

From the Metropolis to the Village and Back Again.

A conversation with Mark Gisbourne, Senior Curator for the XI. RohKunstBau Exhibition "Ein europäische Pörrät #2" in Wasserschloß Groß Leuthen / Spreewald

By Sophie Goltz and Alfredo Cramerotti.

FIRST PART: ROHKUNSTBAU

AC_SG: RobKunstBau is focused on site –specific artistic positions: what do you think about this way of producing and displaying art?

MG: To be honest, I think temporary site-specificity is an excellent opportunity to do new things. It provides an alternative to the many commodified exhibitions of today that trail their way through the Kunsthallen of the contemporary art world. True, it requires more effort to get the audiences to the events, but that is a logistics problem, and once solved, not much different to taking an S-Bahn to Hamburger Bahnhof. It may limit the spontaneity of suddenly deciding to go to an exhibition *ad hoc*, but in that instance the “event” itself needs to be fore-grounded, and getting out of the city is not an unpleasant experience. It also offers the opportunity to bring together different constituencies of town and country, and hopefully as a result an awareness of each other’s practical needs and social experiences. However, site-specific work must always be clarified by its twofold aspects, namely “site” a sincere and committed engagement to the place, and “specific”, what are or should be the important specificities that are to be engaged with at that site. All things are possible but not all things are possible simultaneously, and I don’t just mean the inevitable constraints imposed by the budget. Site-specificity also supposes a sense of “appropriate-ness” that is, which is appropriate to the site, location, history and sensibilities. By sensibilities I do not mean in any sense a form of self-censoring, but rather generating works that enrich the imaginative understanding of the visitor. A lack of focus or disparate-ness merely causes confusion and incomprehension, and this leads me to think about the qualities of the site-specific work that has to be introduced into the given context. Much is made within the urban exhibition setting of the relate-ability of each work, and this is clearly necessary since most spaces are in the tradition of the white cube. In site-specific settings, the emphasis moves from this work relating immediately to that work (though that indeed remains part of it), but the priority is the site, and many of these spaces or sites have a long and complex palimpsest-type history that require a different set of emphases that need to be engaged with.

AC_SG: Audience in RobKunstBau has a wider accessibility, in terms of aesthetic pleasure, than other exhibitions. Is there in your opinion a dichotomy, a no-win situation between art exhibitions with political contents and those centered on aesthetic discourse?

MG: I think the distinction is increasingly arbitrary, and the legacy of an old-fashioned avant-gardism, which chose to bifurcate the “art for art sake” argument (call it aesthetic) and the “avant-garde” argument which posed the ideas of an ideological futurism (call it political or socially committed). They are no longer mutually exclusive in the modern world, where increasingly aspirations towards a personal politics and the social good can be realized together. This is to say one’s personal aims and ambitions are not necessarily to be sublimated to the collective aims of society as a whole. With this realization the old separation of the so-called “aesthetic” and “political content” begins to fall away.

AC_SG: *What would you write - if you weren't the Curator - about this exhibition?*

MG: I would - though is difficult to know since I did curate it - ask if it does its work within the frame of the question it poses? Does it remain consistent to the issues of site-specificity that it lays out, and thereafter measure and evaluate the works against those criteria? Does the content emphasize the history of the house, the village, the Land of Brandenburg? Is it just another country-house show? Does it seek patronize the prospective audience? Is it too literal or didactic? What public constituency does it engage with? Could it work elsewhere? Would its content take on the same meaning elsewhere? Posed as a Metropole to Dorf, or Dorf to Metropole argument, what aesthetic and/or cultural benefit does it bring to the community, or is it just an excuse for city dwellers and international artists to show their wares in another, more unusual place? I think these are questions that must be asked, and as curator these are the questions I should be judged by.

AC_SG: *"Political" art exhibitions are strongly mediated for the audience (through writings, debates, workshops, etc). What is your position in this regard?*

MG: I am all for mediation debates and writings, etc. I would not mediate it, however, in terms of either/or, political or aesthetic, something that supposes that “pleasure” is bad and somehow lacks a “moral seriousness”. That something “improving” has to have a tone of moral seriousness, etc. It’s an old cliché, just like Kierkegaard’s Either/Or, that argues an ethical state of mind is somehow incompatible with an aesthetic one. It separates life (ethics) from art (aesthetics), but we must not forget both forms of judgment are part of the substrata of philosophy. And, by philosophy I mean both are determined by the discursive conditions of language. Returning to your question on “mediation” one needs to focus self-reflexively on the nature, shape and content of the mediation, aware at all times that the language you use has itself been shaped by time and different sets of determinism – be they aesthetic, critical or art historical. The words we use are never innocent, they are not “new-born”, and they carry with them a seemingly infinite number of possibilities. I suppose what we are saying is that the language around art is a bit of a “jam-sandwich”, a cobbled together language built over time. The fluid contents of a given mediation has to take this on board, and as a result the debate around an aesthetic and/or political evaluation is largely dissipated. This does not evade your question but I think reformulates it outside the implied binarism in which it is posed. In this manner I would rather say one could “speak of” a particular exhibition (the object), and not “speak about” an exhibition (the subject).

AC_SG: *How can the two discourses - political and aesthetic come together?*

MG: Let me clarify matters. The political and social poses the greater good or (at least) benefit of the many, while the aesthetic usually connotes personal pleasure individual judgments, and experiences. The problem of traditional ideology (the political) is that is supposed the need to intellectually conform to a given set of ideas, and this was at odds with the libidinal economy (the economy of our personal and individual desires). Now we all know that the political left in the 1960s (in the West) sought to re-negotiate or reconcile these differences in various ways. But, what they failed to fully comprehend against a background of the communications revolution was that the role of an exhibition is to

inform, to open out simultaneously both aesthetic and the political possibilities. The battles today are about who controls the power of dissemination, and who is shaping the conditions where the informing experience takes place? I am fully aware of course that visual arts exhibitions play a limited role in this space of enquiry. But, that said, the smaller scale exhibition still has the ability to point to the conditions in which these originally separate arguments were once posed. The political and aesthetical come together in a reality whereby the personal and social can cohere and “inform” each other. A personal need is not distinct nor does it have to be separated from the social or moral requirements of those around one. The dilemma lies in the binarism to which all Western thought has been addicted. Hence in RohKunstBau it is quite easy to assimilate the hybrid content that is expressed say by Shilpa Gupta, Chen Shaofeng and Yinka Shonibare, with other so-called European based artists in the exhibition. They share a mutuality that brings together what might otherwise have been called “aesthetic” or “political”.

AC_SG: Is the strength of art exhibitions' concepts and curatorial ideas in today's art world making it difficult to criticize their content?

MG: It is only hard to criticize a concept if it is hermetic. As a result it becomes a self-fulfilling paradigm (for the curator that is), and you end up standing outside of it throwing rocks at a mountain, which is not very productive. The question is how to keep the content open to allow for a wide-ranging interpretive engagement. You do not want to close down the imagination of the viewer, or do something that becomes merely illustrative. What one should rather want to achieve is a sense of imaginative flux that changes and evolves over time through reflective thought. A good exhibition is one not that you just remember, but re-remember in a new and creatively imaginative way. Thereby you escape didacticism and you open the door to an involved reception and participation in what is being experienced.

AC_SG: So, would you say that the critics then have to find this imaginative space?

MG: Yes, I think they have to find the imaginative space and that criticism has to be among the most imaginative of the writings. How often it achieves this is another matter, and that's why it has the shorter shelf life of any form of writing. A review of an art exhibition is all but dead three weeks later. The role of the critic, however, is problematic, insomuch that they are living a displaced existence. The critic is no longer the first person there and now has a different function, and criticism is extremely difficult today in that it is trying to find a new role for itself.

AC_SG: How do you see the future of RohKunstBau? Should the concept change, or develop?

MG: As already mentioned, site-specificity can offer alternatives to the existing urban white cube spaces. However I would like to see sorts of parallelism grow up between different site-specific venues in different countries, not for the purpose of merely traveling shows, but rather to generate parallel discourses that can be subsequently integrated to develop a wide set of ideas and argumentations. Nothing is in a more problematic condition than public art commissions, many of which are obviously site-specific, but this could be re-invigorated changing site-specific contents regularly, it is a way of getting around this. As a distraction I have in mind, say the “Third Plinth” site in Trafalgar Square, which has always a site-specific sculpture, and it is changed periodically. If one could extend this internationally to a whole

series of sites and venues for ongoing developments year on year, then the issues of mediation, debates, workshops and writings, would have some discursive meat to deal with. There would be an increasing sense of a profitable international exchange. Hence, the concept of RohKunstBau is but that, one concept tied to one place, and I would hate to see it simply as a franchise model for other places. Rather it should think about a pluralistic engagement with other site-specific exhibitions and venues for the purposes of positive exchange and shared experiences. Within the frame of an increased interactive exchange of ideas, it does have a role to play, but that role is better served as a network and not as an implant that can be taken to other places.

SECOND PART: BERLIN

AC_SG: In the near future RohKunstBau will collaborate with Bethanien, for an exhibition - in the Mariannenplatz space – working with some of the artists presented in previous shows at Wasserschloß. How does this project fit with the general idea of RohKunstBau?

MG: I think what is intended is to reverse roles, namely the village comes to the city. However, it is a show profiling, or put frankly, a shop-window to the achievements at Groß Leuthen over the last four years or so. What may be intended is to create a sort of platform in the city to make the inhabitants aware of what has taken place and what opportunities they might have missed over the last few years. One of the problems RohKunstBau has faced is getting people to leave the city to come to Groß Leuthen, and this may be an opportunity to clarify issues of profile and place.

AC_SG: What do you think about the institution Bethanien? And about the exhibition space itself and its programme?

MG: I think the location offers its own specificities, and out of the body of works of artists who have participated in RohKunstBau, there is an opportunity to generate a different set of emphases whilst still profiling the RohKunstBau association. The Bethanien as a place is already predisposed inasmuch as it is an art school and runs a stipendium programme. I am not the curator of the show, but an issue needs to be addressed as to whether it is a bit “coals to Newcastle” as they say in England. It offers a ready audience on the one hand, but that audience is already part of the “cognoscenti”, and it remains to be seen as to whether a new constituency of visitors can be generated. However, of Bethanien itself, like all stipendium programmes it has its strengths and weaknesses shaped by fiscal realities. But with its publication “Be” it does seek to generate an organic set of discourses.

AC_SG: Soon is Art Forum time. In its short history, this art fair has been subject to various developments, re-developments and ups-and-downs: what do you think about it?

MG: The Art Forum suffers one of the problems of Berlin, namely the international infrastructure needs to be developed more fruitfully for the purposes of an international art fair. Such a fair in its nature is about commerce, and infrastructure is central to such developments. The city, and Germany as a whole, needs to address this issue. As a result, although Berlin is extremely attractive by reputation, its lack of a large collector(s) base, and the difficulties posed by getting collectors here, has shaped and inflected its “up-and-down” state of development. This said I think the Art Forum needs support from the city itself,

particularly in terms of policy, and in creating a more thorough sense of joined-up culture. By this I do not mean city/state-directed, but the city should seek wherever possible to create a positive interactivity within all the diverse cultural elements of the city. Not a hands-on involvement as such, but the facilitating of a ready cultural synopses of the city, the synopses being a generation of elements in one area of cultural policy informing all the other activities as to when and what is taking place.

AC_SG: This year's Art Forum will also be inevitably read through, and related to, the foundation of the Flick Collection. What is your opinion regarding the discussion generated around it?

MG: The Flick Collection is attractive for one-reason only; it's a big name, a big collector, obviously a family that has enormous problems historically. On the one hand, it is beneficial that the Flick Collection is coming here, but it should not be approached in same way that the MoMa exhibition has been approached. It should not be marketed as a sort of elitist cultural event in the city. The fact that he collects a lot of contemporary art, with a lot of big name artists, should not become the singular mechanism to engage other parts of the city in the collection. And, as far as I can see it is becoming just a little bit Hamburger Bahnhof-like, and is going to be a sort of private fiefdom or world. This worries me because if it is presented exactly in the same way as the MoMa exhibition, I don't think that has been intellectually beneficial to the city as a whole. It needs to be much more interactive and critically engaged with the city. And, as with Germany today, having passed through the postwar period, and grown-up to the degree that it does not have to be in a state of apology. Yes, the issues need to be engaged with, i.e., a family with a deeply problematic history, but surely we can move beyond that, and you can utilize this collection as a mechanism to creating a much more fundamental collectors base in the city. Berlin needs to develop a permeating and ongoing sense of engagement with contemporary art, collectors at all levels, creating committed collectors even from a few thousand Euro level on. Something that becomes embedded, and that's what I would like to see come out from the Flick Collection, that collecting art is and should not be an elitist activity. In consequence I feel that it should avoid trying to be presented as an elitist collection.

AC_SG: What about the discussion of having a committed "discursive" place for contemporary art? In Berlin still you don't really find a public space for this purpose, considering that Hamburger Bahnhof is, yes, a place for contemporary art but it's sort of "frozen", where nothing really happens.

MG: Well, Berlin clearly needs a separate museum for contemporary art, a proper modern art museum at that, I agree, there are weaknesses on this front. But one should not be surprised by that, even in London there was no real contemporary art museum until Tate Modern opened four years ago, to be honest. And you don't necessarily need a new building for that, Berlin is full of fantastic empty buildings, where you can adapt pre-existing locations to re-produce a museum of contemporary art with a fair degree of provisional flexibility. One of the main characteristics of contemporary art is an understanding of provisional role of spaces, today artists are constantly adapting and changing their relationship to spaces and working environments and you need something that is "flexible" in that respect. Berlin does have an opportunity, but it is as always the same old fiscal problem: the fact that the city is almost bankrupt does not help.

AC_SG: But they will put public money into the Flick Collection, in the end. He builds and reconstruct the

building with his own money, but it will be run with public money: so the question is, why should local government put the money there and not in another place?

MG: This is simply a set of priorities, I mean, this is a political set of judgments, and you want me to make some statement about the nature of the fact that politicians tend to be self-glorious by nature.

AC_SG: *Not only the politicians...*

MG: Well, curators tend to be it, as well... I'm not suggesting that this self-ingratiating condition of politics does not happen elsewhere, politicians always want to push themselves forward. I do think that the Flick Collection has to be used quite positively. You have to ask yourself, should you have the collection or shouldn't you have the collection...

AC_SG: *What would you answer?*

MG: I think - on balance - that is good to have the collection. In another way it is a poisoned chalice, you know, for we had the same issue in London with the Saatchi Collection. Charles Saatchi on one hand has been a great benefit to contemporary art in Britain, on another hand he has been a market manipulator and self-glorifying in other respects. Regardless of whether he chooses not to come to the openings of his exhibitions. You have to weigh things up in this sense, there is always a cultural balancing act to be addressed, and I think on the whole the Flick Collection is a benefit to this city. How the city uses it, is another question.

AC_SG: *Recently the press published a "report" on the current situation of art galleries and institutions in London, your previous hometown, and the place where you worked intensively. What do you think about the cultural politics in London compared to the one in Berlin?*

MG: In many ways when I look to Berlin today is a little bit like London in the early 80s, with Thatcherism, there was no cultural awareness at a political level whatsoever...so public art funding was crippled in London in the early 80s, and artists had to fund or get it together by themselves. Berlin is in a similar position, and artists are and can be very adaptive. What I like about here is that primarily there is still an affordable space for artists and practitioners to be just that, practitioners. I hope that Berlin doesn't make the mistake that London has made, my central criticism of London, that is, that it doesn't substitute lifestyle for art. Whether London can sustain what it creates is another matter, it is a very fragile balance. Why Berlin has an advantage, is that it has many more spaces, is very under populated, and there is a lot of maneuverability for artists and practitioners, and I think that is a positive aspect of this city.

AC_SG: *You left London to have a more private life, yet now - also thanks to this exhibition - you are back in the eye of the storm, in Berlin: how do you feel about that?*

MG: The benefit of Berlin over London for me is that I don't have the many students that I used to have, while simultaneously trying to write art critical reviews, write catalogues, and try to be sort of present in the art world, all the diverse sorts of things I was doing. This left me no space to be, and in many ways I think in Berlin I have found more space, and this is

what I love about the city. It has much more space, and I don't only mean physical space, I mean mental space also. In that sense I gained a great deal by moving here from London. The fact that the other schizophrenic side of my nature makes me social and interactive, and that I really like people, and I like to work with people, means that I am starting to accumulate other aspects as well, but it has not yet become such a problem as I used to feel it in London. Here I still have a fair degree of personal space, and I value that very much, it relies upon me to find the discipline and confine myself to the things that I want to do.

Mark Gisbourne, Sophie Goltz and Alfredo Cramerotti © 2004