

# ICWA

## LETTERS

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**JW-13**  
**GERMANY**

*Jill Winder is a Donors' Fellow of the Institute studying post-reunification Germany through the work and attitudes of its artists.*

## ***Losing the Palast:*** **The Demolition of Berlin's** **Most Promising Kunsthalle**

By Jill Winder

JANUARY 2006

BERLIN—People from both sides of the Atlantic often ask me to compare the art scenes in New York City and Berlin. My answer has not changed in the last five years. I tell them that New York has an amazing contemporary art infrastructure, with dozens of important galleries, world-class museums, and a bevy of art collectors who drive the market. The downside is that a lot of mediocre art (at least of the contemporary variety) circulates within this sophisticated system. Berlin has the opposite problem: Although there are arguably more talented, internationally-recognized artists here than in any other location in the world, the art infrastructure is underdeveloped, with uninteresting museums for contemporary art and good galleries struggling because of the lack of art market. Put simply, New York has a lot of great spaces and a limited number of exceptional artists, while Berlin has a multitude of first-rate artists who have virtually no place to show their work.

This situation is a source of major frustration and resentment among Berlin's artists and art professionals. Many exhibitions staged at "major" venues such as the independently-run Kunst-Werke or the state-financed museum for contemporary art, Hamburger Bahnhof, are predictable affairs. These shows usually include a sampling of the "hot" young international stars, but the artists who most represent the Berlin scene are conspicuously absent.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, to see the work of these artists, one must travel to New York, Paris, London, Stockholm, Venice or Istanbul—practically anywhere but Berlin itself.

In this context, a rumor I heard in early December quickly got my attention. There was talk of an exhibition being planned by some of the best artists in the city, spearheaded by Thomas Scheibitz, a painter who represented Germany in the 2005 Venice Biennale. They were working on their own initiative, without any institutional backing and with their own funds. Even more intriguing, the show was to take place in the shell of the *Palast der Republik* (the former-East German parliament building in Berlin-Mitte) only days before the building was scheduled to be closed for good and demolished.

Although the exhibition, entitled *36 x 27 x 10*, was on view for only a week

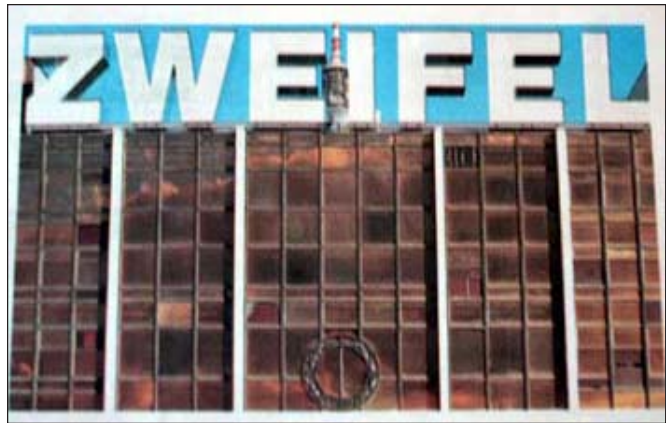
<sup>1</sup> The Hamburger Bahnhof's poor reputation has further declined in the last couple of years. Two notable reasons for this are the museum's agreement with controversial art collector Mick Flick to display part of his vast collection in exchange for construction of a new museum wing to house Flick-owned works (see JW-3), and the list of people nominated for the museum's "Young Artist" Prize in 2005. The nominees in the competition were internationally recognized and established artists (John Bock, Monica Bonvicini, Angela Bulloch and Anri Sala), not lesser-known artists that the museum took risks in championing. Many critics of the prize in the Berlin art world cited the embarrassing fact that one of the artists, Angela Bulloch, had been short listed for the Tate London's prestigious Turner Prize a full eight years before her Berlin nomination, an indication of just how irrelevant and behind-the-times Hamburger Bahnhof is.

(December 23-31, 2005), the unique story behind its organization, the marvelous quality of the art shown and the indisputable draw of its location quickly became the stuff of local art-world legend. This project was the best exhibition I saw in 2005, and one of the most memorable I've ever attended in the city.

\* \* \*

Arriving at the entrance to the Palast on December 30, I was taken aback to encounter a long queue of people patiently waiting to enter the exhibition—something I don't recall ever seeing in Berlin. The crowd was diverse: older couples carrying shopping bags from nearby Alexanderplatz, young hipsters and familiar faces from art world exhibition openings and everything in between. People waited politely, but excitement, curiosity and a bit of anxiousness were palpable. It felt more like we were customers waiting, rapt, outside a closed store, ready to barge in and seize clearance bargains rather than going to see contemporary art. While we inched our way up the stairs of the former grand lobby, volunteer staffers handed out photocopied reviews of the show and people dodged trickles of icy water that dripped through the ceiling high above our heads.

Though I was curious about *36 x 27 x 10*, the main reason I made a point to see the exhibition during the busy week between Christmas and New Year's was to be inside the Palast, my favorite building in Berlin, one last time. The Palast, former home of the East-German Parliament and a beloved meeting place for many East Germans, has lived a fascinating "life" since 1989. The government of reunified Germany condemned the building in 1990, two weeks after the freely-elected East German Parliament voted for reunification. The official explanation for the building's closure was asbestos



Norwegian artist Lars Ramberg installed 20-foot-high letters that spelled out the word Zweifel (Doubt) on the roof of the Palast der Republik. The work was on view from the end of January to early May 2005.

contamination in insulation throughout the building (finished in 1976), but from the moment the Palast's doors were bolted, people complained that this represented a symbolic attempt to erase the history of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Costly asbestos removal took seven years and destroyed the opulent Socialist-Modern interior. What remains is the unsightly shell of the building, gutted from the inside, with its façade largely unchanged.<sup>2</sup>

Conservatives who support the demolition of the Palast are seeking to rebuild an imperial palace that once stood on the same site (significantly damaged during World War Two, the East German government demolished what was left of the palace in 1950). Wilhelm von Boddien is the most prominent supporter of rebuilding the imperial palace and directs a powerful organization



(Left) A view of the Palast der Republik's main lobby (still filled with socialist décor) from 1996. (Right) The same view of the Palast's lobby, stripped during asbestos removal. This is how the lobby area appears today. In view are the steps people stood on waiting for admittance to the *36 x 27 x 10* exhibition. Photos: White Cube

<sup>2</sup> See JW-1 for a more extensive discussion of the Palast der Republik's history and the controversy surrounding its demolition.



*Berlin's famous TV Tower (another GDR-era monument) reflected in the east side of the Palast der Republik's Belgian-glass façade, now covered with graffiti.*

that has raised private money toward reconstruction and lobbied hard in the German Parliament for Palast demolition.<sup>3</sup> Although the Parliament has voted for demolition, and prominent politicians (including Chancellor Angela Merkel) support the rebuilding of the palace, a majority of Germans disagree. According to a January 2005 poll conducted by the Emnid Company, 59 percent of people surveyed were opposed to the demolition of the Palast.

Historical and ideological arguments notwithstanding, critics point out that the real problem with rebuilding the palace is that cost estimates of the project have spiraled out of control and that construction could take up to 15 years, leaving a gaping hole in the center of the city. The government estimates the Palast in its present condition is worth 110 million Euros (US\$132 million) and the demolition of the building will cost at least 60 million Euros (\$72 million). Proposals to rebuild the palace (or *Schloss*) have been plagued by controversy, particularly because cost estimates for rebuilding have ballooned in recent years. In 2002, an expert committee estimated

the cost at 230 million Euros (\$276 million). When another working group looked at the plans in 2003, the estimate was more than double the original figure, or 590 million Euros (\$708 million). A 2005 feasibility study put the number at 1.2 billion Euro (\$1.44 billion)—at that price, the rebuilt palace would be the most expensive public building in Germany.<sup>4</sup>

As I chatted with people waiting in line, it became clear that many of us were not there primarily, if at all, to see the art. For a good number of visitors, attendance was something of a pilgrimage, homage to the Palast as its final hours of existence ticked away. Cultural critics writing about the Palast and the debate about its fate have argued that most older Germans (typically easterners) who oppose the Palast's demolition see it as a symbol of the GDR that should survive. Younger people (whether from the east or west) are drawn to the Palast because of *ostalgie* (nostalgia for the East) that has less to do with politics than with cultural and aesthetic trends. Certainly these factors are in play, but in reality most people's support of the building is more complex and subtle, a mixture of appreciation for the architecture, the cultural potential of the space, and preservation. Advocates for preservation (including Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas) point out that the Palast has now stood empty longer than it functioned as an official East German building, making ideological arguments for demolition seem irrelevant.

Many young people, like Anke, a 23-year-old architecture student I spoke to, referred to the building's style and were only peripherally interested in its political history. As Anke put it, "This [the Palast] is just the only thing we have in the city that shows the eastern Modernist style. Everything else has been torn down. For me, I'm not sentimental about East Germany or anything, but I love the design. It's such a brilliant contrast to all the stuffy, monumental architecture around here." Two pensioners I spoke with, by contrast, were eager to tell me stories about concerts or events they attended in the Palast as GDR-citizens. When I asked a man in his 70s what brought him to the exhibition, he was frank: "Young lady," he said, "I don't give a damn about art. But I remember this place, the time I spent here, and it meant something. I have my memories." The man's companion was less sentimental. "I don't have any illusions about how things were so great in East Germany," she told me, "but it is part of our history. Anyway, it seems like a waste to take down the building. Why not use the money to turn it into a place where people can go and enjoy themselves?"

In a way, my opinion about the Palast encompasses all these points of view. When I excitedly exited the exhibition, I practically ran into a television crew from a local

<sup>3</sup> Wilhelm v. Boddien's organization, called the *Förderverein Berliner Schloss* (Friends of the Berlin Palace), has a website with information outlining their position (partially available in English): [www.berliner-schloss.de](http://www.berliner-schloss.de).

<sup>4</sup> Information from *12 gute Gründe gegen einen Abriss* (12 Good Arguments against Demolition), a booklet produced by the civic group *Palastbuendnis*. More information can be found at [www.palastbuendnis.de](http://www.palastbuendnis.de). A PDF file of a booklet the organization published is available for download (in German only) at: <http://www.palastbuendnis.de/downloads/12%20Grunde.pdf>.



*Installation view of the exhibition Tod (Death), presented by Fraktale, a contemporary art association, in the Palast der Republik in autumn 2005. The organizers were the first to construct the white-cube exhibition space used in the December exhibition.*

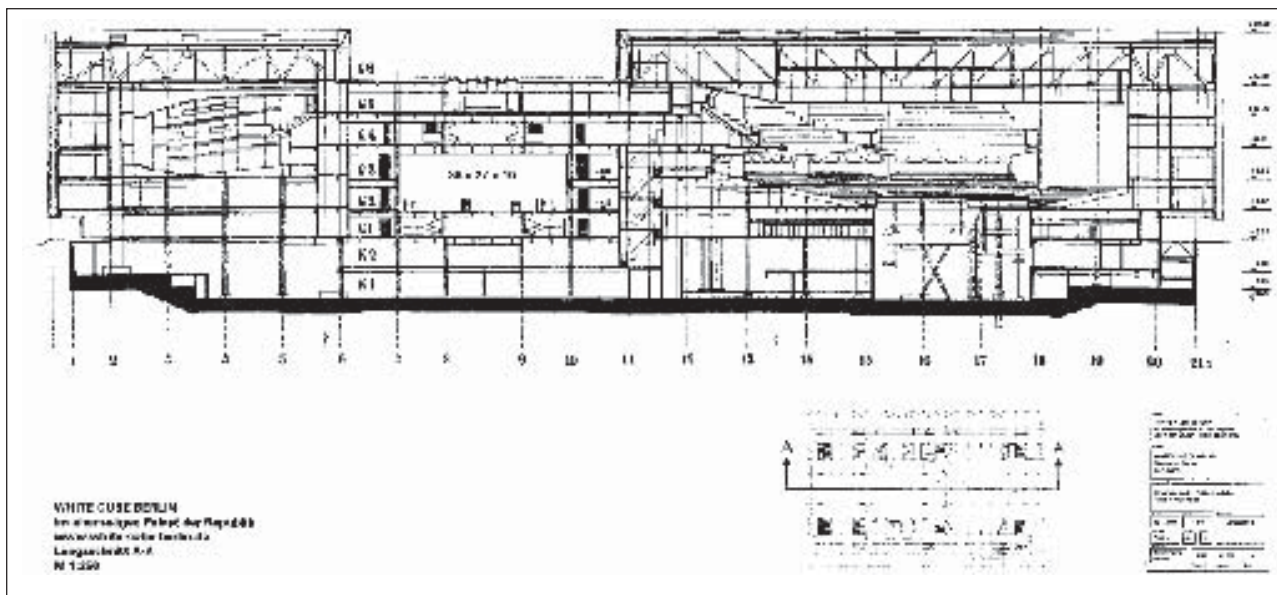
station. They approached me for comment, and after apologizing for my less-than-perfect (and not quite camera-ready!) German, I cited cultural-use value, pragmatic economics, historical significance and style, not necessarily in that order.

Though I had seen the impressive list of participat-

ing artists, I was initially skeptical about  $36 \times 27 \times 10$ . Since 2003, dozens of cultural events have taken place in the Palast while debates raged in the German Parliament about what to do with the building—discussions that, despite much popular protest, have always pointed to eventual demolition. Because the interior of the Palast is literally the shell of the building it once was, events I attended there always felt contrived and unfit for the space. A notable exception to this was an autumn 2005 exhibition called *Tod* (Death). Although the works in that show were for the most part forgettable, the organizers managed to build a classic, museum-like “white cube” in part of the Palast. It was an inspired use of the space and proof to many people that parts of the Palast structure could indeed be used as a traditional exhibition space and not simply as a symbolic location for haphazard projects.

As it turned out, the white cube built for the *Tod* exhibition was the inspiration for *36 x 27 x 10* (so named for the dimensions of the white-cube space). As the government-imposed deadline for the official closure of the Palast (December 31, 2005) approached, protests against the demolition became more pronounced and gained new energy. Fueled by strong feelings the building continued to elicit, Coco Kühn and Constanze Kleiner, who had been impressed with the white-cube structure, decided to organize a project there in the building’s final weeks, and named the initiative “White Cube Berlin.” In early December, a week after the *Tod* exhibition closed, Kühn and Kleiner called artist Thomas Scheibitz and asked if he would be interested in helping organize a show in the Palast’s temporary white cube space.

What happened next is now legendary: Scheibitz started calling other artist friends, who called others. Soon 36 of Berlin’s best artists had agreed to exhibit pieces at their own cost and installation was underway. The fact



*Architectural rendering of the Palast der Republik in its present state. The box in the center (corresponding to levels G2 and G3, with the dimensions noted) is the location of the white cube in the building. Courtesy: White Cube Berlin.*



(Above) Installation view of the exhibition 36 X 27 X 10 on view in the white cube space in the Palast der Republik from December 21 to December 31, 2005. Photo: Stefan Maria Rother (Below) A detail of artist Franz Ackermann's monumental "combine" painting entitled Zugang am Meer (Entrance to the Sea) from 2004. Photo: Detlef Steinberg



that so many prominent artists were willing to commit their work and labor to this project is a testament to the enthusiasm and energy of the Berlin scene, assets that are not put to good use in the local museums. That the show, organized by artists without the professional hand of a curator, was so excellent only exposed how anemic the traditional museum spaces in Berlin have become. As Sebastian Preuss ruefully noted in his review of the exhibition in the *Berliner Zeitung*, "In only ten days, something was achieved that the National Gallery and the Hamburger Bahnhof haven't managed

over the course of many years with millions of Euros in state funding."

In the Palast's white cube, the best artists in Berlin finally had a proper backdrop for their art. Internationally recognized names such as John Bock, Monica Bonvicini, Angela Bulloch, Tacita Dean, Thomas Demand, Olaf Nicolai, Daniel Pflumm, Manfred Pernice, Thomas Scheibitz and Rikrit Tiravanija were represented. The installation made the best use of the space; many artists personally installed their own work. Painter Franz



Another installation view of the exhibition, with artist Olafur Eliasson's work *Umgekehrte Spiegellampe* (*Inside-out Mirror Lamp*), from 2005, in the center. Photo: Stefan Maria Rother

Ackermann contributed a large-scale wall painting adding a cacophony of energy and color to the white cube. Bojan Sarcevic showed a small, delicate, metal sculpture suspended from one of the white walls, creating a complex three-dimensional space from simple lines. The sculpture's fragility and the contrast it drew between space and emptiness was evoked in the work's title, "You have nothing of me, but the space where I would be" (2005). The work of Iceland-born Olafur Eliasson called *Umgekehrte Spiegellampe* (*Inside-out Mirror Lamp*) beautifully dominated part of the installation. Eliasson, whose work always deals with the perception of light and space, made a cross between a shimmering disco ball and modernist chandelier. The sculpture, hung from the ceiling, was made of small, triangular mirrors but the reflective side was oriented inwards. When you stood beneath it, your image was reflected in the thousands of small shards.

The Palast's imminent demolition was certainly part of the impetus for the project, but the organizers' main goal was to show how much Berlin needs a space for artists to experiment and work on their own initiative, and to prove that the Palast could be such a place. As the organizers put it, "The participating artists draw attention to a historical moment at which such a site, shortly before its destruction, can reflect the artistic and aesthetic situation that Berlin creates in a specific way. Furthermore, with their participation in the exhibition, the artists call for preserving and using this exceptional building as an exhibition space for contemporary art." Thomas Scheibitz clarified that his participation was less about politics and more about seizing an opportunity to show what the artists could create given the chance: "In the first place, this exhibition does not represent a particular political position held by artists working in Berlin for or against the Palast. Instead we are trying to show what Berlin's notorious finance discussions extinguish: The clever improvisational use

of ruins, the temporary, the system of chaotic creativity."

Nevertheless, a number of the works in the exhibition lent themselves to political statements, referring both to the Palast and to the contemporary condition in general. The title of Eliasson's work, for example, was seen by some as an ironic reference to the disparaging nickname given to the Palast in the GDR days. Those who hated the building's design called it "*Erich's Lampenladen*" (*Erich [Honnecker]'s Lamp Shop*) because of the interior's pompous chandeliers.

Nonetheless, in an interview with Berlin's *Tagespiegel*, Eliasson focused on the use-value of the Palast as a space: "We could continue to improvise with this place. We've always searched for such a space in Berlin."

Critics lauded both the potential of the Palast space and the exhibition itself. In a country where art reviews are harmless at best and vicious at worst, unanimously positive headlines like "The Temporary Art Palace," "Berlin's New Kunsthalle," and "The Exhibition Wonder in Berlin" were almost unheard-of. In his review for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, critic Niklas Maak lambasted Berlin's official museums: "Many of the artists have been living in Berlin for a long time: Olafur Eliasson, Thomas Demand and Tacita Dean (to name but three of the best known) and have their studios right under the nose of Peter-Klaus Schuster, the director of Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin's 'Museum of Contemporary Art,' but none of them has ever had a solo show there. Eliasson showed in London's Tate Modern instead (attended by no less than 2 million visitors), Demand in New York's MOMA, Tacita Dean in the Paris *Musee de l'Art Moderne*. You have to travel a long way to see the art being made in your own capital."

Jan Brandt, in his review of the exhibition in the

*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, made the argument for continued use of the Palast der Republik. "There is no other city where so many internationally known artists live and work than Berlin, and nowhere else in Germany are there so many galleries and museums, and yet the 'white cube' shows what is missing: a central forum that has contact with the local scene and that takes advantage of its potential. No other building seems more appropriate for this than the Palast der Republik, with its location close to the Museum Island. The Palast der Republik, as empty as it now, can, without any ideology or semantics, provide a space for the long recognized art of the city and create new connections."

Demolition of the Palast der Republik is supposed to begin in February 2006. People will probably not believe it until they see the building being chipped away at. Because the debate has gone on for so long, and supporters of the Palast have won so many battles against demolition over the past 15 years, it is hard to accept that

there are no more appeals to be made. The Bundestag definitively reaffirmed the plan for Palast demolition (for the third time) on January 19. And the consortium charged with taking apart the Palast has already set up construction containers and demolition equipment on the adjacent parking lot—an unmistakable sign that something is about to happen.

When the yearlong demolition begins once and for all, some will be eager to watch a prominent reminder of the East German regime topple. Others will mourn the loss of an important piece of architecture. A few will wax sentimental about good memories of the place, while others will feel vindicated that rebuilding the imperial palace will right a historical wrong. But because of the 36 X 27 X 10 exhibition, I suspect that many artists and art lovers in the city will watch in dismay as a prime space for experimentation, which for a week became Berlin's best place to see contemporary art, is cast into the dustbin of history. □

# Current Fellows and their Activities

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

### **Richard D. Connerney** (January 2005 - 2007) • **INDIA**

A lecturer in Philosophy, Asian Religions and Logic at Rutgers University, Rick Connerney is spending two years as a Phillips Talbot Fellow studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture and politics in India, once described by former U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith as "a functioning anarchy." Rick has a B.A. and an M.A. in religion from Wheaton College and the University of Hawaii, respectively.

### **Kay Dilday** (October 2005-2007) • **FRANCE/MOROCCO**

An editor for the *New York Times*' Op-Ed page for the past five years, Kay holds an M.A. in Comparative International Politics and Theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the *Universiteit van Amsterdam* in the Netherlands and the *Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne*. She has traveled in and written from Haiti and began her journalistic life as city-council reporter for *Somerville This Week*, in Somerville, MA.

### **Cristina Merrill** (June 2004-2006) • **ROMANIA**

Born in Bucharest, Cristina moved from Romania to the United States with her mother and father when she was 14. Learning English (but retaining her Romanian), she majored in American History at Harvard College and there became captain of the women's tennis team. She received a Master's degree in Journalism from New York University in 1994, worked for several U.S. publications from *Adweek* to the *New York Times*, and is spending two years in Romania watching it emerge from the darkness of the Ceausescu regime into the presumed light of membership in the European Union and NATO.

### **Nicholas Schmidle** (October 2005-2007) • **IRAN**

A journalist and researcher for the Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life, Nick is finishing a Master's program in Comparative and Regional Studies (Middle East/Central Asia) at American University in Washington DC. He is studying intensive Persian — as is his fiancée, Rikki Bohan — in anticipation of his departure for Iran after his marriage in autumn 2005.

### **Andrew J. Tabler** (February 2005 - 2007) • **SYRIA/LEBANON**

Andrew has lived, studied and worked in the Middle East since a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Fellowship enabled him to begin Arabic-language studies and work toward a Master's degree at the American University in Cairo in 1994. Following the Master's, he held editorships with the *Middle East Times* and *Cairo Times* before moving to Turkey, Lebanon and Syria and working as a Senior Editor with the Oxford Business Group and a correspondent for the *Economist* Intelligence Unit. His two-year ICWA fellowship bases him in Beirut and Damascus, where he will report on Lebanese affairs and Syrian reform.

### **Jill Winder** (July 2004 - 2006) • **GERMANY**

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

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