

Blockbuster Art Exhibitions in Europe and the United States

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At a dinner party in August, a companion of mine became embroiled in a heated debate about the state of public arts funding in America. "The French were 'fools' to invest so much money in the arts," the gentleman arguing with him said. "Furthermore," the man added, "if it weren't for artists like Robert Mapplethorpe, viable government funding would still exist." Though he wasn't right about much, this man was correct in suggesting that our neighbors across the Atlantic are more generous to the arts than we are.

That Europeans have understood the rewards of art patronage is evidenced by their generous art budgets, individual grants, residencies, and museum funding. The most prominent funding in the United States is for blockbuster museum exhibitions. As a drawing card for tourists, these conservative, blue-chip museum installations have been successful, especially with the collaboration of city organizations, for instance, in the Cezanne exhibition in Philadelphia. Yet these efforts, large or small, still don't come close to the Biennale di Firenze, for example, or a variety of events in Berlin in 1996. Both Berlin and Florence were celebrating a new era in 1996, and for the sophisticated European, a certain amount of artistic risk-taking, particularly in the Biennale, was de rigueur.

It was late October in Florence. This Renaissance city, feeling the pressure to catapult itself into the 21st century, used its grandeur for an ambitious multi-disciplinary exploration of the ways in which the body, clothing, essence, appearance, communications, and style have changed and continue to change. Though the subject has been a theme for many artists over the past decade, this is the first major Biennale explicitly linking art and fashion. The cultural operation cost nine billion lire (\$54,000,000), and occupied 18 cultural institutions throughout the city using 160,000

square feet of exhibition space. The organizing forces of the event were Luigi Settimbrini, an American-Milanese marketing and fashion promoter who has worked to relaunch the city's textiles and clothing fairs; Ingrid Sischy, the former editor of Artforum and present editor of Interview; and Germano Celant, a part-time curator at the Guggenheim Museum and the new commissioner of the Venice Biennale.

The Biennale di Firenze attempted to give people a new and more contemporary look at Florence, to extend the idea of the city and to woo industry, specifically the fashion industry. For some purists this may have come as a culture shock, yet the organizers did not mean to contaminate one's sense of history, but to oblige it. That Florence is not only about the past but is connected with the future is a humanistic idea that would not have offended Renaissance thinkers. This Biennale dressed historic Florence in new and provocative clothes, while presenting a continuing element of surprise.

The Stazione Leopolda is a converted century-old train station which housed the first of the installations that included contemporary art, an exhibition called *New Persona/New Universe*.¹ The works here were inspired by the recent discovery of billions of new galaxies and the unexpected collapse of the boundaries of the known universe as a result of technology such as the Hubble telescope. Another theme was the fusion and liberation of masculine and feminine. Works here by individuals or creative pairs set out to disturb conventional logic of separation of gender and class. Here emerged the clone, hermaphrodite, cyborg, and other "beings" implanted with prostheses of immortality, whose energies were directly related to the intensity of their mutant conditions. However, by infusing them with a haunting presence, the artists questioned the nature and accessibility of the souls of these techno-beings. One case in point was the genetically tampered, cross-sexualized, bewigged life-sized dolls created by the London based team of Jake and Dinos Chapman. A faux forest called *The Island of Dr. Moron* was inhabited by four of these beings, whose skulls were studded with penis-horns and who

shared one fist, four sneakered feet, and one set of buttocks, with a vagina in the place of the anus. Works by Charles Ray, Inez van Lamsweerde, and Cindy Sherman also dealt with the cross-sexualized, cross-dressed, and possibly genetically engineered.

Other works attempted to dissolve the boundaries between natural and artificial, mind and body, physical and non-physical. The tools used were TV cameras; heat, pressure, light, and movement sensors; electronic projections; and other secret devices. Most interesting among these was an interactive piece entitled *Coro* (1995-96), by the Milan set designers, Studio Azzurro. Projected on a pale carpet were life-sized images of sleeping couples. Subtle slumber sounds accompanied these video images, and viewers could control the sleepers' movements by walking, stamping, kicking, or dancing on them. The interaction involved in this appealing play briefly distracted viewers from the implications of intrusion, violence, and control, creating a memorable tension.

It was fall and the weather in Florence was beautiful. I emerged from my hotel on the Piazza Santissima Annunziata, passed the Duomo, crossed over the Arno on the Ponte Vecchio and climbed the steep hill. The Forte Belvedere hosted the Biennale's other artist/designer endeavor titled "Arte/Moda." The broad terraces, the loggiato, and the pallazina atop the city were all incorporated into the exhibition. The curators here were Celant, Sischy, and Pandora Tabatabai Ashagi.

On the terrace, the architect Arata Isozake had designed seven outdoor structures housing paired superstar artist/fashion designer team projects. Here the challenge was to hold a mirror between human beings and the universe, connecting landscape, the sky, architecture, and the city, the inner core of the psyche and the outer shell of skin.

To compete with the Florentine skyline is not easy. Isozake's minimally scaled structures, clad simply in forty-eight sheets of plywood and painted in primary colors, were temporary in appearance and reflected on both our moment in the universe and the brevity of this Biennale. Yet the housings served the collaborations well. Among the most successful projects were by Jenny Holzer and Helmut Lang; Jil Sander and Mario Merz; and Miuccia Prada and Damien Hirst.

At the Holzer/Lang pavilion, one entered a dark space housing columns suspended from the ceiling, on which Holzer's messages were transmitted in two languages. An almost imperceptible scent permeated the environment, representing Helmut Lang's contribution: "a musky perfume emitted after coitus," I was told. The sensuous tension between language and smell was a mysterious surprise. Holzer's phrases from this installation "I smell you on my skin," "Lack of charisma can be fatal," "Decadence can be an end in itself," "I see through your clothes" had been projected along the Arno on opening night. The Merz/Sander team, along with the architect, Isozake, assembled a memorable work of a different nature. The structure for the project was a cylinder. When I entered it I had a sense of being inside a large telescope peering out onto the famous skyline. The work was further activated by the motorized movement of torn pieces of fabric inside the double glass, implying an inner storm. The Hirst/Prada team, in contrast, created a barn-like structure with a fenced courtyard containing a petting zoo where live animals roamed. The sounds of clucks and baas added a note of humor here. This uncharacteristic and witty piece, arguably more about theater and surprise than fashion, was "too much" for Prada who withdrew her contribution, a handbag, before opening day.

Giving over any major city, much less one with Florence's famous history, to a huge multi-site event takes commitment and energy. Devoting a good chunk of the Biennale to contemporary artómuch of which challenges the norms and traditions of the cityó takes guts. (Try to imagine, for example, the mayor of New York allowing pubescent cross-sexual mannequins to be scattered around the Battery.) The effort allowed viewers to see both traditional Florence and contemporary art in new contexts.

In November I arrived in Berlin. Unlike Florence, this was a city still visibly scarred by the destruction of World War 11 and the chaotic consequences of reunification. After the Allies leveled Berlin and won the war, West Berlin was rebuilt with little respect for the past. But in the former East Berlin, traces of the Berlin Wall, Communism, the Stasi, the Nazis, and the Jewish section were left as haunting reminders of an ignominious past. One day, while waiting for an appointment at the Martin Gropius Bau Museum, I saw a portion of the Wall and then stumbled on the site of the former headquarters of the Gestapo, now a museum called The Topography of Terror. This recently unearthed place contains photographs of Nazis harassing

Jewsófame fare, I thought, compared to documentation that we in the United States have seen. Yet the exhibit is there for the younger generation of Germans who were long protected from any mention of this period. Nearby is a 19th-century Jewish synagogue with a newly rebuilt and gilded dome. It was closed when I went there to celebrate the Sabbath, "because of a bomb scare," said a policeman.

On the other hand, the art culturati were geared to show off Berlin at its best. There were openings, parties, dinners, and events in both the West and former East section. The great lure for the world's art elite was the opening of the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum Fur Gegenwart (Museum of the Present). Newly refurbished by architect Josef Paul Kleihues, it once was a 19th-century railway station. Now it houses the immense post-1960s art collection of Erich Marx. The building is spectacular if not pompous. At night its facade is washed in a light blue Dan Flavin illumination. The glass vaulted main hall displayed Anselm Kiefer's lead book room, Volkszahlung (Census) (1991). This is the third in a series of his lead book installations, each dealing with Holocaust themes; this one has walls of lead books that are stuffed with dried peas and encircle a glass polyhedron. This object, seen in the Albrecht Durer engraving, *Melancholia 1*, is a symbol for the postwar predicament of the German people. Another Kiefer sculpture displayed here is the lead airplane called, *Mohn und Gedachbnis* (Poppy and Memory). This refers to the 19S2 poem by Paul Celan, *Death Fugue*. (Celan's parents died in a concentration camp.) Stuffed into the frontal motors and on the pages between the lead books that sit on each wing are stalks of poppies and poppy seeds. (Poppies represent memory and poison.) The plane seems to fly backwards into the future. Hung on the two flanking open aisles were three or four of Kiefer's lead paintings, but better suited would have been his paintings illustrating Albert Speer's halls. Two daunting glass staircases flanking the main hall lead to a series of gallery spaces: a connecting stairwell brushstroked in a gloss orange by Merz; a gallery devoted exclusively to Beuys sculptures; and two notable exhibition rooms, one displaying the entire collection of Joseph Beuys drawings entitled *A secret block for a secret person in Ireland*, and another with early 60's Andy Warhol drawings. Each of these more intimate spaces provided a poetic counterpoint to the heroics. As a fundraiser for a new wing, the garden room in the rear hosted a buffet dinner for hundreds of people, each of whom paid 150 deutsche marks to attend the opening.

European Art Forum Berlin, formerly European Galleries Projektgesellschaft, was founded in Dusseldorf in 1996 by a group of 14 dissident art dealers from the Koln Art Fair. They chose Berlin as the city to host the new fair because the government will move from Bonn to Berlin by the year 2000, making the latter a fast-growing city on the crossroads between East and West. The forum was held on the outskirts of the city at convention halls called the Messe. This was small by traditional standards, with only 120 galleries participating, representing 16 nations. This was a deliberate move by the founders, who wanted to keep it more exclusive than its oversized competitor in Koln. More than half of the invitees were from Germany. The \$15,000 fee per gallery made it one of the most expensive European fairs. At the press conference, in response to this "bourgeois" and "capitalist" exclusivity, a performance artist from Russia stormed the room, squirted a water pistol at the panelists, and shouted "Batman forever." After throwing some furniture, he was ushered out. In spite of this kick-off, the forum proved to be a success. Maureen Paley, director of The Interim Art Gallery in London, said, "Compared to other fairs it was very professional and with high standards. Furthermore, it was a positive experience that I would repeat. I feel that Art Forum Berlin offers great potential for the future if it remains small, selective, and of high quality."

The events in Berlin recall Berlin's golden age as an art marketplace in the 1920s and, like others to whom I spoke, Rudolf Kicken (managing director of the European Galleries Project Co.) predicts that "Berlin will become the major European metropolis, second only to Paris."

The Mitte, located in former East Berlin, represents the changing art geography of the city. It is an area where the art cultures of the former East and West Germany merge. Though it has not yet taken on the importance of the West Berlin art scene, it is fast becoming its competitor as a district on the cutting edge. Invitation for Dinner took place at the Hackeshe Hof, a meeting place, restaurant, and cafe in the Mitte. Four young galleristsóJudy Lybke of Eigen + Art; Friedrich Loock, director of gallery Wohnmaschine; Anton Henning, the artist who shows with Loock; and the team of Carsten Nicolai, Remy Markowitz, and another artistóeach cooked late night dinners celebrating, in a special "Eastern European" way, the meeting of food and art. The events were great fun and contributed to the special mood permeating the Mitte. Anton Henning was also exhibiting at Wohnmaschine at the time. He depicts his multi-personal involvement with his art, music, and food in huge cibachrome self-portraits, doubling or tripling

his image.

Another exhibition, the Berlin Mitte Event, was curated by a young British gallerist, Rupert Goldsworthy. This exhibition opened to a crushing crowd in a smoke-filled evening scene not unlike those in Swiss Artist's Space in the '70s and '80s. The host building was an abandoned department store put into hasty use for this project. The cost was 650 deutsche marks, (\$500) to the 17 participating gallerists, some of whom were international and also showed at the Art Forum Berlin (for example, Pat Hearn, Gebauer & Thumm, and Eigen + Art). Both group works and individual emerging artists were shown. An installation piece by the French artist Michel Francois dealt with disorientation and stood out in this maze of works. He juxtaposed a floor of hand-marked clay with a video, filmed from above, of a whirling, longhaired woman spinning out of control. This work was compelling in its combination of themes relating to the body and the speed of information.

The "Bunker" exhibition was curated by Oliver Schwarz and was held in a World War II bunker. The space was built in 1941 and used as vegetable storage by the GDR. After the Berlin Wall came down, the building was awarded landmark status, and it has been used for techno-parties and culture projects ever since. It was dark, atmospheric, claustrophobic, smoke-filled and noisy the night of the opening. On the upper floors were video works curated by video jockey Manuel da Costa. On another floor, light works echoed the haunted nature of the building. The effect was further heightened by techno-music playing in the cellar, reverberating like muffled artillery fire in the distance.

Before the Wall came down, Berlin was an island of democracy surrounded by the GDR. Subsidies and grants were used to keep West Berlin a desirable place for a West German to live and work. Although stipends handed out to young artists have been cut by about two-thirds, the budget for the city's public museums has barely been touched. This reflects the new attitude being adopted by a city that is becoming the new capital of Germany. Though this conservatism seems reminiscent of the recent cutbacks in the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), it does not diminish the high regard that Europeans have toward the arts.

Even with the cutbacks, more money is spent for the arts in Berlin than the entire visual arts budget in the United States. One percent of their national budget is allotted to the arts without the intervention of a federal arts agency comparable to the NEA. Funding is regionally based and is fueled by education, precedent, and pride, all of which encourages patronage. This commitment does not change much with the election of a new political party, whether conservative or liberal. Regions compete for quality museums, art institutions and Kunstvereins (regional, privately sponsored, museum-quality exhibition spaces for contemporary art which also include residencies with stipends for individual artists).

The American blockbuster museum exhibition is valuable, though limited, in its present form. It enhances the image of a city and brings needed revenue. Safe and sanitary, it speaks romantically of the past and is a lucrative way to pay lip service to the arts. But while such exhibitions are a tool to educate, they cannot compensate for the national budget cuts in the NEA and in the schools. Such budget curtailments send out messages denigrating the significance of the arts and the individual creator.

Most importantly, without education, the contemporary artist, audience, and patron will disappear. If we are to learn anything from our European counterparts, it is that the soul of a community lies in its living creative individuals as partners in the spirit of the culture.

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