

# 8th Berlin Biennale

VARIOUS VENUES

Christian Rattemeyer

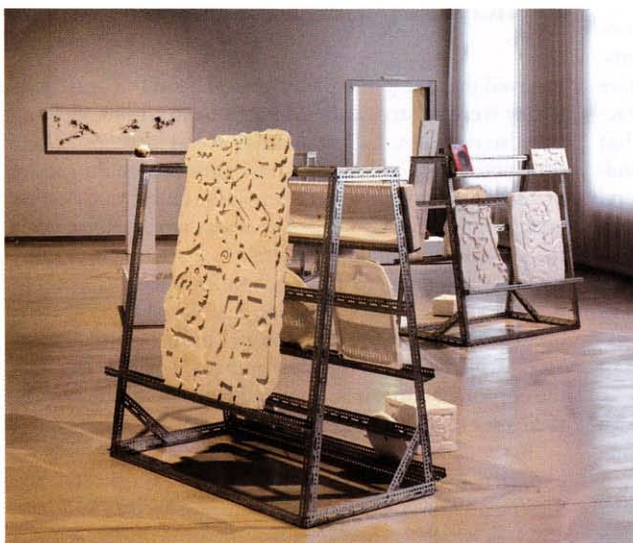
**EVER SINCE ITS FIRST EDITION** in 1998, which took as its theme the colonization of abandoned or unoccupied real estate in East Berlin by artists, galleries, and other creative industries, the Berlin Biennale has made the use of vacant, unusual, or historically important spaces its hallmark. Indeed, this is what makes the biennial unique: It has always hinged not on the selection of specific artists or works, but on the particular and idiosyncratic venues it inhabits.

The eighth edition of the biennial, curated by Juan A. Gaitán, is no exception. Together, the sites it occupies make a statement about conditions of historical resuscitation, disavowal, and progress. The impulse of the biennial is clear: to provide an alternative to the ways in which history has been reclaimed through colonial programs of the nineteenth century, or the neoliberal vagaries of the twenty-first, via corrective activations that emphasize presentness, ephemerality, empathy, and human scale. Aside from KW Institute for Contemporary Art, the traditional headquarters of every biennial since its inception—where the curator presented a number of projects related to drawing and to investigations of modernist form, such as **Leonor Antunes's** large-scale installation with sculptures made of wood, metal, and leather, or Irene Kopelman's room-filling taxonomy of works on paper—Gaitán selected as primary venues the Haus am Waldsee in Zehlendorf and the Museen Dahlem. Both venues are located far off the beaten path, in the old bourgeois, western part of the city, and both are institutions with venerable histories: Founded in 1946, the Haus am Waldsee served as a site for recovery and reconstitution of the achievements of modern masters in the wake of World War II, and the museum complex in Dahlem, an important site of early

Prussian scholarship, holds one of the largest collections of ethnographic and non-European artifacts in Germany.

The presentation at Haus am Waldsee, formerly a private bourgeois villa, emphasized intimacy. Two rooms of the exhibition space contained works drawn from a “private collection,” purportedly Gaitán's own, which included the work of many artists in the biennial (and a few who were not). The collection's inclusion here pointed to the curator's willingness to show his hand—his biases and prior relations with artists—while its presence also underscored the building's original use as a domestic space, a reading further assisted by works such as Christodoulos Panayiotou's *12 pairs of handmade shoes*, 2013–14, a display of leather shoes on shoe boxes. Although such gestures were poetic and honorable, they cast the stakes of the biennial in distinctly personal terms, reducing its urgency and its force of argument.

At the Museen Dahlem, meanwhile, the works and projects largely followed Gaitán's interest in themes such as museological presentation, historical research and reconstruction, geography and exploration, and taxonomy and classification. For her installation *You have time to show yourself before other eyes*, 2014, Mariana Castillo Deball rendered facsimiles of the museum's Mesoamerican archaeological artifacts using techniques ranging from plaster casting to transfer printing. Elsewhere, Wolfgang Tillmans replaced a room of Native American exhibits with images and objects, obliquely (and sometimes too obviously) referencing capitalism's displacement of native culture (via, for example, a Nike sneaker in a vitrine alongside the wall label of the previous object). For his *Expedition Berlin, Herbarium of Artificial Plants*, 2013–, Alberto Baraya juxtaposed eighteenth-century botanical illustrations and artificial flowers, while David Chalmers Alesworth's *Trees of Pakistan*, 2013–14, paired similar such images with depictions of urban squatters. But the perfunctory nature of many of these works in Dahlem made the experience somewhat airless. Only when Gaitán allowed for poetry and play to enter, in a number of pieces in which music was employed as a device to activate the historical record and give ephemeral presence to the unrepresentable, did the exhibition allow for moments of pleasure. Consider, for example, Tarek Atoui's ongoing



From left: Mariana Castillo Deball, *You have time to show yourself before other eyes*, 2014, mixed media. Installation view, Museen Dahlem. Photo: Anders Sune Berg. Tarek Atoui in collaboration with Uriel Barthélémi, Jim Black, Tony Elieh, Charbel Haber, Mazen Kerbaj, Morten J. Olsen, Sharif Sehnaoui, André Vida and others, *Dahlem Sessions*, 2013–. Performance view, Museen Dahlem, May 31, 2014. From left: Andrea Neumann, Mazen Kerbaj, and Stéphane Rives. Photo: Tova Rudin-Lundell. Alberto Baraya, *Expedition Berlin, Herbarium of Artificial Plants* (detail), 2013–, mixed media, dimensions variable.



*Dablen Sessions*, 2013—, which takes as its starting point the museum's collection of musical instruments: some familiar, others basically unknown, some frail from extended use, others new and never played. Several times over the course of the show, Atoui invited respected musicians to perform solo improvisations using instruments unknown to them, both for live audiences and for recordings that would be retained by the museum for future use. Another highlight was Mario García Torres's presentation of the archive of Conlon Nancarrow, a US composer and friend and colleague of John Cage who settled in Mexico City in 1940 and became part of the Mexican avant-garde.

After the vitriol spilled over Artur Żmijewski's anarchic and explicitly political edition in 2012, the Eighth Berlin Biennale was quiet, considered, and bracingly geographically off-center. But while Gaitán's efforts to address the question of globalism and cultural hegemony were laudable, his decision to do so via the oddly removed and formalized language of museological display and classification

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in the hermetic space of an ethnographic museum often left out the urgency of these subjects. Moreover, his preference for a light touch—his desire for intimacy, sustained attention, and ephemerality—resulted in the selection of works and venues that couldn't transcend the exhibition's well-mannered appearance in unexpected or innovative ways. It may be regarded as refreshing that no single work in the show stood out, that artistic hubris was kept in check, but it also made for a biennial that lacked a defining moment, had few surprises in its choreography, and merely hummed along when all one wanted were some shifts in speed. □

CHRISTIAN RATTEMEYER IS THE HARVEY S. SHIPLEY MILLER ASSOCIATE CURATOR IN THE DEPARTMENT OF DRAWINGS AND PRINTS AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK.

