangelo Sassolino played with the reversal of weight and lightness. His concrete works, protruding out from the walls, were