

Berlin/Biennale 1998

>"I really like the discomfort of Berlin...the gruesome history and the outrageous way they're rebuilding....like obsessive compulsive ants with a grandiosity complex. (One wouldn't think there was an economic crisis.) Every >piece of vacant land, bombed out and never rebuilt, is turned into a building site by greedy developers and by >politicians who set up competitions for famous architects to create new visions (with certain guidelines: Prussian, >conservative or American, flamboyantist). I like the voices of Rem Koolhaas and Daniel Liebeskind; the voids >appeal to me...I wish they'd leave them be...they speak of Shoah. They're a place to scavenge and to pray."

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Berlin is holding its first Biennale at a moment when much of its former East, the Berlin Mitte, is an enormous construction site. What fuels the delirium is that in the year 2000 Berlin will once again become the imperial capital of Germany, and a world city. The Biennale, the Art Fair, the opening of Sensation at the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum, Rundgang in Mitte and Charlottenburg and endless parties collided to create a cultural frenzy. Seventy International artists who have lived or worked in Berlin were chosen for the Biennale by three renowned curators. The curators guided conceptual ideas that echoed the inside/outside of the city as construction site, the materials, the memory, the chaos, the order and the desire to dissolve.

The sites that house the installations and projects are in three buildings in the Berlin Mitte: the Kunst-Werke, the newly renovated nexus of the Biennale, the Postfuhramt and the Akademie der Künste, distinctive as architecture and still encrusted by time. The Haus der Kulturen der Welt, in Tiergarten was the stage for Congress 3000 for the late night symposia, multi-media performance and cybercafes.

The Kunst-Werke, The Center for Contemporary Art on Auguststrasse was an 18th century Prussian estate and a margarine factory in the GDR; and became the Kunst-Werke in 1991. Here reigns its artistic director, Klaus Biesenbach, who is also the founder and co-curator of the Berlin/Biennale. Hans Ulrich Obrist and Nancy Spector shared the curatorial position with him until one month before the opening.

The Akademie der Künste is a dilapidated beaux-arts exhibition facility built in 1905 next to the Brandenburg Gate. During the Nazi era it was occupied by the offices of Albert Speer and used as the Akademie der Künste in the GDR. The Postfuhramt is a 19th century baroque design civic institution, grand and dilapidated, not unlike the old PS I. It was

a central post office, complete with stable, and equipped with a private gym for the postmen. Here on Oranienburgerstrasse, in walking distance from Kunst-Werke, we find most of the exhibited works.

Just outside the Postfuhramt, Thomas Hirschhorn created a street altar for the Jewish artist Otto Freundlich, a Holocaust victim. The flowers and cheap detritus are typical of the found materials that created a certain aesthetic design in ambient bars and cafes around Mitte after the reunion. Upon entering the Postfuhramt, I dissolved into a seductive diaphanous maze-like lounge space created by 3 de luxe, a group of hip designers. Installed around a central cylinder, fabricated lucite sea horses are encased in a fluid of colored lights, like an aquatic diorama from Blade Runner. Small glass tables, bass and drum music, vibrating banquettes and a light show interact with the art junkies, creating a public/private place to meet, to relax or take a moment to transform. This typifies a new kind of ambient public-place in Berlin first exhibited at Document X in 1997.

The natural deterioration, peeling paint, cracked walls and stained flowered wall paper that appear here in rooms, hallways, stairwells and rotundas are retained in various installations, while a new wooden footpath designed by interior designer/architect, Walter Musacchi creates a unifying and limiting parcours. Hallways and outer rooms contain art works or installations. To the rear, on the first floor, there's an open theater where a transfixing black and white and bloody film by the multitalented artist/ politico Christoph Schlingensiefel replicates a kind of thirties or forties late night TV horror film and warps your time sense. Schlingensiefel's other activities include the formation of a political party, CHANCE 2000. He took part in the elections the night before the opening and installed his party headquarters upstairs (shades of Beuys). I'm always uncomfortable when art conflates with a self-styled politico but I'm told that Schlingensiefel's modus operandi is to make one uncomfortable. Schlingensiefel also participated in a performance at the congress. Fabrice Hybert's video speeds us through the Venice canals, racing with time to reach Berlin in time for the Biennale. Christoph Keller's technologically inventive photographs are the result of his special apparatus, a helioflex, which attached to the camera can light an area that would otherwise remain in the shade. It produces interior views on a long photographic strip where a fixed point is no longer apparent since the moment and locus of observation has been transformed into movement. It is also a kind of surveillance instrument. Jonathan Meese's, Marquis de Sade Room, included a hodge-podge of information, jarring me only for its large and dumb presence in the exhibition. But hey, this

is Berlin.

On the second floor, we are still on Musacci's boardwalk. Rooms spoke off the central rotunda housing installations by several artists. Heike Baranowsky mesmerizes me with her video/ films. *Passage II Zug 199* depicts a train endlessly leaving a station. Before the last car exits the screen the train brakes, stops and moves backward. Braking and stopping reverses the process of departing and the small tape loop endlessly repeats. Do we know where we're going? Can we get there? In the next room we stand behind a large window covered with red cellophane which transforms the view outside. Ugo Rondinone creates a kind of surveillance onto this street near the red-light district on Oranienburger Strasse where very little is happening. We watch. Speakers set into the wall hypnotically repeat the title phrase Everyday is Sunshine. Another surveillance piece, John Bock's, *liquiditstaan*, has actionist roots (i.e. Schwarzkogler), and is also reminiscent of Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* of the early 70's. Here in an odoriferous two level room sculptures made of everyday objects are strewn like discarded clothing. We climb the steps to the top level and crouch over Bock's secret performance taking place underneath like in a false bottomed suitcase. The artist is documented by one camera which represents just one observer. This contemporary actionist work speaks of secret hiding places sequestered from the Stasis, the Nazis or (bringing it home) to the Moral Majority. *Enough Colour to Paint the Funkturm*, (a radio tower in Charlottenburg) Andreas Slominski's work spoking off the domed room, is inhabited by paint buckets on skids, a form of inside/outside play.

Upon entering the rotunda our paths are further controlled by Olafur Eliasson's large fan ominously swinging from the cupola. Eliasson creates site-specific installations that intrigue through artificial or natural phenomena. This gestural work makes us aware of the scale and sweep of the room and threatens to limit our movement. In the same space a work by Tobias Rehberger portrays his artist friends as bunches of flowers in specially commissioned pots to create a physical still-life. The ornately domed ceiling, the absurdly sweeping industrial fan and the pots of flowers ironically conflate danger, beauty and history.

The ambulatory brings you to Dominique Gonzales-Foersters fictional uninhabited room titled, *R.W. F.* (Rainer Werner Fassbinder). Here, typical cheap seventies furniture captures the atmosphere of melancholic stories which describe living on the fringe of society. An atmosphere for reminiscence. Another memory jogger, Felix Gonzales-Torres poster-works distributed in the city say, *Es ist nur eine Frage der Zeit* (it's only a matter of time). This phrase and its Gothic typol-

ogy is charged with the menace of calamity. This is a reinstallation of the work, which was shown in the Kunstverein in Hamburg dedicated to the AIDS theme. The ambiguity of the phrase relates not only to AIDS, it is also based on the artist's personal experience of the German animosity towards foreigners and its general refusal of others.

The themes that resonate so well in the Postfuhrahmt due to its deteriorated condition, age and haunting presence cease to operate in the same way in the newly refurbished Kunst-Werke. Here the work speaks more about construction, building renovation or social ideas.

We enter an elegant cobbled courtyard with seating arrangements surrounded by a book shop and the new glass Cafe Bravo designed by Dan Graham. Monica Bonvicini, (a prizewinner at the ArtFair), did three works about destruction. They appear in the same space but for me they conceptually merge. The first work in the entrance foyer is entitled, *Be Careful With What You Wish For*. A large ventilator blows a gust of 30,000 cubic feet of air from above, overlaying the sound of the battering ram in the next work. A video, a proto-actionist feminist work, *Hausfrau Swinging* is based on a Louise Bourgeois drawing and shows a naked woman whose head is encased in a house which she uses as a battering ram on two adjacent walls. The work is actually and conceptually thunderous. In another area of the room Bonvincini knocked out a wall and installed a large picture window which peers into a construction site in the rear courtyard which leads out through perspectival arches onto the next street. I waved, the platinum blond-haired workmen waved back. The window will be bricked over for renovation. It's like a last glimpse of a Berlin that will never be the same.

A quasi fun house situation takes place on the first floor where Honey Suckle Company presents an environment containing a series of open cubicles where this group of social creators live during the exhibition. Each member has a TV and VCR. Envisioned as a shelter for the homeless it contains objects encompassing the idea of a future collective, an ashram, combining life and work, relaxation, orgiastic fun and project development. Invading this is the Carsten Holler work, a stainless steel slide emptying its inhabitants from the second floor. It also functions as a legal and mandatory exit route from the building. Just as I'm getting seriously into *Honey Suckle*, a little pig-tailed girl wearing 'mary janes' spills out on the floor from the slide. Adjoining this, in a room that smells like a urinal, is the beautiful and oft seen, *Sip My Ocean*, a video by Pippilotti Rist choreographed to the Chris Isaacs song, *Wicked Games*.

On the second floor for Daniel Pflumm's, *Call from Germany*, Q & A, the artist appro-

priates footage of journalists from CNN where pairs of correspondants are projected on a video screen. Their interaction is reduced to a repeating tenth of a second gesture, a slight blink or nod while both listen to questions. It is a strange and compelling work that deals with moments of least significance. The correspondents change with each hooked up country. Bass and drum music is the only sound.

In a work, *Center Peer*, by the architects Gruntuch and Ernst, a 6" cylinder of brick was bored through a 3' thick outside wall. You look through the evacuated chartreuse painted cylinder positioned with the help of a mirror to perfectly view the symbolic Television

and symposia it throbbed with energy till 6 am each night. The symposium on architecture that I attended harnessed an underground intensity but was so structurally weak as to lead to corrosive and diverting arguments among the discussants. Heated exchanges during the Q & A exposed familiar racial prejudice and obscured the point.

Committed to the young artist, this Berlin Biennale was like an Aperto within a conceptual theme park aesthetic. The intraweaving and interweaving of disciplines is a hot ploy in Europe and is appropriated along with other art philosophies of the 60's and early 70's. Fluxus, Actionist, and Conceptualist works



Reunification of Germany on 3 October 1990, in front of the Reichstag Building in Berlin

Tower, the tallest point visible in the East during the GDR and a subject of their recent architectural proposal to expand its sculptural quality and use. Stan Douglas' photographs of Detroit, a collapsing city, are meant to contrast with Berlin, an erecting city. Mathieu Mercier exhibits a poorly constructed white planter, like a house of cards, in which an ordinary plant is entwined. The domestic object is both product and ruin. Sarah Sze's work at the Akademie de Kunste is a soaring and eager, tenuous installation, reminding me of early Judy Pfaff. A construction of wire and matchsticks, plastic flowers, lamps and fans, engages the mood of the Exhibition.

Congress 3000 took place for three nights in what the Berliners called The Pregnant Oyster; officially, "Haus der Kulturen der Welt". Having had no important function, the Congress 3000 transformed it into an after-hours cafe, bar and disco. Combining light installations, performance, music, art, video,

are hoisted strategies which are expanded in the Berlin Biennale. The confluent aspects of art, fashion, music, performance, life and consumerism seen at all night mid-tech symposia present this new dimension which focuses on architecture, social policy, cabaret, and amusement. That Berlin is the stage here revivifies these earlier ideas to include the city as a subject. The architectural terpsichore of Berlin's construction, destruction and reconstruction may dazzle but will never replace or obscure memory or soul.

P.S. Except for the contemporary Berlin painter, Franz Ackermann, who has conceived a portrait of Berlin as the city sees itself, there was no painting. I snuck off to the Gemaldegalerie for my fix. Reunited under one roof, from the Bode Museum in the East and the Dahlem Museum in the West, are some of the world's most treasured paintings from the 13th to the 18th century; Cranachs, Durers, Aldorfers, Baldungs and more ... ach du lieber!

Carolee Thea