



Courtesy of Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art

KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, courtyard, photo: Uwe Walter, 2009

The 6th Berlin Biennale

On walking chicken, sex in public toilets, Marxist nostalgia and political demonstrations

Katerina Valdivia Bruch

The Berlin Biennale is now in its sixth edition. KW Institute for Contemporary Art has organized this major art event since its first edition in 1998. Back in the early nineties, this renowned art institution was a former margarine factory occupied by medical student Klaus Biesenbach and a group of art enthusiasts. Hans Ulrich Obrist, Nancy Spector and Biesenbach himself curated the first biennale and played a pivotal role, in conjunction with other galleries in the area, to put the district of Mitte in the forefront as a reference place for contemporary art.

This time, the biennale is curated by Viennese curator Kathrin Rhomberg, former director of the Cologne Kunstverein (2002-2007), Artistic Director of *Projekt Migration*, initiated by the Federal Cultural Foundation (2002-2006), and co-curator of *Manifesta 3*—European Biennale for Contemporary Art (2000). *What is waiting out there* is the title of this year's biennale with a focus on reality. The exhibition is spread over six venues including a five-story building, the Old National Gallery, an artist's apartment and a Turkish café.

▼ PHIL COLLINS
Marxism today (prologue), 2010
DVD, color, sound
Film still

► ANDREY KUZKIN
Resistance
Performance, Project Fabrika, Moscow,
2009, Duration 7h 30'
Photo: Irina Steinberg

For the first time, the exhibition moved to Kreuzberg, a district known for its subculture that evolved during the West Germany years, when it was surrounded by the wall. Kreuzberg 36 is the name given to this part of the district according to the old postal code of former West Berlin, which differentiates it from Kreuzberg 61 with a middle class population. With a large Turkish community, it attracts migrants, as well as artists and anarchists, commonly known as *Autonomen*.

Oranien Street is witness to the annual 1st of May demonstrations, music festivals and other parades. The main exhibition venue is at Oranienplatz 17, a former shopping center which stood empty for a decade. By choosing Kreuzberg as a location, the biennale approaches Berlin's 'reality' and its multicultural diversity. On the other hand, it brings reality right in our face: protests against the biennale were visible with posters pasted on the biennale's venue entrances. The posters included e-mail addresses and mobile phone numbers of KW employees and photos of the biennale's curator and the KW director, calling them gentrifiers. Reality knocks the door of the exhibition! Further on, a group of young artists took advantage of this art event and did their own Berlin Kreuzberg Biennale with the funny title "Ayran and Yoga", a play on words referring to the large number of yoga centers in the district and a typical Turkish beverage called *ayran*. This parallel biennale will be shown in Kreuzberg until July 31st.

In fact, we should think about the concept of reality. To start to explore the topic, we may take the metaphor presented by the video performance *Resistance* by Russian artist Andrey Kuzkin, right at the entrance of the main building. The artist seems to be passionately cleaning or deleting the reality presented on a large pile of magazines. But, what is reality? Is reality in the image, or it is in our experience of the image? Does reality exist without images? With an awareness of the flood of images we get in our daily life, this piece might be a clue on how reality functions, how images work and how they influence us on a daily basis.

At Oranienplatz 17, the exhibition addresses contemporary socio-political debates, such as issues on migration, political demonstrations, youth culture and remembrances of Marxist ideology. For instance, UK artist Phil Collins—presented at the Jakarta Biennale in 2009—gives a glimpse of Marxist education in former GDR. In his video *Marxism today (prologue)*, the artist interviews former GDR teachers and professors who were appointed by the government to teach Marxist-Leninist ideology in schools. Old footage alternates with the interviews and offers a nostalgic view of Germany's recent past. It also makes us think about what has happened to Marxist ideology in Germany after its re-unification in 1990 and in Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall.



Courtesy of the Artist; Open Gallery, Moscow



Courtesy of the 6th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art



▲ ADOLPH MENZEL
Three Fallen Soldiers in a Barn, 1866
 Pencil and watercolor on paper
 18,6 x 27,3 cm
 Photo: Volker-H. Schneider

More reminiscences on socialism are present in the installation *Klub Europa* by Austrian artist Hans Schabus, who placed a mammoth with no legs and a stegosaurus without a head—leftovers of the abandoned Spreewald Park, a famous amusement park in former East Berlin. Perhaps the dismembered animals are suggesting a dismantled and almost forgotten ideology?

Lots of documentary video works show reality as seen in daily news: public demonstrations in France, *Les Manifs* by Bernard Bazile; in analogy to the demonstrations witnessed by Mexican artist Minerva Cuevas in her video *Dissidence v.2.0.*; confrontations with the military at the Israel-Palestine border in *Details 2 & 3* by Avi Mograbi; and a voyeuristic eye with youngsters having sex in public toilets, *Beyond Guilt #1, #2 and #3*, three videos by Israeli artists Ruti Sela and Amir Maayan. In a more global context, Mark Boulos' two channel video installation *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* presents inequalities among countries, portraying a Nigerian guerrilla group fighting against American colonization of oil resources, while the other video depicts a typical U.S. stock exchange dealing with Nigerian petroleum.

A lot more attention is given to former socialist Europe: At KW's main hall, Bosnian artist Petrit Halilaj reconstructed his parent's house, which was destroyed during the Balkan war. The wooden structure entitled *The places I'm looking for, my dear, are utopian places, they are boring and I don't know how to make them real*, embodies the space as a sort of farm, chickens included.

Coming closer to today's European reality: a challenging second and third generation of migrants, social gaps that lead to precarious living and working conditions, and urban ghettos as a result of the crisis of capitalism. Examples of the latter are a series of documentary photographs on migration in Europe, such as *High Road Nr. 8* of Russian artist Olga Chernyshewa, with Russian migrants; or the series of photographs *Périphéries* from Algerian Mohamed Bourouissa, portraying peripheral urban areas in France with a large North and Central African population.

Despite its variety of artistic positions, the curatorial selection (with a few exceptions) does not include many artists from Africa, Asia or Latin America. Its concept of reality, therefore, is restricted.

▶ HANS SCHABUS
Klub Europa, 2010
 Mixed media, polyester
 Installation view in the courtyard of
 Oranienplatz 17
 270 x 260 x 550 cm

The biennale is classical, in the sense that it goes back chronologically to the origin of realism in history of art. In fact, it highlights the work of 19th century German realist painter Adolph Menzel (1815-1905). American art critic and art historian Michael Fried was invited to curate the show *Menzel's Extreme Realism* in the Old National Gallery at the Museum Island. Menzel's paintings and drawings depict his personal view of reality: an undone bed, dead soldiers, a street in flames, some moments of the artist's life and his connection to Berlin's reality at that time.

But, does Adolph Menzel's work help us to understand today's reality? In a talk given by Fried, Rhombert, artist Anri Sala, and historian and writer Gustav Seibt, a member of the audience asked about the need to show a 19th century artist in a 21st century art exhibition. The panel apparently could not understand the question, time was over and the next match of the world cup in South Africa was about to start. I left the Anatolian Alevi cultural center with two questions in my mind: why Menzel had to be part of a contemporary art exhibition; and why did they choose this location for the conference, a place totally disconnected from the arts scene, but connected to Kreuzberg's reality.

At least the parallel program of the biennale offered for the third time the young curator's workshop *Real Players*, sponsored by Allianz Foundation, Goethe Institute and BMW, and organized a theater program *La Monnaie Vivante* (The Living Currency), curated by Pierre Bal-Blanc.



Katerina Valdivia Bruch

▼ OLGA CHERNYSHEVA
High Road #8 (2), 2007
 B/W photograph
 100 x 150 cm



Courtesy of the Artist; Galerie Volker Diehl, Berlin; Foxy Production, New York



MARK BOULOS, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, 2008, 2-Kanal-Installation, HDV, Farbe, Ton/2-channel installation, HDV, colour, sound, 14' 20"



RUTI SELA & MAAYAN AMIR, Installation view from the video trilogy *Beyond Guilt* (2003-2005)



MOHAMED BOUROUISSA, *Le téléphone*, 2006, from the series *Périphéries*, 2005–2009, lambda print mounted on aluminum, 120 x 160 cm

In addition, a satellite program organized by the University of the Arts links the audience with the exhibition through an art tour for blind people and how perception guides us through reality, a feedback dinner with the neighbors about their impressions of the biennale, a talk with exhibition guards and a children's program about their own daily reality.

In general, this biennale can be understood as a documentary rather than as an art exhibition. Political and social reality is depicted, almost without make-up, and an aesthetic-creative approach stays in the background. As an attempt, the biennale makes us reflect on the complexities of the concept of reality itself. It shows restrained artistic positions with a risky selection of unknown artists, which would be exciting if their works were challenging to the audience, but this is not the case.

After spending time watching 'real life' in dark rooms filled with videos, what you really want is to get some fresh air, sit on a bench at Oranienplatz and enjoy the nice weather. However, the bench you are sitting on is part of the work of Vietnamese artist Ron Tran. With his installation, the artist connects with the neighborhood by placing two rows of benches facing each other. People get together and may have a close talk, a chat that could be related to *Metamorphosis Chat* by Turkish artist Ferhat Özgür, in which two old ladies are laughing while they are changing their clothes. In a way, it seems as if they are laughing at us for trying to understand what this show is all about.

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