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

Life and Death on Auguststraße: The Fourth Berlin Biennale

By Jill Winder

"If there is a place where the 'New Berlin' exists, as it does in the dreams of foreigners… something like Prague with Chelsea in the cellar, then it is Auguststraße."

–Niklas Maak, *Frankfurter Allgemiene Zeitung*

April 2006

BERLIN – Back to Auguststraße … the famous street in Berlin-Mitte, that's home to the contemporary art space Kunst Werke, the renowned gallery EIGEN + Art and the modern building designed by architect Jörg Ebers, which I've written about previously. Auguststraße is a little more than half a mile long, with 800 inhabitants, three doctors' offices, 17 bars and restaurants, 25 galleries, two hair-dressers, a kosher food store, three playgrounds, a sports field, a music school, a famous ballroom and a bike shop. Poetically, the street begins with a church and ends in the old Garrison Cemetery.

If the buildings along Auguststraße could talk, they could sum up a good part of Germany's 20th-century history. Take the building at Auguststraße #17, which has served at various times as a boarding house for Jewish refugees, the head-quarters of the Zionist Party, a Hebrew school for immigrants, a Nazi deportation

(left) People wait in line to enter the private apartment at Auguststraße #17. (right) Instal-lation view of Bremen-based artist Norbert Schwontkowski's paintings, displayed in situ in the private apartment at Auguststraße #17 where he stays when he is visiting Berlin.

point, a Red-Army post and an abandoned East-German ruin. Adding to the street's narrative, mixing history and contemporary urban life, is the fourth Berlin Biennale. The exhibition, one of the most anticipated of the year, is housed in 12 different locations on Auguststraße—including a former Jewish girls' school, Kunst Werke and private apartments—and is on view from March 25 to May 28, 2006.

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Klaus Bisenbach, founder of the art space Kunst Werke and one of the most

View of the curators, Horensia Voelckers (Director of the Federal Cultural Fund, which supported the Biennale), Klaus Biesenbach and others at the opening press conference on March 23, 2006.

influential figures in the development of Berlin-Mitte into an internationally-recognized destination for contemporary art, gave a short speech on the occasion of the opening of the fourth Berlin Biennale on March 24, 2006. He looked back on the changes in Berlin-Mitte and the art scene since 1990, and recalled a project that, in his words, "got this whole thing started." Bisenbach initiated the *37 Rooms* exhibition project in 1992. Thirty-seven curators and arts professionals were each invited to curate a mini-exhibition in one of thirty-seven rooms found in various buildings along Auguststraße. The exhibition was open for one week in June 1992 and was an enormous success; Auguststraße's reputation as "the" street for contemporary art in Berlin was established with *37 Rooms*.

Biesenbach shook his head in amazement as he recalled the urgency he felt when organizing *37 Rooms*: "We were all working with an incredible sense of upheaval, being pressed for time, of opportunities slipping through our hands. Things were changing so quickly in Berlin, and we were sure that we'd never be able to use the old Jewish girls' school building or some of the old apartment houses again because they'd soon be demolished, renovated … just gone. And now I am amazed, fifteen years later, that many of the spaces we used in *37 Rooms* are still standing, and in the exact same condition. There is no other city in the world where so many things change, yet so many, inexplicably, do not."

Biesenbach was speaking to a rapt art crowd gathered in Clärchen's Ballhaus, an illustrious ballroom on Auguststraße, where one of the Berlin Biennale artworks was displayed. The space was completely packed and gruff bouncers were turning famous collectors and curators, frantically flashing VIP passes, away at the door. I was amazed at how many curators, critics, gallery owners and artists from New York and Los Angeles were present and accounted for. As for the rest of the crowd, they were young artists, art lovers and art professionals from all over Europe, who took advantage of cheap intra-European flights to come to Berlin for the weekend … I like to call them the "Easyjet art crowd." In short, almost everyone in the international contemporary art world was in Berlin and ready to see if all the hype surrounding the fourth Berlin Biennale had any substance behind it.

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A team of three curated the fourth Berlin Biennale: Maurizio Cattelan (a well-known artist from Milan), Massimiliano Gioni (a young curator also from Milan) and Ali Subotnick (an editor and writer from New York City). They have previously worked together, and are known for their creative and unusual projects, especially for the "Wrong Gallery," a "gallery space" located in a single shop window in New York that recently moved to the Tate Modern for a year. Because of a generous funding commitment to the Berlin Biennale from Germany's Federal Cultural Foundation, the curators were able to devote over 18 months to researching and planning the Biennale, and reviewed the work of over 900 artists from all over the world in the process. Expectations were extremely high.

In the contemporary art world, Berlin Biennale curators Cattelan, Gioni and Subotnick are known for being experimental and iconoclastic. True to their reputation, they came up with a series of projects that generated visibility and interest in the Biennale long before the opening. Tamest of the ideas was the presentation of a short column in Berlin's *Zitty* magazine (which could be compared to New York City's *Time Out*), in which the curators introduced an artist living and working in Berlin in each issue. More risky was the curators' decision to open a gallery space on Auguststraße where small group exhibitions (curated by people other than the Biennale curators) were shown for six months prior to the Biennale opening. The idea itself wasn't so new, but the curators' tongue-in-cheek (and illegal) use of legendary New York gallery owner Larry Gagosian's name (the gallery in Berlin is called Gagosian Gallery), presumably meant to be both an art-world insider joke as well as an attempt to milk a famous name for publicity, seemed more jaded than radical.

Photo: Jason Nocito

The unconventional group portrait of the unconventional trio of curators. From left to right: Maurizio Cattelan, Massimiliano Gioni and Ali Subotnick.

Of the curators' pre-exhibition projects, the book *Checkpoint Charley* (the slightly misspelled title refers to a famous East-West border crossing in Berlin that is now

home to a very touristy museum) was the one that went horribly wrong. The book, a heavy, cheaply produced tome, three-inches thick, filled with grainy photocopies of pages out of artists' portfolios, came out a few months before the Biennale opened. Because it contains the work of hundreds of artists reviewed by the curators but not selected for the Berlin Biennale, *Checkpoint Charley* functions both as a roster of rejected artists, and as a kind of vanity production for the curators. It seems to announce: "Look how hard we worked! Look at the exhaustive research we did!"

Besides the fact that the artists in the book are very poorly represented (some images of the artists' works are practically invisible, and there is often no indication what exactly is in the picture), the curators did something immensely unprofessional—they did not bother to ask the artists for permission to reproduce their work and thus engaged in hundreds of copyright violations. Far worse, however, was the cynical and disingenuous statement in the books' colophon: "All of the artists are represented without their consent. We are extremely grateful for this." A friend of mine, an Austrian artist living in Berlin, was asked for her portfolio by the Berlin Biennale curators last year. She was horrified to receive an e-mail shortly after the book was printed, indicating that she could pick up her free copy at Kunst Werke—none of the artists had been informed about the book beforehand. I had lunch with this friend the day I bought *Checkpoint Charley*, and we sat together flipping through the pages of the book to find her name (the book has no table of contents or page numbers). The curators had reproduced a drawing that my friend did, not as artwork at all, but technical instructions for a complex video installation. The page in the book completely misrepresented my friend's work.

I was shocked that the Biennale curators would do such disservice to the artists who had shared their work with them, and even more surprised that they would risk the ire of powerful galleries that insist that their artists and galleries are credited in reproductions. My friend was glum but resigned: "I've talked to other artists who are also in the book and we're all appalled. But what can we do? The curators are powerful and we're not in the show. Some people are happy for any publicity, but I don't want publicity if it doesn't present my work in the proper way. The curators took the time to send a mass e-mail telling us to pick up the book… why couldn't they have sent a similar e-mail simply asking for permission?" The knowledge that the curators had taken advantage of hundreds of artists in this way made me feel that instead of a reputation for being "radical" the curators should rather be known as unprofessional. In the case of *Checkpoint Charley*, they displayed outright disrespect for the artists on whom their exhibitions are based.

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Cattelan, Gioni and Subotnick titled the fourth Berlin Biennale *Of Mice and Men*, after John Steinbeck's classic 1937 novel, and told viewers that they saw the exhibition as a kind of novel itself. The curators made it clear that they were not interested in doing an analysis of gentrification or transition in Berlin or of Auguststraße itself; instead they utilized the unique locations on the street as a backdrop for the art. In describing the exhibition, the curators were vague and a times irritatingly elusive when it came to explaining their vision for the show or their position in general. This excerpt from the curators' written statement illustrates the way in which one can make a statement that doesn't say anything at all: "*Of Mice and Men* attempts to broaden some narrative passages and initiate chains of thoughts that rotate around questions of birth and loss, death and surrender, grief and nostalgia. Or maybe it's just a small theater of the absurd, which we believe reflects the darkness we see all around us."

I found the exhibition surprising, unusual, lacking and irresponsible in equal measure. Rather surprising was the curators' choice of art works. Instead of attempting

Part of a work by young Polish artist Aneta Grzeszykowska, which appears on all Berlin Biennale posters and press materials. It is a wedding picture of the artist's parents, which she used as the basis of an artwork exhibited in the Biennale. Grzeszykowska's work, "Album" (2005) consists of her own photo album filled with old family pictures. This sounds straightforward enough until one realizes that the artist has digitally erased herself from many of the photos, altering the family documents and the family's history through her absence.

Photo: The artist and Galerie Yvon Lambert, Paris

Still image from the video work "Deeparture" (2005) by young Romanian artist Mircea Cantor. In the film, a wolf and a deer are locked into a white-cube gallery space together. The deer cowers, shivers with fright and remains mostly still while the wolf encircles its prey threateningly, but never attacks. The work is rather painful to watch, engendering as it does an intense sense of threat and the possibility of a violent attack.

Film still from the work "Burn" (2001) by artists Robert Reynolds and Patrick Jolley. It is a terrifying and mesmerizing film in which the interior of a fully furnished house catches fire and slowly burns. As flames spring up and begin to take over the rooms, the people in the house react either with complete indifference (fanning the pesky flames away and continuing to read a paper) or seem eerily unaware (as is the woman lying in a burning bed shown in this image). It's as if the residents are resigned to the proximity of danger and the inevitability of death.

to "take the pulse" of the global contemporary art scene of the moment, as many other biennials try to do, Cattelan, Gioni and Subotnick simply displayed "… some things we wanted to see together," including the work of over 70 artists from 4 generations. The inclusion of older artists and older works, and the predominance of objects (drawings, sculpture, installation) in contrast to relatively little video work, made this exhibition unique. The fourth Berlin Biennale is a poetic exhibition, filled with melancholy and lovely, delicate works that actually seem interested in the concept of "beauty"—surprisingly rare in contemporary art.

The curators had a goldmine of interesting locations to use on Auguststraße, many not normally open to the public, and they took full advantage. The problem, in my opinion, was that they instrumentalized certain locations, ignoring the often-tragic history of the sites and using the run-down and abandoned rooms as an aesthetic backdrop. While such use may not be problematic in an old private space,— for example, in a former Jewish girls' school — it felt inappropriate and disrespectful. The abstract themes of "myth" and "futility" running through the exhibition stood at a troubling distance from the very real fear, loss and tragedy embodied in the school—after all, just down the road the Gestapo rounded up many of the school's pupils and deported them to concentration camps. This history cannot and should not be trivialized as a pleasingly ruined setting for art. Adding to this was the surprising fact that so few of the works on display dealt with historical context or political questions in general. I found the disconnect between sites like the former Jewish school and their artistic contents extremely troubling.

That said, there were plenty of beautiful, complex and thought-provoking works in the exhibition that deserve mention. The St. Johannes-Evangelist-Church, built in a neo-Romanesque style, consecrated in 1900 and used sporadically during the GDR regime, is found at the southern end of Auguststraße. The Biennale begins inside, with a subtle work by Belgian artist Kris Martin. The piece, entitled "Mandi III" (2003), suggests both the cycles of life and of arriving and departing. It is a flipboard, like the ones found in train stations or airports, whose constantly turning letters and numbers usually announce the arrival and departure times of trains and planes. In Martin's version, however, the flipboard is completely black, and while parts of the board are programmed to flip over at random intervals, the sign remains unreadable and mute. Because of its installation in a church, this relatively simple work takes on a powerful aura, and stands as a metaphor for the passage of time and seems to suggest that both birth and death are merely stops in the long, human journey.

Another interesting location made available to artists was the Post Office Depot stables. The Post Office

View of Kris Martin's work "Mandi III" (2003), installed in the St. Johannes Evangelical Church.

In the Berlin Biennale, artists take advantage of the unusual exhibition venues, leading to some striking installation works. This image shows a detail of German artist Michael Beutler's "Yellow Escalator" (2006) in the Post Office Stables.

Depot is a lovely neo-baroque building with arched entryways and an ornate interior with an octagonal cupola. Built in the late 1880s, the building was used by the GDR's Postal Service and later as administrative space up to 1990. The complex is now under monument protection, and holds a few artists' studios. The space is occasionally rented out for special events, and the well-attended opening party for the fourth Berlin Biennale took place there. The adjoining stables housed horses that were used to transport mail between 1881 and 1928. Michael Beutler, a young German artist, used one stable as the site for his complex installation piece, "Yellow Escalator." The disparity between the bright new construction and the run-down stable was strong, and provided a striking visual contrast between the two.

As previously mentioned, the former Jewish girls' school was the most compelling and problematic site put

View of the back of the Post Office Depot building. The unused Post Office stables, where some works in the Biennale were installed, are located across the parking lot (out of view).

Installation view of Marcel van Eeden's ongoing drawing cycle depicting the life of K.M. Wiegand, which includes both real and fictional events. The installation is in a hallway in the former Jewish girls' school.

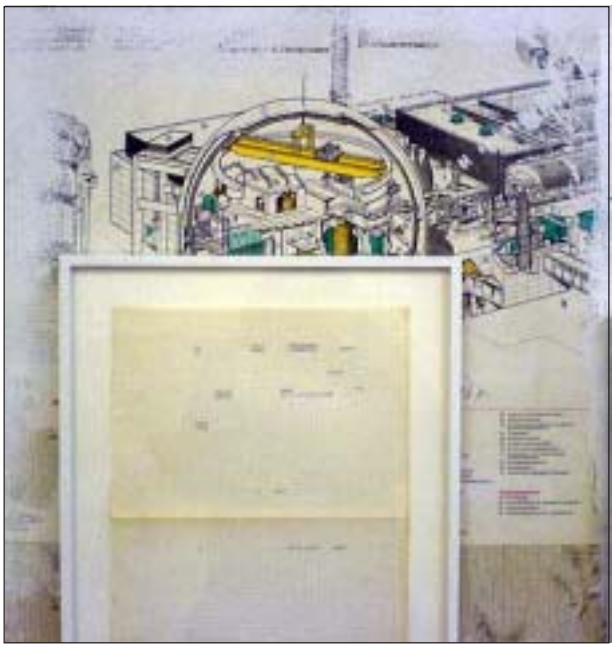
to use on Auguststraße, The building, one of the first examples of modernist architecture on the street, was built between 1927 and 1928 and functioned as a private Jewish girls' school. It was one of the last buildings commissioned by the Jewish Community before the Nazis seized power. The school remained open, under increasing pressure, until 1942, when the National Socialist regime ordered all Jewish schools closed. After the war, the East German government turned the building into a polytechnic high school and named it after Berthold Brecht. After 1989, the school building was returned to the Jewish Community of Berlin through the restitution process and has been vacant since 1994.

One enters the school only after going through a metal detector and having bags searched, security measures that the Jewish Community, which owns the building, deems sadly necessary to prevent vandalism and violence. This procedure is a sobering reminder that right-wing violence and neo-Nazi attacks against Jews and immigrants are on the rise in Germany. Entering the school, one is also reminded that until the Nazis' rise to power, this part of Mitte was a prominent Jewish neighborhood.

View of one of Paloma Varga Weisz's sculptures installed in the former Jewish girls' school.

All five floors of the school were used to display Biennale artworks. The old classrooms have dusty floors, chipped sinks located at child's height and walls covered with as many as four or five layers of peeling wallpaper or chipped paint, in the particular industrial-green color that once graced schools and offices all across the Eastern bloc and Soviet Union. Adding to the mystery and eeriness of the place, bulletin boards scattered throughout the school are cluttered with signs announcing a parents' meeting or a prize won by one of the students, all dating from the late-80s and early 1990s. These are remnants from GDR-times. In particular, one large red sign promoting "Pioneer Bereitschaft" (Pioneer Readiness)—the Pioneers were members of the East German communist youth group—caught my eye. The school is so decrepit and has such a sense of both crisis and emptiness that at one point, I was reminded of pictures I'd recently seen of an abandoned elementary school in the town of Pripyat, Ukraine, deserted after the Chernobyl disaster.

Installation view of a series of intricate drawings by Roland Flexner installed in the former Jewish girls' school.



Here a text piece by Christopher Knowles is installed over a peeling diagram explaining the latest nuclear reactor technology in a former physics class room. Bruce Connor's film showing US government footage of nuclear tests in the Bikini Atol is installed just five feet away.

There is a sense in which the immense curiosity that viewers (including myself) feel about locations like the school makes the artworks appear more interesting than they really are. Nonetheless, I found a unique kind of serendipity at work in a couple of parts of the school, and despite my reservations, in those moments I found the installation profoundly interesting. At one point, I was looking at the work of American artist Christopher Knowles, who was diagnosed with autism as a child. His obsessive typed lists (such as in "Untitled. 42 Relationships", circa 1983, where 42 couples are listed) were displayed in simple frames. Through an adjacent door, Bruce Conner's work "Crossroads" (1976), a black-and-white film made from the US government's archival footage of nuclear tests in the Bikini Atol in 1946, was playing. Connor compressed the film so that what the viewer sees is the bomb going off 27 times, with only slight variations in camera perspective or speed, displaying at once a fascinating image and nightmare scenario *par excellence*.

My observant friend Fredrik Lassen pointed out that one of Knowles's drawings was installed over a peeling, 1980s diagram of a nuclear reactor, and that we happened to be standing in an old physics classroom. These kinds of eerie coincidences and poetic connections made the exhibition more than the sum of its parts. I found the same to be true in the case of Norbert Schwontkowski's paintings at Auguststraße #17. The works, themselves fairly

unremarkable, were instantly transformed into something intimate and compelling when displayed in a private apartment.

One important work in the Jewish girl's school that did justice to its surroundings by subtly invoking the past was young Polish artist Robert Kusmirowski's "Wagon" (2006). Elaborating on his childhood game of making intricate replicas of objects to play with in communist Poland, Kusmirowski painstakingly crafted a life-size freight car atop a section of train track out of simple materials. Beautifully installed in the school's old gym, the artist's work managed to refer to his own childhood history, Nazi deportations and the inhuman use of freight cars to transport Jews to concentration camps. The former Jewish girl's school deserved to have been installed with more works that actively engaged with its history, or at least acknowledged the past in a more thoughtful way.

The work of two other artists, displayed in a construction container and the Post Office stables respectively, also managed to refer directly to the political context in which they were shown. Dutch artist Erik van Lieshout's video "From Rotterdam to Rostock" (2005) was screened in a construction container that he fitted out by building a half-dozen cramped "seating" spaces. The work documents a bike trip that the artist made last fall across northern Germany. Along the way, van Lieshout (a fairly goofy-looking character) narrates his journey in squeaky, high-pitched Dutch, lamenting about various random health problems and an ex-girlfriend. But there's a dark side to this slapstick routine, and the ugly underbelly of a certain segment of German social and political life is exposed as van Lieshout encounters neo-Nazis, old German housewives, drug addicts, farmers, students and unemployed middle-aged men drowning their boredom in beer in village bars. One can only hope that van Lieshout did some selective editing for impact, because many of the people he meets, while friendly, don't hesitate to make all manner of blatant racist and ethnic remarks, blaming their unemployment on "dark immigrants" and lamenting the loss of Hitler as Germany's "all-time best leader." At one point, van Lieshout breaks down sobbing while talking to a Dutch friend on the phone. His convincing homesickness and anguish at what he has encountered are surprisingly moving and believable. Adding more weight to the artist's journey is the fact that the Dutch have a very angry and unresolved history with Germany because of World War II—van Lieshout's distress can also be seen as a reaction to the failure of his own attempt to disprove some national prejudices about the Germans.

Another important art work was by Polish artist Pawel Althamer. Althamer's conceptual work usually involves the human body and everyday situations, but his piece for the Biennale, at once deeply personal and sincerely political, reaches into new terrain. Based on his personal experience of living illegally in Berlin, when a patron arranged for him to receive a visa, Althamer attempts a similar gesture by appealing to Berlin's Senator of the Interior, asking him to grant a residency permit to a Kurdish immigrant family. As Althamer notes in his written appeal (which has been signed by over 3,000 petitioners so far), the Olcay family have been living in Berlin since 1989, having fled here from Turkey because of persecution. Four of the family's six children were born in Berlin; they all speak fluent German, have attended German schools, and know no other home than Berlin. Under German law, since the children have all turned 18, they are subject to deportation. Their mother (now a divorced single parent) is jobless and receives social benefits. One son, 18-year-old Besir Oclay, has been so distressed by his impending deportation that he has spent the last six weeks in a hospital under suicide watch. During the Berlin Biennale, Althamer arranged for Ms. Oclay to live in a rent-free apartment. She has also been provided with a translator and German tutor to help with her appeal and to enable her to find a job. In one of the Post Office stables, Althamer displays two simple objects: the written appeal and one of Besir Oclay's sneakers, placed on the dirt floor. This lonely shoe, the artist seems to suggest, is a symbol of the powerlessness of the boy and his desperation. Althamer entitled his work "Fairy Tale" (2006), clearly hoping for a

Photo: Oliver Hartung/NYT

Installation view of Robert Kusmirowski's haunting, life-sized, handmade replica of a freight car and section of track, entitled "Wagon" (2006).

happy end to this drama. The artist used his participation in the Berlin Biennale as an opportunity to both raise awareness about the situation immigrants in Germany face, as well as to make a concrete difference in the lives of one family. It was a moving and important gesture that contained a level of compassion and socio-political engagement that was lacking in so much of the exhibition.

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Generally speaking, the fourth Berlin Biennale was well received. People loved the various sites where works were installed, and found the presentation thought-provoking and the art works refreshing. I suppose I agree with critic Peter Richer, who stated in his review of the exhibition in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* that *Of Mice and Men* was "a leaden national echo chamber, that one can only engage with if one isn't from Berlin."

He was referring both to the lack of engagement with history or politics in the show, as well as to the fact that decrepit buildings, while visually compelling, are nothing new to Berlin's residents. This is by no means the first (or last) time that curators have attempted to spice things up by trading pristine white-cube spaces for "industrial" or abandoned ones.

I was not alone in feeling uncomfortable and dissatisfied by the apolitical nature of most of the art works (with the few notable exceptions I've mentioned). Charles Esche, director of the Vanabbe Museum in the Netherlands, called the exhibition an "end game" and lamented the lack of hope, criticality, or vision of a better future in the show. If we believe, as I do, that art can have meaning beyond aesthetics, and that gifted artists have the power to make a statement about our world and how we might imagine it differently, the fourth Berlin Biennale was immensely disappointing. Then again, if we agree (as I do as well) that artists must be free to create beauty and make works that address their personal histories, passions and concerns, then I submit that the fourth Berlin Biennale has its lovely, poetic moments. ❑

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Phone: (603) 643-5548
Fax: (603) 643-9599
E-Mail: icwa@valley.net
Web address: www.icwa.org