

abc art berlin contemporary

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by KITO NEDO

Considering that Berlin's abc art berlin contemporary is only in its sixth year of existence, it already has a colorful past. Established by a small group of Berlin-based galleries in 2008 as an alternative to the more traditional (and waning) Art Forum Berlin art fair, it is now the center of the so-called Berlin Art Week, but still struggling to define its inner balance between commercial and cultural ambitions.

Case in point: the organizers continue to cautiously avoid the term “fair,” stressing the openness of the exhibition format instead. As the newly-appointed director Maike Cruse put it in a recent interview: “We still do not call abc an art fair as from the beginning it was our intention to develop an alternative more artist centered format and because we are a private initiative run by a small structure and tight budget and are not owned by a fair company or an investor.” In the past, abc did work with curators, such as Ariane Beyn (2008) or Marc Glöde (2011), but the engagement of Cruse marks another level of professionalization. The stamp of this former communications manager for Art Basel and sometime curator is instantly recognizable: Cruse gave the whole event, which takes place in an old industrial structure not far from Potsdamer Platz, a performative edge. This year, galleries were invited to extend their presence at abc with all kinds of performances, lectures, and artist talks, intended to form a flow of mini-events throughout the day, with each announced by *CNVVIAL* (2013), a site-specific sound piece by Pae White. The artist—who was presented at the fair by neugerriemschneider with a series of works featuring pigment etched away with a laser (*Carvings*, 2013)—created an ethereal chime-play, which was subtle enough to be either noted or ignored.



A similar thing can be said of the stage-like exhibition space in the entrance area of the fair. For “Upcoming Exhibitions” the project space Shanaynay (Paris) invited over a dozen other project spaces from all over the world to stage temporary exhibitions within two-hour time slots. Despite the prominent placement of this mini white cube, each time I passed by on Thursday during the preview, not much activity seemed to be going on. Notwithstanding these efforts and the strong presence of the MISS READ book fair, taking place in parallel in the same venue, the gallery exhibits in the main halls were still the focus of the event.

For her installation *One Time, One Million (Migratory Birds – Romantic Capitalism)* (2009) presented by Wilfried Lentz, Rotterdam and RaebervonStenglin, Zurich, Berlin-based artist Susanne Kriemann built a circular display structure that shielded the viewer from the rest of the fair. On the inside of the wooden panopticon, the artist mounted a sequence of forty-six photographic prints that documented the results of artistic research into the biography of Swedish inventor, entrepreneur, and ornithologist Victor Hasselblad (1906–1978). Kriemann used a vintage Hasselblad camera from the 1940s as a starting point and tool to re-visit modernist heritage by renting a helicopter to document urban structures from above. But the camera's eye isn't trained on just any buildings—we see aerial shots of a utopian housing complex in the suburbs of Stockholm, which is now home to lower-income immigrant communities. It is the same location where riots fueled by youth unemployment and disenfranchisement broke out earlier this year, showing that even the famed Swedish welfare state has cracks in its facade. There might be a certain nostalgia for the modern here, but the piece also elegantly points to the contradictions of today.

Whereas Kriemann's works builds an almost intimate space around her audience, Sharon Hayes takes the opposite tack. For *Yard (Sign)* (2009) the artist collected or recreated over 150 signs found in the suburbs of American cities.

Installed on private property, professionally mass-produced or hand-painted, they send all sorts of political, commercial, and religious messages to passers-by: the viewer is confronted with calls to support the U.S. military—or for ending the Iraq War; campaign slogans from the 2008 Obama election campaign; foreclosure signs; religious adverts; and even praise of the power of sisterhood, as well as a neighborly warning about a particular silver Mercedes: “Really bad driver!” In the work, presented by Tanya Leighton Gallery, economy, politics, and the individual all pile up into one very particular public/private place: the lawn in front of any old suburban house.

A different kind of monument can be found in artist Jan Peter Hammer’s *Gedenktafel für die Verlierer der Wiedervereinigung / Memorial for the Losers of the Reunification* (2013) at Supportico Lopez. The commemorative bronze plaque, which is inspired by old socialist memorials that still can be found in various public places in the former eastern part of Berlin, deals with the particular impact of gentrification in the city, where a wave of privatization of former communal housing continues to force impoverished tenants out of their flats to make way for people who can afford condo rents.

Perhaps the most fitting work in the context of the fair, whose architecture (by Manuel Raeder, for the second year in a row) borrows heavily from the aesthetics of the bygone industrial era and elements familiar from construction zones alike, is Maria Eichhorn’s *Eichhorn Absetzcontainer* (2013)—a blue-painted steel dumpster-style container, which is usually used for the collection and transport of large amounts of waste, building materials, or soil. This behemoth sits in the center of the fair at Galerie Barbara Weiss like a stubborn reminder of the outside world, the presence of heavy construction equipment elsewhere, and as a placeholder or reference perhaps for working culture as such. On the other hand, this object appears as dazzlingly new and untouched, bearing not a single scratch on its surface—a rational form, developed only for use and not aesthetic contemplation. Adding an additional layer to the work is the fact that the company emblazoned on its side shares its name with Eichhorn; this is not, as one would assume, a kind of artistic signature, but in fact the actual name of a company in the artist’s hometown.

The beauty of destruction is also to be found in the photographs of car wrecks by photographer Ricarda Roggan (at EIGEN + ART). Her pictures (from the series “Garages,” 2008) of crumpled cars are very theatrical; set in stark contrast of brightness and darkness, Roggan recalls the romantic idea of the ruin in the form of one smashed up auto body after another. The series is a beautiful work that has been shown on several occasions before, but it is still worth a second or even third look. This is also the case with Thomas Locher’s still fresh-looking text-picture *The World* (1987) at Georg Kargl Fine Arts, Vienna as well as the grid-based, black-and-blue ballpoint drawings by Michael Deistler, a Hamburg-based artist born in 1949, who is represented by Dorothea Schlueter Galerie. Between 1995 and 2007 Deistler, a collaborator of Sigmar Polke, Albert Oehlen, and Werner Büttner who has a somewhat mythic standing as a reclusive living survivor of the wild seventies and eighties, produced works with free geometric rhythm—on one panel this play is arrested and the word *Dreck* (filth) appears.

Among the other cryptic, yet appealing works presented at this year’s abc, a 10-meter-wall collage by the English, Berlin-based artist Mathew Hale titled *MARIA UND JOSEF: It becomes a morbid time* (2012) deserves a mention (it is on view in a space shared by Wentrup, Berlin; Galerie Michel Rein, Paris/Brussels; and Ratio 3, San Francisco). It consists of, among other things, various newspaper clippings and photographs that formulate a quasi-S&M narrative between Camilla Parker-Bowles, Prince Charles, Princess Diana, and the 2011 youth riots in the UK. No less idiosyncratic is the presentation of Daniel Keller at Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, which brings together three-dimensional CAPTCHA-tags (*FUBU Career CAPTCHA (Progresist Betworks, 2013)*), a showroom-dummy with a DIY survivalist-item once owned by Ted Kaczynski, a.k.a the “Unabomber” (*Freedom Club Figure, 2013*), and a mirrored glass plate with words etched into it, the grooves of which are then filled with water, which surprisingly results in a kind of low-brow smart phone/new digital aesthetics. The individual words, however, relate to the ideology of the Seasteading Institute, an organization that promotes autonomous communities on floating platforms in international waters (*ZION+ Platform (Blue Ocean Strategy ERRC grid, 2013)*).

One Dutch curator told me, aside from looking at new art, she loves to visit abc for two reasons: firstly, everyone she needs to meet is there, and secondly, everyone she is meeting in Berlin is relaxed enough to talk. This must not be a bad thing. Indeed, when I spoke to a few gallerists at abc, some even seemed surprised and delighted if a sale actually happened, almost as if this were not the focus of their participation in the event. Perhaps this is proof that abc’s dodging of the “fair” label, semantic as it may be, does hint at a different kind of atmosphere it manages to create. On the other hand, if abc wants to establish itself as a platform for young and experimental galleries and project spaces, it has to address the economic pressures that they are under. Can a booming fair also work like an extended performance festival? If abc manages to resolve this major contradiction, then it’s on its way to becoming a very unique, very Berlin-ish affair.

Kito Nedo is a critic based in Berlin.