

What Time is Germany?

Diedrich Diederichsen

Recently, a strange, even unreal sight presented itself to a bicyclist riding across the Museumsinsel (Museum Island) toward Unter den Linden from the new Buchhandlung König (König Bookstore) at a leisurely pace. An alien - a “jackalope,” half-artwork and half-building - seemed to have sneaked in among all the richly historical buildings, some of them renovated at great expense, that vouch for German and Prussian continuity here. The effect that this new object has on the perception of all the other architectural simulations of historical constancy is one of derealization. Are these all film props, and if so, where does reality resume?

In a procedure for working with images that she has already used in other works, Bettina Pousttchi has designed photographs of the since demolished Palast der Republik (Palace of the Republic) in such a way that several hundred individual prints, affixed to the exterior walls of the so-called Temporäre Kunsthalle (Temporary Art Gallery), create the impression of a miniature edition of the now vanished former prestige building of the GDR. The images are not only black and white; they are also, of course, reduced in size and work with defamiliarizing technical operations that Pousttchi has already employed in other works precisely as an index of the secondary temporality of the images - in the same way that filmed TV images in movies always have striating lines running through them.

Nonetheless, the images have a powerful reality effect. That effect is based in part on the fact that we are now accustomed to temporary facades and recognize that their transient character doesn't really signal change. At the same time, however, it also stems from the disconcerting realization that no other building in this area can any longer claim to be anything but a fleeting embodiment of ideology since the Palast der Republik was demolished: an event in which ideology faced off against ideology to create a set of architectural “facts on the ground.”

Thus, once our bicycle rider had caught sight of the so-called Temporäre Kunsthalle, completely covered by Pousttchi with altered black-and-white photographs of the demolished Palast der Republik and thus made to resemble a scaled-down Palast der Republik (the building that is obviously missing from the whole ensemble), all the other buildings also seemed to turn into alienated versions of themselves. The strenuously simulated simultaneity of Prussian-German continuity and the German-Euroglobal present that characterizes the entire scene mutated into a theme-park-like dreamland. The dream that is being dreamed here, however, is not the product of an actively repressing, sublimating, and condensing unconscious mind. On the contrary, it is a dream decreed in full consciousness by new German strategies of presentability. The fact that the ideological substrate of Berlin's Mitte neighborhood now appears as an explicitly ordered dream - which soon collapsed amid the spluttering and flaring of a psychedelic fairy-tale ambience as the bicyclist moved into the bus lane next to Humboldt University - is not the only merit of the above-mentioned work, which bears the title *Echo*.

In their installation-oriented phase, the visual arts not only raise in a new way the question of the space of art,¹ as has often been observed, but interestingly also that of time.² Phenomenological and psychological notions of time as well as those of technology and physics overlap with those of the philosophies of history and the diagnosis of the present. Thus, in an installation, the amount of time one spends

before an object is newly determined by the fact that the exhibited objects themselves (for example, video installations) unfold in time and call for different time-management decisions on the part of the recipient than would a visit to a classical painting gallery. Yet precisely this – in recent years – increased preoccupation with the a priori of reception has also been able to thematize time as the medium of historicity in a different manner from the arts of citation, appropriation, and reenactment. The latter concentrate on deconstructing the institutions of the original, the creator, and the artist subject, and thus place the focus on the doubtfulness and relativity of production primarily in reference to the dubiousness of the modernist logic of progress. The former, by contrast, has frequently been able to investigate processes of reception in such a manner that the relationship between the temporality and processuality of reception on the one hand and, on the other, the historicity of that which is recognized as finished and known – or hollow – also became clear.

Now, Bettina Pousttchi's work *Echo* explicitly regards itself as a photo installation, despite the fact that it is not mounted inside the Kunsthalle but covers it from without. Nevertheless, it treats an exhibition space by treating its skin; thus, it would seem to belong to the tradition of institution-critical interventions that directly address the architecture of exhibition spaces. At the same time, however, this art gallery is one that, right from the start, takes the wind out of the sails of one of the objections usually voiced by such institutional critique. It does so by, as it were, freely conceding its temporary character and thus marking – and apparently putting up for discussion – the tacit assumptions underlying institutional power, which artists like Michael Asher have been able to localize within the architecture and interior design of art institutions. Thus, one cannot point out from within this gallery what it is institutionally; one must do so from without, in relation to the buildings that surround it. Post-authoritarian institutional power is still institutional power, but it is no longer authoritarian. Rather, it freely invests the function of the variable in relation to the constant (within the cityscape), of commentary in relation to a text (in the reception of art), etc., with a (new) institutional function: while one can (and should) criticize this function, one must do so in a different manner from old institutional critique. Nevertheless, it can't be done without alluding not only to these changed conditions, but also to the – again – changed conditions of critique, this time changed by the simple fact that this critique is one that is based on predecessors. This Pousttchi does in the sense that, while she thematizes the building as a placeholder for the institution à la Asher, she no longer attacks the hardware of the architecture but the cultural software of the representation and the differential semiotics of urban scenes.

It should, in passing, be pointed out that this work brings together precisely the two fields in which Bettina Pousttchi generally works (and not without an awareness of their traditions): sculpture and photography. The photo installation turns its creatively altered prop – the architecture of the art gallery – into a sculpture. But the fact that that sculpture, at least in the temporality of the bicycle rider's attention, looks like a building, means that now all the other buildings too can only be read as sculptures. For as soon as at least one item in a series of signifying elements introduces the possibility of assigning the entire series to a different ontology, that possibility is considered by the observers, at least in passing.

The word *temporär*, or “temporary,” also means passing, but it remains indifferent vis-à-vis the conditions of that passing (historical processes, natural disasters, etc.).

It does not say when and under what conditions something passes, when it will be past and under what conditions. Other architecture – for example, classical museum buildings – always indicates precisely when it was begun and often when it was remodeled and refounded, but never when or even that it will pass away. The Palast der Republik too spoke only of its beginning and not of its possible end or of its predecessors. This at least was done by the Museum für deutsche Geschichte (Museum of German History) in the GDR era: a plaque at the museum's entrance pointed to the fact that it had previously been the museum for the "glorification of Prussian-German imperialism." A "temporäre Kunsthalle," or "temporary art gallery," says something like this: I stand for the ideology of freedom from ideology. I produce meaning, but only secondarily, with regard to something else; if the historically authoritative gaze looks at me too long, I'll already be gone. This is precisely the state of affairs that seems to have given rise to the idea of making the Temporäre Kunsthalle resemble an antagonistic structure, the Palast der Republik, which sought to face that very gaze and perished in the process.

The temporal and time-bound character of architectural plans and decisions and the interaction with them on the part of the broad and varied public – who are in every respect a heterogeneous and bewildering mass of recipients who either use buildings actively or let them pass by in the background as constants of everyday life and whose spirits are either lifted or depressed by them – have also been set in motion, just as they are with interior installations. Classically, constancy and the assertion of continuity in architecture is a means of mystification similar to change and variety in industrialized entertainment. The antidotes have always been marking interventions, temporary structures and extensions, just as, conversely, duration and drone, extreme length, open ends, etc. were means by which the arts combated the aesthetic of standardized sequences, the daily drifting past of moving images and music. Today, however, the temporary facade, the outdoor projection, the free and open embrace of a state of perpetual reconstruction have themselves become a permanent state of affairs, a connecting link in the consumption of architecture and the city, which effectively takes the gaps between the signature buildings as its canvas.

Bettina Pousttchi's *Echo* covers the exterior of a building that, in its anticipatory zeal to confess, rushes to concede its own temporality and impermanence, yet inside of which works have been exhibited that sought to reorganize the temporality of the art object in keeping with new technologies, new genres, new aesthetic projects, and new fashions. The Temporäre Kunsthalle in Berlin is not the first and not the only building in which the inner and outer reorganization of the temporality of art and architecture meet. Nor is Bettina Pousttchi the only artist to take up these two aspects of a new thematization of temporality. But this constellation in the middle of new old Berlin – a city that so aggressively and ostentatiously purports to be the theater of history – confronts the technical, medial, and artistic (or urbanistic, economic, and political) problematic with its normally excluded third term: history. Conversely, however, it also places an obstacle in the path of those who would like to take renewed command of history as an interplay of constant and variable in which only those who are currently in power determine what the constant is and what it represents, and what the variable is.

What the word "temporary" leaves casually unspoken is the reason why something passes, its limit. It counters the limit with an eternal relationship between constancy (true German history) and variability (commentaries, buildings that come and go);

incontestable nationality and revisable aberrations (the GDR and according to the same logic: National Socialism). In this way, it is denied both that National Socialism disavowed Prussia beyond recall as well as that the (failed) attempts of the GDR to establish another Germany actually took place and created indisputable facts. In the case of biological life, the limit is set by death; in that of political life, it is set by historical upheavals that not only cannot be denied but must always be assessed, of course always provisionally. The new balance between the assertion of an eternal phenomenon of the German (the Stadtschloss, or City Palace) and a postmodern, eternally fluctuating stream of entertaining commentary that operates with all kinds of temporary phenomena seeks to dodge this necessity. Bettina Pousttchi has assigned a special place in her photo installation to the measurement of time: a big clock stands at the spot where the national emblem of the GDR was formerly displayed, constructed from its elements, hammer and compass. Another clock on the back of the building, which was also not present in the original, shows a different time. Thus, *Echo* expresses the key unspoken element, the relationship between this new German construction and the real historical state of affairs. It provides the answer to the question: what time is it?

¹ Comp. Michaela Ott, "Ästhetik/Kunstgeschichte," in *Raumwissenschaften*, ed. Stephan Günzel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), 14–29.

² Comp. Juliane Rebentisch, *Ästhetik der Installation* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 146ff.

From: Bettina Pousttchi: *Echo Berlin*, Temporäre Kunsthalle Berlin, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln 2010