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Berlin: art, technology, mice and men

Michael Connor at the 4th Berlin Biennial and The Treasures Project

Erik van Lieshout, installation view of *Schöne Grüße aus Chemnitz-Rostock* (working title), 2006, Courtesy Uwe Walter; 4th Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art.

Don't think this is a show about Berlin.

The curators of the 4th Berlin Biennial issue this warning as part of their statement in the exhibition catalogue. They can be excused for worrying that the local context and history could overshadow the work. This is, after all, Berlin—a city that bore witness to the Reichstag fire and the fall of the Berlin Wall, evolved into a mecca for the international creative class and is now riven by joblessness and racist attacks. Your humble art hack on the beat can be excused for thinking there's quite a lot to write about before he even gets to the artwork.

The official programme of the Biennial was staged along a single city street, Auguststrasse, and this concise structure was one of its greatest strengths. The journey from one end of the street to the other was as much an urban archaeology experience as an international biennial. The exhibition made use of venues that elicited narratives from the local context, such as a shipping container, a graveyard, numerous private apartments and a former Jewish girls' school, in addition to the KW Institute for Contemporary Art. Of these, the disused school provoked perhaps the most comment. The building was one of the last buildings opened before the Nazis seized power and the catalogue tells us that it "remained open throughout the 1930s, despite the increasing persecution of Jews by the Nazi regime." Many of the rooms had paint peeling from the ceiling, wallpaper hanging off the walls, strange fixtures of indeterminate use. At one point I spent several minutes in a disused toilet before realising that it wasn't an artist's installation.

This momentary confusion would no doubt have been welcomed by the curators. Maurizio Cattelan, Massimiliano Gionni and Ali Subotnick have earned curatorial notoriety in recent years with the Wrong Gallery. With one square metre of exhibition space, it was billed as the smallest gallery in New York: "The Wrong Gallery is the back door to contemporary art and it's always locked." To ensure that the Biennial lived up to this irreverent precedent, the curators established a rogue gallery in Berlin under the international art brand "Gagosian", without, of course, official permission from Larry G himself. Their love of the unconventional also came across through the inclusion of works like Martin Creed's *The Lights Going on and Off*. When an installation consists of a blinking light fixture installed in a rickety 1920s German institutional building, the line between art and life becomes difficult to detect. To make matters worse, the work was out of order during my visit: Creed's lights were simply stuck in the 'off' position.

Grim sights

Don't let these gestures fool you into thinking the Berlin Biennial was a rip-roaring good time. This was a rough-hewn exhibition that wasn't afraid to confront the absurd and tragic futility of the human condition. Otto Mühl's orgy smorgasbord; Klara Liden's manic exercise routine set on a Swedish subway; Jan Toomik ice skating in an endless loop while naked—the works in this exhibition suggested that the line between human and animal behaviour, between mice and man may not be as clearly marked as one might like to think.

Bruce Conner suggests that even disaster can be absurd in his film work *Crossroads* (1976), drawn from archival footage of the first postwar A-bomb tests. The nuclear test is replayed again and again, from a number of different angles, in a pulsing visual rhythm. As I watched, the image of the mushroom cloud gradually lost its associations with disaster and began to have a hypnotic effect on me—due in no small part to the urgent soundtrack by avant-garde musicians Terry Riley and Patrick Gleeson. When I got back to my hotel that night, I was still impressed enough with the piece to check the web for more information on these two and was not disappointed—terryriley.com is well worth a visit for anyone interested in psychedelic

wallpaper or audio tracks with names like Conquest of the War Demons (see Greg Hooper's review of Terry Riley's Brisbane performances on page 33).

While Conner's work undercuts the factual nature of his source imagery, a well-known piece by Gillian Wearing trades on the supposed objectivity of the video image. In the 3-screen video installation *Drunk*, Wearing's camera captures alcoholics from her South London neighbourhood in a sterile, white environment. The scale and installation style of the piece gives the impression that these men are actually in the gallery space itself. This illusion creates a sense of awkwardness, perhaps because the men are being callously scrutinised on camera, or perhaps partly because these men are unpalatable for a gallery context.

Erik van Lieshout, an unpalatable character himself, is also known for creating uncomfortable portraits of subjects including Moroccan prostitutes, Dutch mental patients, his brother and most prominently, himself. Each of his videos is structured as a series of shots that flow by in rapid succession offering glimpses of events that seem to be triggering a nervous breakdown on the part of the artist. His new piece for the Berlin Biennial was no exception. In this work, van Lieshout travelled through Germany by bicycle "to get to know his neighboring country." The resulting work offers a snapshot of van Lieshout's own intolerance and that of his neighbours. He criticises a man on the street who appears to be out of work and yet owns an iPod; he gets beat up; he worries about his pee being yellow.

Van Lieshout's piece is presented in a shipping container viewing environment that could best be described as abject. Only a handful of viewers could enter at a time, and the wait for a screening was at least an hour throughout the opening days. This problem of hundreds of visitors trying to enter unorthodox spaces and private apartments was one logistical downside to the event. The single interactive artwork at the entire Biennial was displayed in one such private apartment and the context did the work no favours. Damián Ortega's furniture works were designed to shake whenever a person approached. It made a certain kind of sense to show the work in a domestic space, but it also ensured that the only people who would go to the trouble to queue and see the work would be those who already had some idea of what to expect. Perhaps the installation would have benefited from the element of surprise if it were shown in a more accessible venue.

More successfully spooky than the moving chairs was Aïda Ruilova's new film work, an homage to her mentor, French horror auteur Jean Rollin. Ruilova's past work has relied heavily on the repetition of sound, filled with staccato mantras such as, "You're pretty!" Her new piece makes use of a similar audio rhythm, but instead of spoken mantras, the soundtrack is composed of small noises recorded in close-up, such as the unzipping of a fly. The work centres on an erotic scene between a young woman and a seemingly dead Rollin, shot in his Paris apartment. The young woman is continually on the verge of expressing her passion through kisses and caresses, but each time she is about to complete these gestures, Ruilova cuts the shot sharply. The inability of the protagonist to kiss or touch the object of her lust imbues the piece with the sense of obsessively repressed sexual desire.

Alternative viewing

Nebelwelten, photo: Anna von Stackelberg

One of the most interesting projects at the Biennial was not a part of the official program at all, but an independent exhibition. The Treasures Project was an exhibition of 4 young artists from Berlin selected by Janet Cardiff, Rebecca Horn and Robert Wilson. The show was installed in the basement of an old brewery, the Alte Königstadt Brauerei. Visitors descended several flights of stairs emerging into a dark, labyrinthine vault. To navigate their way to the exhibition space, they had to follow a trail of small light fixtures that were extinguished as each visitor moved through the space. The technology behind it was simple—the kind of motion sensors that are most commonly found in the driveways of suburban houses—but it made a big psychological impact.

The Treasures Project included 3 works, each of which played up to the texture of the exhibition space itself. Erik Büniger's installation *Dark was the Night, Cold was the Ground* used computer controllers to determine

the speed of 3 turntables, each playing a recording by Blind Willie Johnson to create an ominous choir that echoed throughout the space. Andrea Loux's video installation *Nebelwelten* filled a subterranean chamber with a large screen projection of fog covered landscapes. The pastel palette of the video very nearly complimented the colour scheme of the subterranean vault where it was installed, creating the illusion of a tunnel looking out into open space. A third piece, *Performance Envelope*, created a theatrical underground laboratory for the cultivation of genetically modified plants used for detecting the presence of land mines. Visitors were invited to literally watch grass grow—and explore the secret narratives suggested by the piece. Upon leaving, visitors passed through a final room where exhibition organisers Anna von Stackelberg and Louise Witthöft had covered a long banquet table with hundreds of candles.

The Treasures Project marked a sharp contrast with the official programme of the Berlin Biennial, which seemingly betrayed a desire to return to a pre-technological era. The exhibition suffered from the inclusion of too many works with a self-conscious aura of age, giving the impression of a slightly ham fisted attempt by the curators to evoke a sense of history. On the other hand, the Biennial's biggest successes stemmed from its traditional approach. The narrative structure of the exhibition, the in-depth engagement with the local context, and the care with which the works were selected and presented, made this exhibition a success on many levels.

4th Berlin Biennial, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, March 25 - June 5, 2006; The Treasures Project, Alte Konigstadt Brauerei, March 23 - April 24

As Head of Exhibitions at the BFI, Michael Connor is developing a new exhibition space for screen-based visual arts, opening in London as part of the National Film Theatre complex later this year. From 2002-2005, Connor worked as Curator at FACT in Liverpool, where he produced a wide range of media arts exhibitions, events, publications and screenings.