

2nd Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art

Postfuhramt | Kunst-Werke Berlin

S-Banbögen Jannowitzbrücke

Allianz Treptowers

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The ambition of the 2nd Berlin Biennale for contemporary art is to exhibit a utopian sociability in art. In twentieth-century art, utopia has failed because it was too ambitiously universalizing. Nowhere does the Biennale labour a critique of these failures; instead, it seeks to demonstrate utopia's possibility today. Thus its curator, Saskia Bos, distinguishes the overreaching ideological assumptions, for instance, of the generation of the 1960s and 70s from those of younger artists who appeal to "small, feasible Utopias" based on one-to-one relationships. Who could be against utopia, especially one that is personalized?

Not all forty-eight artists or collectives in the Biennale exemplify its theme. That number of artists taking up the cause of sociability would seem to demand the dissolution of the exhibition format instead. Yet it remains secure, which suggests that this ambition is an art-world one after all, and here rests its ideological assumptions.

The Biennale places emphasis on interactions with others in works that focus on "relationality, on concern and connectedness." Preferably these are actualized in real exchanges, in the real space and time of the spectator's engagement. Of course the meaning of the word

"spectator" makes no sense under these conditions of participation. But these conditions of reception, as onlookers, are the self-imposed limits in other work where the subject of sociability is represented more traditionally within a frame, albeit the medium usually is video.

The first type of work creates an aestheticized framework for an experience where an exchange is involved. Usually this exchange is based on the category of the gift: we receive something as our participation. This gift more typically is a service than an object. For instance, Thai artist Surasi Kusolwong's *Happy Berlin (Free Massage)* (2001) offers a free massage to weary viewers. Spanish artist Alicia Framis' *Minibar (Just for Women Only)* (2000) serves liquid aphrodisiacs, but only to women. Thai artist Navin Rawanchaikul's *Pha Kao Mar on Tour* (1997-2000) lets one take away the Thai fabric that itself decoratively sheaths his pavilion and whose many uses are documented on video monitors inside.

None of these works address the viewer but allow something to happen. Meaning only ensues through whatever is engaged and exchanged. British artist Liam Gillick's *negotiateddouble* (2001) gave away nothing tangible; its fabric-padded timber beam construction mimicked the rafters of Kunst-Werke Berlin's top floor and provided the seating where lectures and discussions were scheduled. Gillick cannot predict the outcome of the use of his work; the space he creates is potential. What takes place there is an "as if" situation Bos describes for many of these works, where "art is a free space, allowing people to reflect but not to solve the problems right there and then."

The problem with this free space is that it is still the privileged space of art discourse and its first circle of consumers. Although this art aims for no systemic social change as did that of earlier generations, its individual gestures have no multiplying effects when we leave its domain. This stems from the fact that we reciprocate nothing in the exchange because we are not *obligated* as the receipt of a gift traditionally demands. This free space actually absolves art from the social world through taking its own aestheticized play, and therefore its privilege, as its content, an entertainment and status no different from the critique Peter Bürger applied long ago to the avant-garde's sublation of bourgeois art's aestheticism into praxis. Moreover, are these healing exchanges really free of commodity relations, supported as they are by the institution of the Biennale? After all, someone behind our backs paid for the professional masseurs who were recruited from a Thai massage business in Berlin which left its pamphlet for us to take away.

Other works in the Biennale are more honest in implicitly admitting limits to changing individual consciousness. These are works that accept the frame that separates the virtual space of the art work from the actual space of its spectators, even though both might be contiguous in installation. I would include here such video instal-

lations as Dutch artist Aernout Mik's *Glutinosity* (2001), that depicts a decomposing struggle in which stakes seem no more than a serpentine interplay between protesters and security shot in the tight foregrounded space of a slow back-and-forth pan; Indonesian artist Fiona Tan's *Tuareg* (1999), a recomposing group portrait provided by found film footage that shows the gregarious playfulness presumably of a village family preparing for its solemn anthropological (?) photographic record; and Portuguese artist João Penalva's *Kitsune* (2001), a dialogue between two strangers on a misty pine-forested mountain side who tell each other Japanese ghost stories from their childhood. I am more authentically moved by this fictional scene in which we hear only the voices of these elderly men than by the forced sociability of an actual interaction – which in the end is more socially fictional.

To make art more sociable does not necessarily mean allowing art its own social space but extending its frame outwards in order to make its privileged world more inclusive. Art's contradictions would be less presumptive seeing, as I did during press day, a janitor washing the floor outside Austrian-Israeli artists Muntean/Rosenblum's installation. Inside *Where Else* (2000), a stripped-down fake, generic fast-food restaurant, a photograph was being taken of its *tableau vivant* janitor, an unmoving uniformed young man posed somewhat idealistically with mop in hand, surrounded by the artists' paintings and photographs, integrated as decor, commenting on youth culture's forced *anomie*. In art, the actor in the *tableau vivant* must be oblivious to us; in life, it is we who are oblivious to the social fact of that other service scene in the hallway. Of course, my sighting was accidental to the artists' intentions, but the privilege of preview sometimes lets one witness what should disappear but now leaves its social trace in the work of art. > Philip Monk

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MARKUS MUNTEAN/ADI ROSENBLUM, *WHERE ELSE*, 2000, MIXED MEDIA, INSTALLATION VIEW; PHOTO: JENS LIEBCHEN, BERLIN, COURTESY 2ND BERLIN BIENNALE.