



View of Pravidoliub Ivanov's Territories, 1995/2003, 10 flags and holders: mud-covered fabric, wood and metal. Block Collection, Mon, Denmark.



Paul McCarthy's mixed-medium installation Bang-Bang Room, 1992. Collection Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin.



View of Norbert Schwontkowski's studio at Auguststrasse 17, showing several of his oil-on-canvas paintings from 2001 to 2006.



Oliver Croy with Oliver Elser: Special Models: The 387 Houses of Peter Fritz, Insurance Clerk from Vienna, 2000, paper architectural models.



Bouchet: Berlin Dirty Room, 2006, compost.



View of black-and-white photographs from Mike Mandel and Larry Sultan's "Evidence" series, 1977/2001. All installation photos this article Uwe Walter.

REPORT FROM BERLIN

Street Life

The fourth Berlin Biennial drew on the complex history of a single street, and on art of the past 30 years, to provide a rich context for new work by an international roster of artists.

BY RICHARD KALINA

It would be safe to say that Berlin is not a city that wears its modern history lightly. Ghosts linger everywhere—from the Nazi period and the war years to be sure, but also from the hardscrabble early postwar period. Just as important is the grim Cold War era, which not only divided the city internally but walled off West Berlin, leaving it an island deep in the center of East Germany—or, as it was then known, the German Democratic Republic. The fourth Berlin Biennial (organized by the artist Maurizio Cattelan and the critics and curators Massimiliano Gioni and Ali Subotnick, and held under the auspices of the KW Institute for Contemporary Art) took the challenge of the city's historical and emotional character seriously.

Called "Of Mice and Men," after the popular but melancholy and upsetting 1937 John Steinbeck novel, whose title in turn was drawn from the not entirely sanguine 1785 Robert Burns poem "To A Mouse, On Turning Her Up In Her Nest With The Plow," this Berlin Biennial was not your typical high-profile, international "white box" showcase. There were, to be sure, neutral, museumlike com-

ponents—the KW Institute for Contemporary Art (formerly Kunstwerke), one of the exhibition's two major venues, has the slightly scruffy look of the low-budget but very serious kunsthalle. The Biennial's real curatorial charge, however, came from the choice to set virtually the entire exhibition on the few blocks that comprise Auguststrasse, the street on which the KW is located. (There was a satellite venue around the corner at Oranienburger Strasse 65—the Diesel Wall, a billboard space supported by the Diesel Corporation and dedicated to the ongoing presentation of work by young artists. The Canadian artist Steven Shearer used it for a huge two-panel word piece in sans serif caps. I'm not entirely clear what it means, but the first two lines give the flavor of it pretty accurately: "VOICELESS ALTARS OF FLESH/NAILED IN UNHOLY MISERY." While off the Biennial's main street, this work was emotionally of a piece with the rest of the show.)

Auguststrasse is an extremely heterogeneous street with a variety of small to midsized buildings, including a former margarine factory (the KW building), a school, apartment buildings of different ages and ranging from elegant to shabby, a dance hall, galleries, low-rise offices and a row of former post office stables. There is also a playground and an empty lot; bracketing the street are a church at one end and a cemetery at the other. Twelve venues were used by the Biennial, including the church and the cemetery. Even a small covered shipping container was put to use, by the Dutch artist Erik van Lieshout, who fitted it out as a miniature (and rather claustrophobic) theater where he showed a video of his bicycle trip from Holland to Germany. Given the variety of the sites, decisions about which artist to put where presented more curatorial challenges and opportunities than usual.

Located in the former East Berlin, Auguststrasse runs through the traditionally diverse and by many accounts raffish Spandauer Vorstadt neighborhood of the Mitte sector. The East, at least its more central precincts, has been thoroughly woven into the fabric of prosperous West Berlin, and at first you don't notice that there is really any difference between East and West at all. Mitte is now a lively part of town, literally in the middle—just the sort of place that would attract the culturally inclined. But Auguststrasse, small as it is, is steeped in history, some of it very disturbing. The



View of Auguststrasse in the Mitte section of Berlin with former Jewish School for Girls on left.



Florian Slotawa: *Ersatzturm (Substitute Tower)*, 2006, installation with objects from the household of Barbara and Axel Haubrok, Düsseldorf, 24 feet high.

nondescript apartment building at Auguststrasse 17, for example, houses Bremen-based painter Norbert Schwontkowski's Berlin studio, where the public was permitted to view his groupings of small, moody figurative paintings as well as his rather austere personal possessions. (The artist was not present when I visited, and the studio looked as if he had just left to do some shopping and would be back shortly; the sense of stepping into someone else's life was part of the installation's rationale.) Unremarkable as it looks now, Number 17 has a past. Built in 1865, it was used by the Jewish community for a number of functions, including a nurses' residence, a social service center and a shelter for women and girls. In 1942 it became a collection point for the concentration camps where many of the local residents met their deaths. After the war it housed Soviet military administrative offices, and in 1949 it was converted into rental apartments, currently administered by the Jewish Claims Conference. With this knowledge in mind, the viewer cannot help experiencing Schwontkowski's paintings differently than if they were nicely centered on a gallery wall. *Sandsturm* (Sandstorm), 2005, for example, a small, seemingly casually painted canvas, shows four faceless, isolated, black-clad women, carrying white bags and trudging along in a featureless gray and brown space. Their isolation, fatigue and sense of displacement are palpable.

The thorough catalogue of the Biennial records the history of each space or building where artworks were displayed, and this research project

Standing in a large, plain assembly room with peeling yellow walls and a cracked ceiling, Kuśmirowski's boxcar looked remarkably small. But it bore witness to history in a deeply unsettling way.

was key to the exhibition's success. The most moving venue—if a building could be said to possess a sensibility or soul, this one does—was also the largest. The former Jewish School for Girls at Auguststrasse 11-13 was built between 1927 and 1928 and served as a cornerstone of the thriving local Jewish community. The school taught underprivileged girls and also orphans from the nearby children's home. It managed to keep its doors open during the 1930s when the Nazis were stepping up their persecution, but was closed in June 1942 along with all the other Jewish schools. Under the GDR, the school reopened as the Bertolt-Brecht-Oberschule, but was returned to the Jewish community after the fall of the Wall. Enrollment proved too low to sustain the enterprise, and it was closed again in 1996, remaining empty and unchanged until it was reopened to the public for this Biennial.

Handsome and gracefully proportioned, the modern five-story building has fallen on hard times. It is plastered on the outside with posters and covered inside and out with graffiti. Peeling wallpaper and flaking paint add to an air of gloom, anxiety and loss, which the work on display did little to dispel. The tone for the part of the exhibition housed here was set when, after going through a metal detector on entry (required because of the building's ownership by the Jewish community), one was greeted by Paul McCarthy's *Bang-Bang Room* (1992). A noisy contraption of walls swinging open and doors slamming, it suggests domesticity gone bonkers. Though the visitor was put on edge and kept that way, some humor was to be found. *Bang-Bang Room* tends, as McCarthy's work often does, toward the nas-

tily goofy; Felix Gmelin's 2005 video *Sound and Vision*, which uses a hard-to-believe 1970 sex-education film showing a class of blind students carefully exploring the bodies of a stoic young man and woman, is funny in a squirm-inducingly embarrassing way. The single-named, New York- and Frankfurt-based Bouchet carpeted three adjacent rooms with compost from the nursery of a Berlin prison to make *Berlin Dirty Room* (2006), which updated and rather nicely sullied Walter De Maria's canonical 1977 earthwork, *New York Earth Room*.

For the most part though, the exhibits were chilling. Bruce Conner's 1976 film, *Crossroads*, set to a meditative soundtrack by minimalist composer Terry Riley, manipulates documentary footage of the 1946 nuclear tests at Bikini Atoll, using repetition along with different camera angles and film speeds to create an effect that is both hypnotic and scary. I was also taken by the work of the Bulgarian artist Pravidoliub Ivanov, whose 10 mud-covered and unreadable flags hung mute and stiff along a hallway. But by far the most moving and distressing work in the building, if not the Biennial as a whole, was *Wagon* (2006), by the Polish artist Robert Kuśmirowski. A meticulous full-scale replica of a boxcar, of the sort that carried so many off to the camps to be murdered, *Wagon* was painted a dull barn red with no markings whatsoever and set on a length of track. Standing in a large, plain rectangular assembly room with peeling yellow walls and a cracked ceiling, the boxcar looked remarkably small. But it bore witness to history in a deeply unsettling way. To some it might have seemed manipulative, even theatrical, but not to me. Its very artlessness, its lack of sophisticated esthetic fudge and blur, combined with its impeccable craft, gave it a power that was undeniable. I saw it the same day that I came upon Micha Ullman's memorial, *Empty Library*, on nearby Bebelplatz. Ullman's piece (not part of the Biennial) sets a roughly 3-foot-square window into the cobblestones on the site of the infamous book burning of May 10, 1933. Beneath the glass, you can make out a small, white, closed-off room with bookshelves that are permanently empty. I also saw it at night, when it is softly lit from within. The very antithesis of grandiosity and self-importance, *Empty Library* speaks of the excavation of memory, and of loss and blankness. It is, along with Maya Lin's *Vietnam Memorial*, the most affecting memorial I have seen. Both *Wagon*, and *Empty Library* are vessels of sorts and though human presence has

been removed from them, their humanity is all the more evident for that displacement.

The Biennial's other main venue, the KW Institute at Auguststrasse 69, is across the street and over a bit from the school. The first piece that you saw was Bruce Nauman's 1988 installation *Rats and Bats (Learned Helplessness in Rats II)*. It is made up of a yellow Plexiglas maze with six video monitors, video imagery of a rat running through the maze and, projected on the wall, of a man wielding a baseball bat and pounding the living daylights out of a sack. The work radiates anger and frustration, and is very much along the lines of my favorite Nauman video piece, the

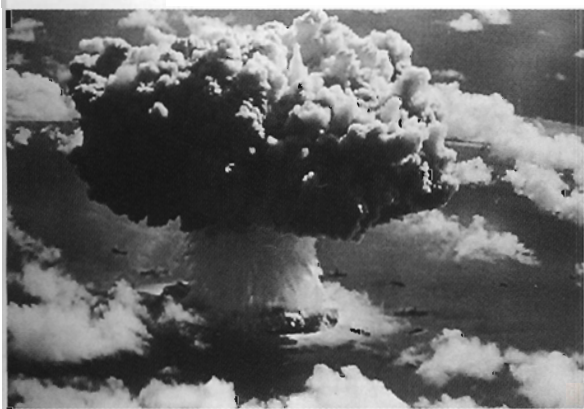


Robert Kuśmirowski: *Wagon*, 2006, wood, cardboard, paper, acrylic paint, 33 feet long. Private collection, Kortrijk, Belgium.

insanely grating *Clown Torture* (1987). Many viewers started their tour of the Biennial at the KW, and the image of earnest Biennial-goers moving through the clearly configured exhibition—its layout discouraged meandering—made the choice of the Nauman as a starting point quite telling.

Restless containment seemed to be one of the Biennial's motifs, shown to disquieting effect in Romanian-born Mircea Cantor's 2005 video, *Departure*. In it a deer and its natural predator, a wolf, are confined in a white room. They pace nervously, eyeing each other, but the wolf—thrown off, I would assume, by the unnatural situation—does not attack. The tension escalates, and even though the short film loops, there is a sense that something really bad is going to happen in the next minute or two. Often going hand in hand with confinement is observation or surveillance. Gillian Wearing's black-and-white 1999 video *Drunk* takes a group of street drinkers who lived near her London studio and brings them up into her work space. They go through their alcoholic paces in front of a white backdrop while the camera mercilessly records. It feels as if we are watching an animal behavior experiment devised by Samuel Beckett.

There were a few pieces at the KW that were somewhat lighter in tone, especially if you find obsessive behavior entertaining. The Berlin-based artist Florian Slotawa, who in the past made a sculpture using every single one of his posses-



Bruce Conner: *Crossroads*, 1976, 35mm film transferred to DVD, 36 minutes. Courtesy Canyon Cinema, San Francisco; Gladstone Gallery, New York.

The well-seasoned curatorial team worked to create an exhibition that amounted to an artwork in itself. They were helped by the political, social and artistic complexity of Berlin.

sions, this time ransacked the house of one of his collectors and built a structure, titled *Ersatzturm* (2006), with a good deal of their generically modern furniture. Tables, chairs, cabinets and shelves are stacked into an attractive towerlike structure some 25 feet tall. It is all well balanced, one would sincerely hope, but the curators walled it off in any case in an atriumlike space, and you looked down at it from the exhibition floor above.

appealing in an over-the-top hobbyist way.

This Biennial was clearly a serious affair, but one irresistible bit of foolishness was included. The curators dubbed a very modest street-level gallery space, which they used as a venue for a series of changing group exhibitions, the Gagosian Gallery Berlin. Their venture was wholly unauthorized, an appropriation of a brand name. Apparently the real Gagosian was amused and did not object. There are echoes here of the curatorial trio's defunct Wrong Gallery, an inoperable glass doorway on West 20th Street in New York with what looked like a functioning gallery behind, though in fact there were only a couple of square feet of floor space. (There was, for a time, a Will Return sign—an artwork by Jamie Isenstein—with a clock set a quarter of an hour fast.) The Wrong Gallery resided in Chelsea from 2002-05 and is now at the Tate Modern in London.

A number of publications and activities preceded the Biennial proper, among them the opening of the Gagosian Gallery Berlin in September 2005. It ceased operation at the end of the Biennial's run. "Homework," the show it had up when I visited, had a vaguely domestic agenda. The work on display, for example a fake potted plant fashioned by Peter Rösler from pieces of German police uniforms and other items of clothing, was professional and nicely made but decidedly not big-time—scarcely the blue chip material that one would find at any of the legitimate Gagosian locations.

Biennials and triennials are common enough these days, and you need something special to have yours stand out in the crowd. Berlin's Biennial is a fairly new entry in the field, and its fourth round had a lot going for it. The curators did some real digging and did not favor the latest crop of young talent, the local artistic power structure or the high-end international art-star crowd. It was good to see, for example, a contribution from the eccentric and always interesting Bay Area artist Bruce Conner, along with such other '70s work as Christopher Knowles's compulsively typed lists and Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel's *Evidence* (1977/2001), which culled odd and disturbing photographs from the archives of corporations, research institutes, government agencies and police departments, and presented them, uncaptioned and unexplained, in a deadpan way.

The well-seasoned curatorial team worked to create an exhibition that amounted to an artwork



Mircea Cantor: *Deeparture*, 2005, 16mm film transferred to DVD, approx. 2½ minutes. Courtesy Yvon Lambert Gallery, Paris/New York.

in itself. (Cattelan, well known for such provocations as the life-size sculpture of Pope John Paul II struck by a meteorite, was not represented as a sculptor in this Biennial.) They were helped, in no small part, by the political, social, historical and artistic complexity of the city of Berlin itself. To be sure, some of the curatorial rhetoric in the catalogue was overheated, and some of the artwork seemed well intentioned but thin. As a whole, though, the exhibition provided not just a chance to look at engaging art, but also a means to take the measure, in a way that only art can do, of an important city still in the midst of change and consolidation. □

"Of Mice and Men," the fourth Berlin Biennial, was on view Mar. 25-June 5, 2006.

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Felix Gmelin: *Sound and Vision*, 2005, DVD, approx. 3 minutes. Courtesy macaroni inc., New York; Milliken, Stockholm; VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

It would be hard not to be taken with Oliver Croy and Oliver Elser's collaborative research project titled *Sondermodelle* (Special Models), 2000. Under the auspices of their quasi-academic Fritz Studies Project, Croy and Elser have accumulated, documented and analyzed the complete collection of paper house models made by an obscure Viennese insurance clerk named Peter Fritz, who died in 1992. Croy unearthed a trove of the models the following year in a Viennese bric-a-brac store. Fritz's miniature houses, churches, apartments, gas stations, factories and the like are colorful, playful and highly detailed. While they are similar to buildings found in the part of Austria where he had a vacation house, they are wholly invented. Fritz constructed them out of cardboard onto which he attached wallpaper and other adhesive-backed papers, images from magazines, cigarette packets, insulating tape and other such materials. For the Biennial the artists carefully set all 387 of the models out on long shelves, and the installation, which unfolded around the entire room, was immensely



Christopher Knowles: *Untitled (Top 14 of 1978)*, ca. 1978, typing on paper, approx. 16 by 12½ inches framed. Courtesy Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York.