

Axel Lapp

## Berlin Biennale 2 - A biennale or a brand\*

The 'Berlin Biennale' is not really a biennale in the traditional sense of Venice or São Paulo, where each country nominates an artist as a national representative. It is more like a large exhibition of contemporary art, trying to present an overview of recent developments and gives a platform to the new and the hot, a smaller version of 'Documenta' perhaps. In fact it is a normal exhibition, a group show with one curator and works by just over 50 artists. The use of the word 'biennale' in the title only serves as a way to establish it regularly on the international circuit. The next biennale will have nothing to do with this one: there will be a different curator, different concepts and possibly different exhibition spaces. At its core, the Biennale is all about branding and marketing the arts in this city.

While the first 'Biennale' concentrated on the general theme of Berlin, mostly exhibiting artists who lived and worked in the city or had done so in the past, this one does not seem to have a theme at all. Saskia Bos, the director of De Appel in Amsterdam, who is the curator of this exhibition, presents a very personal selection of artists, and nothing more. The works of art do not appear to correspond with each other or to focus on the exploration of certain ideas. They are just there. And in each space, the visitors have to start afresh, have to forget what they have seen before. Bos has used the catchwords «connectedness», «commitment» and «contribution» to describe her ideas behind the selection, yet apart from being catchy, these words do not seem to serve any purpose. They certainly fail to make things clearer.

There is however a tendency towards works which are partly also a performance piece, or which are providing a service for the visitors. During the first week of the show, Surasi Kusolwong offered massages free of charge in his *Happy Berlin (Free Massage)*, 2001, a colourful installation of mattresses, curtains and potted plants. At certain times, he and his team would help the visitors relax and restore themselves after the strenuous art watching. Another point of relaxation is Alicia Framis's installation *Minibar (Just for Women Only)*, 2000; or so one hears, as a man, I was prevented from directly experiencing

the delights of the interior of her wooden seraglio-like structure, in which a male «comforter» makes the time pass pleasantly for his female guests. In Navin Rawanchaikul's installation *Pha Kao Mar On Tour*, 1997-2000, which details the uses of a Pha Kao Mar, a checked cloth from Thailand that can be used for clothing, cooking and almost everything else, the visitors get one as a present.

Elsewhere, Dan Peterman is also an artist at work, and in *Bottle Cap Pasta*, 2001, amidst a selection of fridges, cookers, kitchen tools, groceries and many plates he makes pasta in the shape of bottle caps. However, in the exhibition context, these manned exhibits are very problematic, as they lose much of their fascination when the action is not on. After the first week, Kusolwong's mattresses remained as a not very successful lounge area, and *Bottle Cap Pasta* makes one feel out of it, having missed the action. These exhibits are a frustrating experience for the later visitors, though undoubtedly fun for the opening crowd.

Videos form another large section in this exhibition, as the only form of media art represented (all others being deliberately excluded from a fear of not being accessible to large numbers of people at the same time). They range from the rather simple but very sensual *Rain*, 2001, by Fiona Tan, comprising two films of the same bucket standing in the pouring rain with a small time lap, to complex or self-referential installations by Kutlug Ataman, Christian Jankowski or Arturas Raila. Ataman, who is known as a director for his feature film *Lola and Bilidikid*, shows a very intimate portrait about a Turkish Transvestite, *Never My Soul (Installation)*, 2001. In several rooms you can watch films about different aspects of this man's life, who bares himself totally to the viewer. The films show him in a variety of situations, from talking on the phone and telling stories in conversations, to having sex; yet Ataman always manages to tread the fine line between documentation and voyeurism. It is the succession of different films that makes this installation so compelling, as the visitors are free to choose the grade of intimacy to which they want to expose themselves, traversing back and forth in this man's life.

Jankowski's video *Rosa*, 2001, is the result of a complicated series of artistic citation. The makers of the recent German film comedy *Victor Vogel - Commercial Man* bought the central idea from an earlier performance by Jankowski (seen at the last Venice Biennale), in which he went hunting for food in a supermarket with a bow and arrows. In the film, this becomes the idea of a character called Rosa, an artist. The idea is appropriated by the Victor Vogel figure for an advertising campaign. In this latest piece, Jankowski himself reappropriates the idea using scenes from the film, stopping scenes in mid-action at which point the actors turn around and deliver statements about art, thus completing some kind of circle.

Arturas Raila's *Under the Flag*, 2000, consists of two video projections on either side of the room. The first presents scenes from a small town in either Austria or Germany; the second shows five neo-nazis, sitting under their flag and commenting on the other film, which they must see on a TV screen. As could be expected, these comments are racist and nationalistic, as well as being silly and sometimes quite frighteningly normal. The language of the film is Lithuanian, subtitled in German, so creating a distance, making the film quite safe in Germany. It is fairly obvious that, if the original language had been German, this film could not be shown, for fear of spreading right-wing ideology. In contrast to this, a very quiet and beautiful installation is David Claerbout's *Untitled (Carl & Julie)*. The large projection apparently shows a still photograph of two people, a man and a child, sitting at a table on a terrace in the sun. But on entering the gallery, your movement triggers the action of the girl turning in the direction of you the intruder, looking curiously for a while, before turning back to what she has been engrossed in before the intrusion. The film then returns to the status of a still photograph.

Qiu Shi-hua's work could not be more distanced from this type of work. His canvasses, all *Untitled (Landscape)*, 1999, are almost exactly that: canvasses. Only from a distance, and with some concentration, are the faint traces of painting visible. Muntean/Rosenblum, (Markus Muntean & Adi Rosenblum), on the other hand paint very realistic images of young people in poses that we know from fashion magazines. *Untitled (I don't like to Think of This ...)*, 2001, and *Untitled (Why, Though, Can't Everything ...)*, 2001, show images of such anonymous young men and women, with captions expressing the

theme of juvenile angst. They function almost as a portrait of a generation. In *Where Else*, 2000, Muntean/Rosenblum use prints of these paintings as the decoration in a room that resembles the eating area of a fast food restaurant, complete with plastic benches and tables, fake plants and two doors to the toilets. At times there is even a uniformed cleaner standing in this performance installation. Fred Tomaselli is also using the painterly form, though he does not paint with paints or brushes. He paints with leaves and other little objects (special favourites of his seem to be hemp leaves and all sorts of tablets) which he then encases in resin. These paintings thus also have some three dimensional aspect, which Tomaselli strengthens by building up his works in different layers. *Untitled*, 2000, is a picture that opens up an entire microcosm of structures and forms which build up the lines of the larger painting.

Jonathan Monk uses the images in art books for his installations. *Sol Lewitt Four Basic Kinds of Line and Color Front to Back Back to Front Forever*, 2000, is an animated 16mm film loop of all the images in a book on Lewitt, blended and projected on to the wall together. Gerhard Richter is give the same treatment. The structures often continue through several frames, while the colours change, yet in a related tonality (this is helped by the yellowish wall-colour in the Postfuhramt). Also poetic are Monk's *Meeting Pieces #61* and *#62*, lines of text on a wall in the Kunst-Werke, which make appointments for meetings at sunrise at the pyramids in Luxor on November 21 in 2010 (in Arabic), and at sunset of the same day at the main entrance of the Luxor hotel in Las Vegas (in English). This piece hangs just above Keith Tyson's *An Open Lecture About Everything That Was Necessary To Bring You And This Work Together At This Particular Time*, 2000, a sound installation of a lecture Tyson gave, and for which he made notes on a large canvas. Listening to the text, viewers can find the relevant notes and follow them, almost as if they had been part of the original lecture, looking at the individual elements of the painting in exactly the order they were executed.

The installation of works in the Kunst-Werke is by far the most successful of the whole exhibition. It is a space where individual works can be combined, where relationships can be established. The other venues of the '2. Berlin Biennale' are much more problematic. The divided spaces of the Postfuhramt, a former Post Office

building, only work for a very few pieces - Ataman's video installation is one of them -, while most seem to be left in the small spaces for the lack of a better alternative. There is nothing distinctive about many installations of art in these old offices, and some appear as if they were leftovers from older exhibitions in the same place. Only the spectacular central space, with its huge dome and stages supports the displayed art, in this case Alicia Framis's *Minibar (Just for Women Only)*, and the entrance hall, with Patricia Piccini's large pink and powder blue *Truck Babies*, 1999, gives a good first impression of the show.

The time for this building as an exhibition venue seems to be running out; there have been too many shows in this kind of space, and while the novelty value is running low, the grotty rooms do not provide a very good place for the art either. The next 'Biennale' will probably have to do look for other spaces, as the Postfuhramt will by then be handed over to the developers.

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The 2. Berlin Biennale was held at Postfuhramt, Kunst-Werke, Jannowitzbrücke and Treptowers in Berlin from April 20 to June 20, 2001.

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### Abstract

The hype generated for the '2. Berlin Biennale' has been enormous; especially as there was some uncertainty as to whether it would happen at all, having been once postponed for financial reasons (which makes this in fact a triennale) and then prepared in a rush and in secret. It is another attempt to place Berlin on the contemporary art map, if not permanently then at least every two years or so.

### Title

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