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## Berlin Glitzkrieg

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by Carolee Thea

*All urban voids create their own kind of cerebral sediment, where particles and fragments make themselves known as solid consciousness. These holes are the monumental vacancies that define without trying, the memory-traces of an abandoned set of failures - Robert Smithson*

The first Berlin Biennale, the Art Forum Berlin art fair, the opening of the "Sensation" exhibition at the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum, Rundgänge (gallery walks) in Mitte and Charlottenburg, a slew of openings at new alternative spaces, and endless opulent and funky celebrations, collided in the fall of 1998 to create an art frenzy of enormous proportions. The Germans have always understood the economic rewards that culture brings to a city, and soon after reunification the plan to recreate Berlin as the new cultural center of Europe began. In the fall of 1998 the international art world was invited for a preview.

Its location at the crossroads between East and West, an expectation of the millennium, and anticipation of once again becoming the capital of Germany have fueled a building delirium in Berlin. The transformation of this city over the past 10 years has been awesome. In the year 2000 it will be unrecognizable. Specifically targeted for transfiguration by architectural glitzkrieg is the 40-year-old void at Potsdamer Platz, the product of Allied bombing during Nazi rule and neglect by the DDR. Rabbits and scavengers have made it their playground, as have developers, architects, architectural philosophers, and critical theorists. This 17-acre site and others like it in the city that have come to represent absence and memory are now disrupted by the glitzy architectural fantasies of a united Germany.

Mega corporations Sony and Daimler-Benz, with their principal architects, Renzo Piano, Richard Rogers, Arata Isozake, and Helmut Jahn, have designed a complex of apartments, theaters, a casino, 10 new buildings, 10 new streets, a central piazza, and three acres of ponds and rivulets right on what used to be the border of East and West. Pink and blue plastic drainage pipes twist in the dirt and cranes fill the sky in Berlin's Mitte (the former East). Here, the streets are blocked by steel girders, mud, plasterboard, cement mixers, rubble, diggers, cars, trucks, and hard hats.

The first Berlin Biennale took as its subject the construction site that presently defines this city. Seventy international artists who have lived or worked here were chosen by curator Klaus Biesenbach, who initially worked with Nancy Spector and Hans Ulrich Obrist. This "glocal" event was based on Walter Benjamin's idea of the 19th-century flaneur. The curatorial concept was to describe the "inside/ outside of the city as construction site; the material, memory, chaos and the desire to dissolve." The Kunst-Werke, Postfuhramt, and Akademie der Kunste, all located in Mitte, housed the installations. Each of the architecturally and historically distinct buildings contributed to an ambiance that was both haunting and transitional. The Postfuhramt is a dilapidated Baroque structure that was once a post office. Most of the art for the Biennale was sited here. Installed near the entrance was a Fluxus-inspired street altar made by Thomas Hirschhorn, Otto Freundlich's Altar, commemorating a former Berlin artist and Holocaust victim. Made of flowers and cheap detritus, it typified an aesthetic common in bars and cafes around Mitte after the unification.

A simple boardwalk designed by architect/artist Walter Musacchi flowed through the Postfuhramt's maze of unrenovated interior rooms and hallways. The first interior installation dissolved into a seductive mazelike lounge space created by a group of hip designers, De Luxe. Surrounding a central cylinder, small lucite sea horses were encased in a fluid of colored lights, like aquatic dioramas from Blade Runner. Small glass tables, bass and drum

music, vibrating banquettes, and a light show interacted with art junkies to create an interior sculpture: a public/private place to meet, relax, or transform. A contrasting and jarring work on the same floor was Jonathan Meese's Marquis de Sade Room, a multi-level space containing a glut of adolescent clutter.

Natural deterioration, peeling paint, cracked walls, and stained flowered wallpaper in rooms, hallways, stairwells, and rotunda were incorporated in various installations, while Musacchi's recyclable boardwalk insured directive and contrast. On the second floor, still on Musacchi's path, rooms branching off of a central rotunda housed installations by several artists. One of the most mesmerizing was Heike Baranowsky's video, *Passage 11 Zug 199*. A taped train appeared to endlessly leave the station but before the last car disappeared from the screen, the train stopped and moved backward. The braking and stopping perhaps reversed the process of departing and arriving, and the small tape loop continued perhaps to mimic the repetitive nature of history. In Ugo Rondinone's *So Much Water, So Close to Home*, a large window covered with red cellophane overlooked Oranienburger Strasse, near the red-light district. Speakers set into the wall hypnotically repeated the phrase, "Everyday is sunshine" while video monitors on the wall showed people in mundane activities. John Bock's *liquidats Aura Aromaport Folio*, an installation and performance with Viennese Actionist roots, also suggested surveillance and secrecy. Viewers were drawn into Bock's foul-smelling, two-level room containing sculptures fashioned from everyday objects and strewn like discarded clothing. The work also included a secret performance by the artist underneath the steps leading to the top level (an element reminiscent of Vito Acconci's 1970s work, *Seedbed*). Andreas Slominski's slight piece did at least follow the inside/outside theme; for *Enough Colour to Paint the Funkturm*, Slominski simply placed that many paint buckets on skids. (The *funkturm* is a radio tower in Charlottenburg).

Swinging ominously from the cupola of the Postfuhramt's Baroque rotunda was a large fan by Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson, who creates site specific installations using artificial or natural phenomena. He says that the works he develops of ephemeral beauty "outside" the economic system are both a critical and a romantic commentary. The swinging fan at the Postfuhramt made me aware of the scale and sweep of the circular space while threatening to limit my movement. Other works by Eliassen were represented at various galleries at the Art Forum. In the same domed area, Tobias Rehberger showed a series of "portraits." Rehberger commissioned friends to describe themselves as a bouquet of flowers in a specific vase then each individual floral arrangement was fabricated and assembled here to create a whimsical still life. The ornately domed ceiling, the absurdly swinging industrial fan, and the pots of flowers ironically conflated danger, beauty, and history. Rehberger's work dissolves the hierarchy of art and design, everyday incidents, lifestyles, art history, and entertainment in order to recombine them in new forms.

Felix Gonzales Torres's posters distributed throughout the city announced that "Es ist nur eine Frage der Zeit" (it's only a matter of time). The phrase, with its Gothic typography, was charged with the menace of calamity. The same work was shown in the Kunstverein in Hamburg dedicated to the AIDS theme. The ambiguity of the phrase relates not only to AIDS, but is based on the artist's personal experience of the German refusal of and animosity toward foreigners. Other works of note at the Postfuhramt were by Dominique Gonzales-Foerster and Christoph Schlingensief.

The themes that resonated so well with the crumbling condition of the Postfuhramt ceased to operate in the same way in the Kunst-Werke. After the wall came down, this DDR margarine factory became an alternate exhibition space, the Center for Contemporary Art, the restoration of which was completed one month before the exhibition opened.

A cobbled courtyard carpeted with Musacchi's runway/boardwalk was flanked by a bookshop and the Cafe Bravo, designed by Dan Graham. The first interior works were by Monica Bonvicini, who created three separate pieces about destruction. The first, located in the entrance foyer, *Be Careful With What You Wish For*, consisted of a large ventilator, which intermittently blew gusts of 30,000 cubic feet of air and cushioned the sound of the battering ram from the next work, a nearby video, *Swinging Housewife*, a video work with a feminist slant based on a Louise Bourgeois drawing. Bonvicini taped a naked woman, her head encased in a metal model house, which she banged against two adjacent walls. In the same room, Bonvicini knocked out a wall and installed a large picture window, exposing a construction site in the rear courtyard. The window opened through perspectival arches onto the next street, offering a glimpse before the opening was bricked over again.

Next was a disheveled funhouse environment containing a series of open cubicles where the Honey Suckle Company lived during the exhibition. Each member had a bed, TV, and VCR. Envisioned as a shelter for the homeless, it contained ideas for a future collective or ashram, combining life, work, relaxation, orgiastic fun, and project development. Penetrating this environment was Carsten Holler's indoor-outdoor, snaking stainless steel tunnel-slides whose entrance on the third floor emptied its players onto the first floor while also functioning as a mandatory exit route from the building. On the second floor, Daniel Pflumm's *Call from Germany*, Q&A focused on video headshots of pairs of CNN correspondents. The captured moment of their interaction was of a repeating a 10th of a second gesture that depicted a slight blink or nod while each listened to another correspondent. All we could hear was the drone of bass and drum music. This interior moment of pause was a fascinating contrast to an exterior frenzy. On the opposite wall from the Pflumm video was *Center Peer*, a work designed by the architects Gruntuch and Ernst. A six-inch cylinder was removed from a three-foot-thick wall; its circular interior was painted chartreuse and with the addition of a well-hidden mirror, one could view the symbolic Television Tower, the tallest point visible in the East during the GDR. This tower has also been the subject for a recent architectural proposal to expand and enhance its use and appearance. Near the Brandenburg Gate, in the crumbling Akademie der Künste, was the work of Sarah Sze. Her tenuous and obsessive construction, a city made of wire and matchsticks, plastic flowers, lamps, and dangling ceiling fans, was reminiscent of early Judy Pfaff. Also in this location, Rirkrit Tiravanija exhibited *Cinema de Ville, Berlin/Bangkok (1997)*. Consisting of two identical large green tents, it housed videos depicting life in each of the titled cities. Tiravanija also cooked (or curated) the food for a fun-filled opening night party at the Postfuhramt and participated in other Biennale events.

Transgressing art borders within a thematic context has become a strategy in this art world culture. The same artists or their works also appeared in different transformations at Art Forum, the Biennale, or Congress 3000, where late night symposia, multi-media performance, and cybercafes celebrated the psycho-geography of a metropolis in flux.

The third Art Forum Berlin, with 145 booths, was smaller than its older siblings in Cologne and Basel. To its credit, this energetic event has been searching for new strategies to enliven the relationship between art and the economy while encouraging patrons and collectors to create opportunities for young artists. For example, one sponsor, Bankgesellschaft Berlin, funded Art Forum to invite 31 international curators and museum directors as prospective clients. As partner to the Art Forum, the bank also awarded prizes for the two best booths. One was won by the Chelsea gallerist, Xavier LaBoulbenne, and will allow him to return next year with a larger booth even though his sales were disappointing. Most of the participating American dealers found the Berlin Fair an important place to do business, not always for immediate results but for the future. The fact that the 1998 event fell 4,000 visitors short of the previous year's tally suggests a necessary rethinking of its schedule, which coincided with the Sao Paulo Biennale as well as having too many overlapping events and an opening on Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of atonement.

Another link between Art Forum and industry was the establishment of the Paul Cassirer Award donated by the German real estate developer Groth+Braalfs, which is cultivating a central area in Berlin called "Tiergarten Dreick." New buildings for the headquarters of the Christian Democratic Party, the Mexican Embassy, banks, newspapers, and high-end apartment buildings are planned to include sculptures and other artworks. Each gallerist participating in the fair suggested one artist for a site-specific work. The prizes, DM 20,000, were won by Monica Bonvicini and Liam Gillick. To encourage participation by younger gallerists, Art Forum offered 17 small affordable spaces. One from Berlin, Künstler Haus Bethanien, is run by Christopher Tanert. His space in Berlin, once a children's hospital in Kreuzberg has offered studios and stipends for international artists since the 1970s. Shift, a new alternate gallery, is obsessed with transgressing art boundaries. Co-founder Martin Berghaumer conducted a lighthearted experiment at the fair by taking Shift to the stock exchange, to stimulate discussions about a new fund-raising model that provided support for artistic initiatives and at the same time created a synergy between art and business.

Art Club Berlin, curated by Klara Wallner, has been entrenched at ArtForum for the last two years. The club is a multi-functional art space funded by the Fair and private sponsorship. Artist Flora Neuwirth created a social space with lighting, seating, and a bar, serving as a platform for fashion, music from international DJs, and a video library containing works by

Erich Weiss, Mark Wallinger, Tracy Emin, and Monica Bonvicini. There is no lack of alternative spaces in Berlin: Pavilion der Volksbuhne, loop-raum fur aktuelle kunst, soma, conves TV, micro e.v., are only a few. What characterizes them all is a desire to cross over the traditional boundaries of the institutionalized art world.

BuroFriedrich, opened last year by freelance curator Walling Boers, has a program of ever-changing exhibitions sponsored by the Dutch government. Boers considers his space not as a classic showroom but rather as an office that generates projects like video archives, lounges, billboards, concerts, and fashion shows for international artists and performers.

Another alternative arena with more traditional underpinnings and probably the best bet for success is the recently inaugurated INIT Kunsthalle Berlin. Located in a defunct supermarket, INIT is the brainchild of a select group of gallerists who joined forces with a few collectors and critics. They opened with the works of Martha Rosler.

Since the fall of the Wall in 1989 and the reintegration of the city, artists have come in a steady stream, not just from Germany but from around the world, attracted as much by the revitalizing times as by the prospect of large, cheap studios in the heart of the former East Berlin. Generous funding for this migratory herd was another incentive. Now the economics and sociology of unification, moving the capital, rebuilding the city, the world economic crisis, the merger with European markets, and a government with tighter purse strings have significantly diminished arts funding.

Yet sponsorship for the arts is always deliberated in Germany. Banks, industry, real estate developers, and private sponsors are being sought and educated. Monika Grutters, a Parliamentary representative from the Christian Democratic party and chairperson for the Cultural Foundation for Bank Gesellschaft said, "Berlin is the focus for all of Germany. Now that it will have capital status there is less state money for Public Service. The designation "Pubic Service" is sub-categorized into: education, science, research and culture. Before unification the Federal Government gave DM600 million, per year for culture and now the number has been reduced to 60 million. The cuts also include the compulsory retirement of 80.000 Public Service employees. Sponsorship sought from the private sector and corporations undermines incentive by the restriction of narrow categories for donating. One is anonymous and untaxed; the other, called "classic," is not anonymous and is heavily taxed."

Where many wager on the success of Berlin as a city of opportunity, others see certain realities as a hindrance. In *Critical Inquiry* (Autumn 1997) Andreas Huyssen says, "Berlin already has surplus office space for rent, yet more is being built every day. There is good reason to doubt whether Helmut Jahn's happy tent, which hovers on Potsdamer Platz above the central plaza of the Sony development, will make up for the loss of urban life that these new developments will inevitably entail."

Klaus Biesenbach, a resident of Berlin for the past 10 years says, "Berlin can be seen as representative of an evolving international situation, but at this moment, Berlin really presents more areas of friction than other cities. Five years ago people thought Berlin would have five million inhabitants, but instead the numbers are falling. Berlin is unpredictable." Perhaps with jobs created by the newly residing corporations and government, the equation will change.

Ostentatious architectural glut combined with the relocation of the capital presents a larger question for the future of Berlin. Is this a Babylonian Glitzkrieg like Los Angeles or Tokyo whose future pretentiousness may be seen as an asset, or will it be blighted by the logistical issues of difference, location, economics, unification and a shroud of history that won't go away?

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CAROLEE THEA INTERVIEWS KLAUS BIESENBACH AT THE BERLIN BIENNALE 1998.

Klaus Biesenbach, the curator of the 1998 Berlin Biennale is also the artistic director of Kunst-Werke, the Center for Contemporary Art in Berlin. His exhibitions include the Berlin Biennial (1998), the opening of PS 1 in New York (1997), "Nach Weimar" at the

Kunstsammlungen zu Weimar (1996), "Club Berlin" and "Projected Images" at the Venice Biennale (1997) and collaborations at Documenta X, "Hybrid Workspace" (1997), and in Berlin, "Christo in Berlin" (1993).

Carolee Thea: I understand that you originally studied medicine. How did it happen that you became involved in the art world?

Klaus Biesenbach: I was always involved in the art world while I was studying medicine. When I came to Berlin I volunteered in the Kulturamt, the cultural administration and I was asked to found the Kunst-Werke. There was an empty building that was planned to house studios and an exhibition center. First everybody thought it was state-owned and would be financed by the city but then a claim was filed by a family who said they owned it. It turned out that we rented it from someone who didn't own it so we had, by law, no contract.

CT: How was Kunst-Werke originally formed? Who were some of the members and are they still involved?

KB: Alexandra Binsholm was one of the founding members as well as Philipp von Doering, as well as myself and Alfonso Rutelliano. Alfonso is now a lawyer in New York. Alexandra and Philipp are still on the board. And I am the artistic director.

CT: What is the nature of the alliance that you have with P.S.1?

KB: It is a conceptual alliance. For me it was important to go first through the renovation with P.S. 1 and reconceive the institution in order to learn to do this in Berlin.

CT: In the past you worked with the Hochschule in Berlin. Will you continue to work with younger artists?

KB: Definitely. I have been a guest lecturer at curatorial programs and I also work with some cultural institutions in New York and New Jersey. I think it is interesting to work with emerging artists or students who are just learning to be artists.

CT: How will Kunst-Werke function now?

KB: That is a question for the cultural ministry that provides the funding. That's really an important question-- if they will be able to provide enough support for the Kunst-Werke to become a real institution. Before it was more of a student initiative and now it has become an internationally known space in the city. I think the city has to decide if they want to invest or not.

CT: Kathrin Becker said that Kunst-Werke started as an interesting co-op hut and has now become the "Kempinsky" of the art world in Berlin. First it was a very small hotel and now, a very big one.

KB: I like the comparison. The difference in the metaphor is that it is still a place for emerging artists. The Kempinsky has different clients than a small hotel. We will stick with the young guests. The service is improved and the young guests remain, it is perfect!

CT: The Berlin Biennale is like a laboratory for contemporary art and culture. How were the artists chosen?

KB: The artists were chosen by a team. The idea was to choose emerging artists who became more visible in the '90s, who have worked or lived in the city of Berlin or around it, and who have an interdisciplinary orientation.

CT: Will you do the Congress again?

KB: Yes, I will. The Congress was a very important component of the Biennale. It helped to produce a new piece by Christoph Schlingensiefel and performances by Pipilotti Rist, Jonathan Meese, John Bock, and Honey Suckle Company. They all performed for the first time on a big stage.

CT: I liked the boardwalk in the Postfuhramt It functioned like a parcours while retaining the

special character of the architecture. Especially In the rotunda, along with the work of Tobias Rehberger and Olafur Eliasson, the dialogue between the architecture and boardwalk and the sculpture was very successful.

KB: Walter Musacchi designed it. He is very creative and is able to improvise in difficult conditions like in the Postfuhramt. He proposed a boardwalk through all the buildings. The Postfuhramt, in its original state, was like an archaeological site. Creating another level allowed the possibility of bringing in the artworks. It cost nothing because the wood was sponsored. It is wood you use to shape concrete and will be recycled afterwards.

CT: Although the Kunst-Werke is a beautifully renovated building, the Akademie and the Postfuhramt worked better conceptually. What do you think?

KB: We originally wanted to use the Kunst-Werke as a construction site and remove one ceiling, but the whole building threatened to collapse. Four weeks before the opening, the building itself was in danger. We were forced to put concrete around everything to secure the building. We had to install steel beams inside, and because of fire construction laws, they had to be covered with concrete. For this reason we couldn't use it as a rough space. It was an emergency so we decided to paint it and leave the floors raw instead of having an unpainted but renovated site.

CT: In the original press release there were three curators mentioned. I was surprised when I arrived to find that only you were remaining. What happened?

KB: Putting the concept together and achieving a realization under incredibly difficult circumstances was impossible for three people in different locations. It was clear that we had to enlarge the team because of the interdisciplinary approach and the different aspects of the show like the Congress and the book. We realized that one of us had to be here to get this project on earth. The Kunst-Werke was under heavy renovation at this time so it was like putting a show into a museum while the museum was being built. It became clear that one had to be here continuously to direct things and to make fast decisions. Because of the situation of working closely together for two years on a very conceptual basis was an arrangement of trust. Every decision was rechecked with the other ones and the show was put up in the presence of the curators. Yet certain decisions could now be made alone freeing the situation enormously. I think all three of us are pleased to see the concept realized without a loss of too much energy. We also feel that we found a very contemporary form of presentation with the enlarged team.

CT: What will happen to these building(s) after the Biennale:

KB: The Akademie is going to be rebuilt by Guenther Behnisch. The future of the Postfuhramt is unclear and the Kunst-Werke will be reopened next year as a Center for Contemporary Art, with or without me. At the moment two floors are occupied with the Biennale and two more floors will be opened after the completed renovation next year.

CT: Will you do the Biennale again?

KB: I think a lot of people invested a lot of energy, so actually I think I will do a second one in the year 2000.