

Our Unreal Cities

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The KINDL–Centre for Contemporary Art is housed in a former brewery in Berlin’s Neukölln district, a cathedral-like example of German Brick Expressionism built between 1926 and 1930 by Hans Claus and Richard Schepke. Its seven-story central tower rises high above the two entrances with their pointed arches set asymmetrically into its base; to the right stands the mash house with its huge copper vats, to the left the former boiler house. At the front, four windows extend three-quarters of the way up toward the boiler house’s twenty-meter ceiling, recalling the windows of a church.

Bettina Pousttchi’s intervention mirrors the space on this architectural level like no other work before it, because she takes this façade with its monumental windows seriously as what it is: a strangely theatrical display of industrial functionality and transparency, but with the vertical, heavenward orientation of religious architecture. On entering the huge, empty space, the conceptual and spatial accuracy of the artist’s gesture is immediately apparent. Through the four windows, we see vertical strips of the surroundings—buildings and trees, parked cars and bicycles, sections of sky. These views, plus the window elements that frame and subdivide them, have been duplicated as digitally reproduced chimeras (*Panorama*, 2019): printed onto long curtains or banners, they turn the other three sides of the boiler house into windowed façades. The illusion is perfect, but also identifiable as such. Perfect because it creates the impression that this room always had windows on all sides, or at least merited them. And identifiable first because, as with all of her digitally created façade chimeras, Pousttchi made everything look as if it has been copied from an old black-and-white television set or video-surveillance camera (as if photographing the images has revealed the horizontal stripes of the cathode-ray pattern) and second because rather than (re)constructing the views in the other directions (what one would see if there really were a window), she copied and pasted the view from the front of the building (the same trees, parking lots, and so forth). We find ourselves, then, in a virtual hall of mirrors, but one that can be experienced physically and spatially. Rather than generating a sense of disorientation, however, the aim here is to create a symmetrical and illusionary opening of the space and of the gaze. But, as mentioned above, the opening remains identifiable as unreal. In this way, the work aesthetically highlights the true unrealities we have long since been navigating in our cities.

Another example of this is Pousttchi's outdoor work for Kunsthalle Tübingen (*Block*, 2019). Directly opposite the Kunsthalle stands an eight-story Brutalist apartment block built in 1968 that serves mainly as a student hall of residence. On a polygonal footprint, the building has an alternating sequence of windowed and windowless façades. It appears as a bizarrely stunted, low-budget version of Le Corbusier's garden city utopia where standalone apartment blocks bundle the needs of the urban masses. Pousttchi's intervention is as effective as it is simple: the windowless surfaces are given windows. The aforementioned cathode-ray stripes make the illusion easily recognizable as such, but at the same time it manifests a utopia of opening up to light and life where previously there were literally stone walls. Be it Brick Expressionism or Brutalism, by this "mere" mirroring and duplication, Pousttchi succeeds in reactivating the unfinished dreams and illusions of twentieth-century architecture to ask how we want to build and live in the future.

In 1965, German psychoanalyst Alexander Mitscherlich published his timely polemic *Our Inhospitable Cities: Incitement to Unrest*. With his slogan-like title, he addressed the widespread and in part fully justified objections to the modern (social housing) architecture of the period: faceless tenements and dreary tower blocks where people were packed off to socially segregated environments which "in their monotony alongside peripheral highways teach us that everything is far worse than one likes to imagine."¹ But Mitscherlich also inveighed against the wish for home ownership that almost inevitably results from such a situation, pushing the wave of social segregation further out into the suburbs. For him, and for a generation of Germans influenced by him (the generation of the 1968 student unrest), all of this was an expression of the sheer lack of imagination of the postwar period.

Describing Mitscherlich's position as typical of its time highlights the paradigm shift heralded by Rem Koolhaas's *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (1978). It was no longer a matter of evoking and seeking to reconstruct the prior model of a more social urban society by creating more densely developed urban zones of encounter. Instead, with Koolhaas's visionary review of the emergence of modern high-rise Manhattan, a different ideal suddenly established itself: of a city that really is made of dreams. According to his persuasive theory, the idea and ability to build to unforeseen heights, to scrape the sky, to unleash a phallic, Surrealist assault on heaven that can no longer be justified purely in terms of functionality or efficiency, came from the amusement parks of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—specifically Luna Park on Coney Island. It was there, with the creation of entertaining illusions pointing to a scientific future and technical miracles, that it became possible to imagine offices

¹ Alexander Mitscherlich, *Die Unwirtlichkeit unserer Städte* (Frankfurt, 1965), p. 41.

and apartments becoming vertical in Manhattan in unprecedented ways: “The strategies and mechanisms that later shape Manhattan are tested in the laboratory of Coney Island before they finally leap toward the larger island. Coney Island is a fetal Manhattan.”²

Thanks to improved steel construction methods, but above all due to rivalry and one-upmanship driven by dreams, ever taller buildings rose into the sky. If one compares this period with today, however, whether one thinks of Berlin, London, New York, or Chongqing in China (now the world’s largest city), it is immediately clear that illusion no longer precedes reality. The blueprints for today’s cities and buildings are not developed in the current equivalents of the Luna Park (movies, video games). Instead, they have long since become illusions *themselves*. Not in the sense that they are not physically present as built structures that generate realities of usage (or nonusage), but in the sense that they no longer arise from an experience of urban reality, not even being designed on the proverbial drawing board with an eye to shaping society, resulting instead from a mixture of digitized investment and tourist marketing.

In Berlin, politicians are working toward the reconstruction of Schinkel’s Academy of Architecture, reprising what already took place with the rebuilding of the Hohenzollern Palace on an adjacent site cleared by demolishing the East German Palace of the Republic, an illusion of the possibility of resurrecting former glory—a Prussian Fata Morgana whose phantasmal task is to heal the wounds and abysses of the twentieth century.

Which brings us to a key public work by Bettina Pousttchi: *Echo* (2009–10). In the mid-2000s, the demolition of the Palace of the Republic was painted as a prerequisite for the reconstruction of the Hohenzollern Palace, even though there were also serious proposals for integrating all or part of the nineteen-seventies East German building into a new ensemble. In January 2006, before the viability of a reconstruction had even been confirmed, Germany’s parliament voted in favor of complete demolition. Clearly the aim was to create a *fait accompli*, preventing those campaigning for the East German building’s continued usage from winning over listeners and majorities with their often more compelling arguments. For years, this left a huge void at the heart of the city, prompting the launch of a competition for interim usage. From 2008 to 2010, the Temporäre Kunsthalle, installed on the western edge, further highlighted this emptiness with its simple box design (architect: Adolf Krischanitz).

But it was only with Pousttchi’s façade work, which covered the entire box, that this marking of the void really came into its own, as it quoted façade elements from the recently disappeared

² Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York. A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York, 1994), p. 30.

Palace of the Republic—the grid of its steel framework and its mirrored windows. In this way, the East German building was resurrected as a scaled-down black-and-white copy—at first glance. On closer inspection, however, one noticed strange modifications. As well as the cathode-ray strips mentioned above, this meant above all the centrally positioned monumental clock. Hold on, was there even such a clock on the original? No. Instead, the clock replaced the enormous East German state emblem (hammer and compass in a wreath of wheat sheaves) that hung above the main entrance. A clock: the titular echo is thus not just a spatial phenomenon, from one side of the site to the other, but also a temporal one. The clock is ticking. And today, we have the reconstruction of the Berlin Palace on this site (architect: Franco Stella) whose shape and overall appearance recall not so much Prussia's glory as the hopeless retro-style gigantism familiar from the churches of American sects or the ostentatious buildings erected by the rulers of former Soviet republics in Central Asia.

Pousttchi's *Echo* came from the past and pointed—in muted black-and-white—to the garish cut-and-paste of the coming retro architecture. In 2019, however, the same work in slightly modified form on the façade of Kunsthalle Rostock had an entirely different meaning (*Echo's Echo*, 2019). The occasion was an exhibition of artifacts and artworks dealing with the Palace of the Republic's history. Here, the clock over the entrance (Kunsthalle Rostock was the only art museum built in East Germany to combine brick with concrete and glass in a Brutalist style) was a displaced, "false" reminder of the symbol of the "workers' and farmers' state," symbolizing the task of preserving such buildings while permitting a differentiated view of the past. Indeed, after this show, Kunsthalle Rostock was closed for extensive renovation work.

Of course, the relevance of this rivalry between traditionalist reconstruction of pre-modern buildings and the (post-)modern legacy of the second half of the twentieth century extends beyond the demise of real-existing socialism in East Germany and Eastern Europe. In West Germany, too, modernist-Brutalist buildings were erected, with Frankfurt offering a particularly striking example. The buildings around the square at Römerberg, a traditional meeting place in front of the town hall, were almost completely destroyed by bombs during World War II. In the nineteen-fifties, they were rebuilt using a mix of reconstructed façades (late-medieval half-timbering, stepped gables, and other such details) and modern supporting structures. But the area between Römerberg and the nearby cathedral remained a wasteland for decades, until two dominant buildings were erected: the brutalist Technical Town Hall (1974) including a parking garage, and ten years later, directly opposite, the postmodern Schirn Kunsthalle. In 2010, after forty years, the Technical Town Hall was demolished to make way for the "New Frankfurt Old Town"—the fairy-tale resurrection of an old town center, with around thirty buildings.

What for some was a positively mythical source of urban revitalization remains for others a very expensive Potemkin village generating tradition-based kitsch for tourists, reactionaries, and ethno-nationalists alike.³ Both reactions were foreseeable—less so Pousttchi’s reaction to an invitation from the Schirn. Her façade work *Framework* (2012) came at the precise moment when the Technical Town Hall had been (almost) completely demolished, but before construction on the “New Old Town” had begun. During this hiatus, across from the demolition site, Pousttchi turned the eastern face of the Schirn’s elongated main building and the interior of the large rotunda at its entrance into a black-and-white frieze of recurring patterns based on samples taken from the traditional half-timber houses at the nearby Römerberg. But she mixed these patterns with others typically used in the latticework screens of Indian and Arabic architecture (*jali* and *mashrabiya*, respectively). In place of windows or walls, these are perforated surfaces structured by geometric patterns in such a way as to diffuse sunlight, cool air by drawing it in through small openings (ventilation), and protect the interior from the gaze of passersby. Incidentally, the fact that all these associations are not entirely mistaken is shown by a series of works entitled *Frameworks*, made after the Schirn piece (since 2014) in which Pousttchi groups specially made and fired ceramic elements into geometric patterns on the wall. By combining cues like “half-timber,” which signal a rose-tinted, cozy past, and thus notions of homeland, with the mentioned elements of “Oriental” architecture, Pousttchi highlights the illusionary, Potemkin-like quality of Frankfurt’s newly built Old Town, at the same time as offering the utopian dimension of a hybrid interlocking of seemingly incompatible motifs.

In nearby Mainz, in 2017, Pousttchi was given another chance to comment on the architecture and surroundings of her host institution by means of a façade work. The occasion was a double solo show with Daniel Buren at Kunsthalle Mainz. The late-nineteenth-century brick building is the former boiler and machine house of the city’s customs port; its conversion into an exhibition venue, opened in 2008, is most strikingly signaled by the addition of a twenty-one meter reinforced concrete tower that leans at a seven-degree angle, its green glass façade divided by a vertical row of windows. To this strip, Pousttchi added a “half-timber” pattern. Or to be more precise: half-timbering slyly transformed into a pattern more reminiscent of the kind of folding metal gates used to secure shop windows against nocturnal break-ins. With her exhibition at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas in 2014, Pousttchi extended this scissor gate image to the

³ A brief overview of the dispute is provided by Stefan Breitenmoser in his article “Neue Frankfurter Altstadt: Heimat oder Disneyland?” in *Baublatt* (June 17, 2019), <https://www.baublatt.ch/bauprojekte/neue-frankfurter-altstadt-heimat-oder-disneyland> (accessed on January 22, 2020).

front façade of an institution, as if it were a big shop selling precious objects. And the Sculpture Center really is located in a part of Dallas known in the mid-twentieth century as “Automobile Row” whose auto-part outlets may well have had such folding security gates. Fittingly, she transformed the interior into the illusion of a *Drive-Thru Museum*, complete with asphalt and road markings, as if it were possible to cruise in a car past the sculptures chosen from the collection (including classics like Auguste Rodin, Naum Gabo, Alberto Giacometti).

While in Dallas the association was with a historical type of shop, in Mainz Pousttchi used an excerpt, a “larger-than-life” enlargement of the scissor gate pattern, adapted to the available vertical window strip. The pattern clashed with the green tower’s late-modernist appearance, but it also seemed to respond to the immediate surroundings, since the Customs Port has long since given way to an expensive office and residential development. As in the case of the Palace replica on the Temporäre Kunsthalle or the half-timbering on the Schirn, the scissor gate pattern became a (distorting) mirror and echo of urban change, including its unkept or postponed promises of coziness and glory. In other words: including its unreality.

While these façade works all echo the urban illusions that surround them, for Städtische Galerie Wolfsburg Pousttchi inverted this strategy, creating a polyphonic echo of something that only exists or existed at points on the globe far removed from another—something like the architectural opposite of Wolfsburg (founded by the Nazis as a model city) with its squat industrial buildings, and of the Renaissance castle from which the city took its name, the Wolfsburg, in which the gallery is housed. She covered the castle’s north and side wings with a 2,150 square-meter printed banner with a montage of photographs of historic and contemporary skyscrapers that had all, at some time, been the world’s tallest building—from New York and Chicago via Dubai to Kuala Lumpur and Taipei (*The City*, 2014). The unreality of this photomontage, heightened by the digital black-and-white of the reproductions, is the ultimate inversion of Koolhaas’s Luna Park. Now the skyscrapers themselves had become a Fata Morgana, the setting for a surreal black-and-white movie that was never made.

Approaching the glass façade of the main entrance to Berlinische Galerie during Pousttchi’s solo show there in 2019, the initial association, as in Dallas, was “closed shop.” At the same time, this association was cancelled out because the pattern was not black but white, immediately evoking the aforementioned geometrical patterns from Indian and Arabic architecture. And they didn’t look out of place on a contemporary building like the Berlinische Galerie, because modern architecture has been known to adopt the cooling and concealing functions of such screens, which also provide geometrical decoration—considering, for example, the perforated apartment

walls in Oscar Niemeyer's high-rise Edifício Copan in São Paulo (1961) or Jean Nouvel and the perforated outer skin of his Institut du monde arabe in Paris (1987).

Passing through this ornamental filter, then, I enter the gallery and move among Pousttchi's sculptural works in the exhibition space. While all of the façade works continue to resonate, I am now confronted with objects—all taken from urban public space: crash barriers, bollards, tree guards—that have been powerfully crushed and bent out of shape to create sculptural figures. The results are painted or varnished to give them a uniform matte or glossy skin, a perfect finish that also signals a removal from time, a kind of immortalization. This recalls traditions that emerged from Minimal Art, like the objects of John McCracken. But for anyone willing to entertain the thought, these clean, miraculously “undamaged” skins coexist with the obvious fact that huge mechanical force has been applied to the objects (Pousttchi does this herself using a large sheet metal press). And because these are all objects from the streets, they inevitably evoke the destructive power of the automobile. But such thoughts are then banished by the anthropomorphic associations of Pousttchi's *Vertical Highways*, arrangements of upended crash barriers that stand there like graceful dancers.

Finally, I realize that Pousttchi's façade works find a fitting counterpart in the street objects. Whereas the former mirror the illusory spaces of urban architecture, subtly distorting them at the same time, the latter bring me back to the real, vulnerable conditions of my own movements through these illusory spaces. Firstly, due to the simple fact of their being objects in the exhibition space among and around which I must navigate. The association with massive mechanical impacts is there, but its shock is quickly absorbed by the immaculate surfaces and the anthropomorphic forms. In this way, the façades and the sculptures capture the way it feels to live in today's cities under the conditions of digitized capitalism. It is painful and unreal at the same time.