

Let's fake history

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Maciej Mielecki and Re-enactment Group, "Battle of Berlin 1945", Spreepark, Berlin-Treptow, 2012

The seventh edition of the Berlin Biennale, or BB7, exhorted visitors to “forget fear”, but also to remember—to remember the Second World War and its echoes, to remember the statelessness of the Palestinians, to remember the Occupy movement. If the latter were presented as a contemporary phenomenon, the biennial would in fact be contributing to its historicization. The similarity of the “Occupy Biennale” camp in the KW Institute for Contemporary Art to “living history museums” was hard to suppress—as was, going back further in time, that to nineteenth century colonial exhibitions with their exhibitions of “savages.” Occupy has remained rather marginal in much of continental Northern Europe, and this exhibition opens at a moment when it is uncertain if Occupy has any kind of future as an international mass movement. In this context, the reliance on informal forms (tents, graffiti, etc.) that have their justification on the streets but look lazy and clichéd in a white cube hardly suggests that serious stocktaking is about to take place; the same goes for much of the language that is being used, including a whole hallway of Stéphane Hessel quotations. And what does it mean to “occupy” by invitation? While the “Autonomous University” and other activities may prove to be useful and productive in some manner during the course of the BB7, the refusal to go beyond an unfocused montage of accepted signs and slogans does not exactly bode well.

It would be pointless to review the BB7 in a conventional manner, as it prides itself on its break with the customs of curating, and shows little in the way of practices that are not either extensions of that of curator Artur Zmijewski or instrumentalized by him.¹ There is no point in lambasting the dumbest and most dubious projects or statements, but a few remarks on this Biennale’s unarticulated contradictions are in order.

On the one hand, the show wallows in the neo-historicism of a comically small “Battle of Berlin” reenactment and a display of artifacts pertaining to the displacement of Germans from Eastern Europe at the end of the Second World War. The latter installation, at the Deutschlandhaus, was created in collaboration with the controversial historical center planned for this location by the Stiftung Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung in the

Deutschlandhaus. In his curatorial statement in the press package, Zmijewski sees this center as an instrument of the German state, and part of its campaign to prepare people's minds for Germany's renewed European dominance. If an obsession with German and Polish history (and especially with German-Polish history) is running through much of the Biennale, this does not seem to lead to any particularly cogent point, political or otherwise. What matters with projects such as the tree-planting campaign "Berlin-Birkenau" (presented as an installation with birch tree saplings from Auschwitz-Birkenau to take away) is above all the instrumentalization of "Big History" to generate an atmosphere of historical importance.

Thus, on the other hand, historicist repetition comes at the price of historical forgetfulness. History is reduced to media fodder, and it seems to be of secondary importance if the resonance in the press is positive, as with the Auschwitz-Birkenau project, or negative, as was the case with the campaign to collect copies Thilo Sarrazin's book before the opening, which caused a media shitstorm because it appeared to evoke, intentionally or not, the book-collecting and book-burning episodes from the 1930s. One may readily agree with Zmijewski that the enormous success of Sarrazin's murky theses on immigrants points to a fundamental problem in German society, but this biennial is part of the same "attention economy" that is the habitat of Sarrazin in Germany and of Geert Wilders in the Netherlands.

"Forget Fear" (the title of the Biennale) is predicated on what must be a willfully crude opposition between art and action, between art history and "real" history. The undialectical crudeness appears to be a cipher for radicality. Art must be rejected, and our actions must be voided of aesthetic niceties that in the end only serve to bind us to a corrupt system. Who would deny that Zmijewski puts his finger on a real problem when he states that "art doesn't act, and it doesn't work"? This realization has fueled and vexed practically every avant-garde, and in one way or another occupies (no pun intended) any serious practitioner today. What is striking about BB7 is the utter lack of reflection on previous historical moments when the negation of art seemed to be an option, or indeed a necessity: the Productivism of the 1920s for instance, or Situationist and other projects around 1968. Equally striking is any reflection on "actionist" rhetoric at a moment when it has been co-opted by the very populists this Biennale claims to oppose, and effectively mirrors in many respects.² Rather than using the contradictions that beset their practice as materials, rather than articulating them and trying to make some modest progress, Zmijewski and his collaborators swipe them under the carpet on which they reenact Big History.

One of the few interesting BB7 projects in this respect is Renzo Martens' Institute for Human Activities, which organizes a seminar on gentrification in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In a Biennale marked by an actionism that is utterly unwilling to reflect on the deadlocks it faces, Martens actually poses the question of the efficacy of artistic gestures. Martens starts from the observation that the impact of "artistic interventions" in locations such as Congo, Peru, or the Parisian banlieue remains largely symbolic. By contrast, when those projects are presented at the "sites of art's public reception" in the art world's major cities, they have real economic effects, the shorthand for which is of course "gentrification." Having reduced art's agency to gentrification, Martens then proposes to export this sole real-world effect of art to Congo. The strong point here is that Martens—who appears to be one of the few artists following his own agenda and not merely acting as Zmijewski's ventriloquist dummy—refuses to buy into the BB7's tendency to posit an elsewhere outside of art that has to be conquered. Martens actually works from inside art, and sees action not as a negation of art but as arising from an issue that is aesthetic as well as social and political. Unfortunately, in embracing the ultimately catastrophic logic of gentrification, Martens also embraces the dated radical chic of "overidentification", that corny fatal strategy from the bargain bin of bright ideas.

With his polemical reduction of art to economic agency, Martens partakes in the abstract negation that is at the heart of this biennial – the crude and undialectical refusal not of art, but of aesthetics. As Zmijewski's co-curators, the Russian group Voina, put it, "These days ethics is much more important to art than aesthetics."³ As understandable as the sentiment may be in Putin's Russia, this rigid opposition is ultimately self-defeating. Since Romantic art and Idealist philosophy, modern aesthetic practice has always problematized its own relation to ethics and politics. Rather than engaging with an ongoing dialectic (which, admittedly, is hard and often frustrating work), the BB7 grandly claims to abrogate it. The result is that the repressed aesthetic returns as a mere look, as generic form, as cliché – not only in the Occupy camp.

The Berlin Biennale disregards aesthetic issues but keeps the self-perpetuating structure of art. In this sense, the BB7 ends up at the opposite end of Productivism or radical post-1968 practice, which envisaged the creation of a lived aesthetics without the trappings of bourgeois institutions. The BB7 goes in the other direction. It is completely dependent on an institutional framework for staging gestures it loudly proclaims to

be ethical—or unethical. After all, Zmijewski ambiguously embraces the ethically and politically dubious, here and in his work in general, which suggests another return of the repressed aesthetic: a rather dumb and coarse aestheticism of the ethical that comes across as a debased version of nineteenth-century aestheticism.⁴ Perhaps the acceptance of certain institutional and personal ties is another instance of this BB7's brand of ethical aestheticism. What to think of a project based on a call for radical, real-world action that still takes the form of a biennial that prides itself on its connections to Berlin Biennale founder Klaus Biesenbach, and exists in symbiosis with Gallery Weekend Berlin?

The apparent contrast between BB7 and the GWB made them all the more complicit. They became the Coke and Pepsi of the Berlin art world, illustrating an abstract and rigid opposition between aesthetics and ethics, between contemplation and action. The blame for this situation must be shouldered largely by the curators of BB7; it is they, not the galleries, who claim to present an alternative to “business as usual”. Is it problematic that “critical” work such as Mark Dion's, Jenny Holzer's or Alice Creischer's (to mention just a few established names) is being shown in rather wonderful, near-perfect gallery shows? Of course it is. However, those artists never claimed to be able to make the contradictions that traverse their practice magically disappear; rather, they attempt to work with and through them. Had a serious conversation been desired from the part of the BB7, might such artists not have made a serious attempt to reassess and recalibrate their practice, to make a leap from one problem to the next? This would be to act historically, rather than to re-stage Big History as a Sunday-afternoon skirmish.

NOTES

¹ To say nothing of the manner in which Zmijewski uses the BB to present himself as a victim of censorship, showing the video “Berek” (“Game of Tag”, 1999), which was removed from an exhibition at the Martin-Gropius-Bau last year.

² Actionism as an ideological fetishization of action is of course to be distinguished from activism as a practice.

³ Voina group, curatorial statement in the BB7 press package.

⁴ See also the stunning passage in Zmijewski's statement in the press package about Polish artist Joanna Rajkowska, who gave birth to her baby in Berlin as an “homage” to the city. The fact that the child was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer, and that it was a Polish and not a German doctor who diagnosed it, leads Zmijewski to abstruse speculations about cultural difference. An opium-addled nineteenth century Satanist dandy would probably have shown more restraint.