

Bettina Pousttchi – In Recent Years
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The Berlinische Galerie is housed in a building whose phenotype gives no clues as to its function. Built as a warehouse for glass in 1964 and converted into a museum in 2003–04, its façade is entirely devoid of architectural gestures. Its interlocking rectangular volumes recall Kazimir Malevich’s geometrical “architectons” or works by Carl Andre, the façade dominated by floor-to-ceiling windows along its forty-meter front and by the protruding cube of the foyer. While several works have been specially created for the museum’s outdoor area, the façade itself has never been used for a large-scale artistic intervention. Rather than restricting herself to the classic white cube of the interior, artist Bettina Pousttchi included the museum’s outer skin in her concept with *Berlin Window* (2019), a work that covers the glazed front with a pattern she refers to as “transnational.” Its hybrid structure combines components from different art-historical sources, drawing on both half-timbering and Oriental latticework creating a synthesis of different cultures. At the same time, she asks whose history and culture is represented in public space, and which local and national identity is constructed by urban planning and architecture.

With her intervention, Pousttchi transforms the museum into a sculptural object. The translucent, semitransparent film creates effects both inside and out: viewed from outside, it gives the glass foyer an unusually closed appearance; from inside, it transforms the space depending on the prevailing light, creating effects that resemble those of historical shadow plays. Here, too, Oriental and European elements are combined. The work is based on photographs modified using image processing software, an approach the artist already used for her first façade work *Echo* (2009–10) on Schlossplatz in Berlin. This photographic installation presented an edited view of the Palace of the Republic visible from afar on all four sides of the elongated box of the Temporäre Kunsthalle Berlin. Following the controversial demolition of the East German Palace of the Republic (completed in 1976) and before the beginning of reconstruction work on the Hohenzollern Palace (whose ruins were dynamited in 1950 to make way for the Palace of the Republic) the vacant lot in the city center was given over to the initiators of the Temporäre Kunsthalle. With her façade work, Pousttchi not only commented on the debate surrounding the demolition of the Palace, a key symbol of the East German state, but also questioned the historical awareness of post-reunification Germany. In addition, the installation reflected on the role of photography in digital modernity and inquired into our relationship with memory, historicity, and authenticity.

By inserting two extra walls into the museum’s main hall, Pousttchi has given it a new shape and rhythm. Unlike many artists using this space, she chose an exhibition model in which works from recent years are related to each other—three rooms with a total of four groups of works that present different aesthetic practices. The show begins strikingly in the first room with her most recent works: large sculptures assembled out of mechanically twisted highway crash barriers, painted various colors, that set the white cube in motion. The barriers are standard prefabricated steel elements that she buys online and then shapes into twisted steel ribbons in a workshop in Berlin. This work continues the artist’s engagement with elements of street furniture. Since the invention of automobiles, there has been a need to regulate these vehicles as they became faster and faster. For example crash barriers, with their solid materiality and ability to withstand great force, are placed into the streetscape to prevent dangerous collisions and ensure that traffic flows in orderly lanes. In the titles of her *Vertical Highways* series (2019), Pousttchi explicitly refers to the use of crash barriers in roads, and

especially highways; the individual works are named after the German autobahns, from A1 through A5. The highly aesthetic sculptural works thus address a range of issues. The autobahn ended the age of the railways, shrinking time and space with new possibilities for rapid individual travel, in turn paving the way for the mass motorization that significantly altered industrialized nations' cultural landscape. Highways are used for long- and short-distance travel and have ultimately mutated from an object of desire into a burden. Since the latter part of the twentieth century, highways have been a substantial focus of public and private interest. In the context of discussions about climate change, private transport often plays a major role. The crash barriers that Pousttchi uses as raw materials reflect all of these aspects. They also stand for her engagement with precursors in art history. The artistic practice of using prefabricated industrial materials that do not belong to the traditional material canon is already found in Marcel Duchamp's readymades, while Pousttchi's fascination with the art of Constructivism is evident in her series *Double Monuments for Flavin and Tatlin*. Operating against the backdrop of her diverse studies in cultural and art history, philosophy, and aesthetics, she creates works with multiple frames of reference, whose critical components only gradually reveal themselves to the viewer.

In the second room, Pousttchi shows all twenty-four photographs in her *World Time Clock* series, for just the second time. In 2016, at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., she adapted their presentation to the architecture of the museum's circular gallery. At Berlinische Galerie, she has divided the pictures into four sets; the space has been adapted to fit the works' dimensions and grouping. Beginning with a photograph of the clock on Big Ben in London in 2008,¹ Pousttchi traveled to all of the planet's twenty-four time zones, always on the lookout for public clocks. The division of the world into time zones did not take place until the end of the nineteenth century.² Thanks to the ever-expanding railway networks, distances could be overcome faster and more easily. Timetables and a system that was valid across cities, regions, and countries were required to harmonize trade and travel conditions. The British Empire, with its colonies spread across the entire world, pushed for the introduction of a uniform world time system. When discussing the now generally accepted time-zone system, one should not forget that their creation was driven largely by the hegemonic striving and colonialism of nation states in nineteenth-century Europe.

Time regulates and controls. It lays down a rigid grid to which everyone must adhere. Large public clocks in urban spaces played an important part in this, as only few people could afford their own chronometers. The time was thus announced publicly by clock chimes, or at least visually by a clockface that was visible from afar. These large clocks were often part of colonial architecture, sometimes modeled on Big Ben in London. This is probably why such large clocks are no longer taken care of in some locations—their connotations linking them too strongly with colonialism and rule by foreign powers. The introduction of standard times and calendars has also often been discussed in relation to postcolonialism. According to German historian and Africanist Andreas Eckert, "In the late nineteenth century, when European powers began establishing colonial rule in Africa, the colonization of time was an important aspect of their endeavors. The introduction of the Gregorian calendar, Christian

¹ On the origins of the series, Pousttchi says: "*World Time Clock* began when I lived in London for a short period in 2008, often traveling between London and Berlin. The one-hour time difference between these two closely connected places always amazed me, prompting me to think about this specific world order." In Bettina Pousttchi, *Framework* (Cologne, 2012), p. 105.

² At the British-dominated Meridian Conference in Washington in 1884, Greenwich was finally recommended as the reference meridian.

holidays, work-free Sundays, and the transition from local to European time, marked the efforts of colonial rulers to bring time under their control. The spread of clocks and calendars was to remind those who had been colonized that time was no longer their own.”³

States have often asserted their sovereignty by introducing their own time zones. In 2015, North Korean ruler Kim Jong Un decided that the clocks in his country would be turned back half an hour on August 15, 2015, to mark the 70th anniversary of the end of Japanese colonial rule in North Korea (1910–45). During this period, Tokyo had decreed that the clocks in Korea would be put forward thirty minutes to bring them into line with Japanese time. Many other recent examples exist. Fixing time and time zones is always an act of power, a political demonstration. Pousttchi’s *World Time Clock* was realized over a period of eight years. In the course of the project, some time zones changed or were redrawn. Whereas the first photographs were taken more or less unsystematically, the artist subsequently planned her travels in such a way that the project could be completed. When interpreted in political, postcolonial terms, the work’s strict seriality takes on a timeless significance.

In the third and final room, Pousttchi shows additional sculptural works made in recent years using bike racks, bollards, and tree protection barriers. Here, too, she took commercially available products and bent them out of shape before treating their surfaces. Both the tree protection barriers and the bike racks belong to the repertoire of street furniture that the artist has been exploring for years. These often overlooked objects play a central role in her view of urban space, not just as raw materials for her sculptures, but also as symbols of regulation and control. The tree protection barriers in particular look unfamiliar here, not with their bottom third buried in the earth as they would be in the street. Twisted, crushed, and larger than usual, they seem to dance in the exhibition space. All of the sculptures are conceived as separate works, with individual titles derived from Berlin street names. Choreographed by the artist as a group in the space, they take on the character of an installation, their twisting shapes recalling the vegetal forms of climbing plants, an association reinforced by the choice of colors—various shades of green that subtly refer to the places where such objects are usually deployed. With their glamorous polished surfaces, the deformed bike racks appear as precious objects, stripped of their function. Like the tree protection barriers, they bring urban space into the museum. Less authoritarian than the crowd control barriers of earlier works, the bike racks are nonetheless placeholders for the regulatory dimension of urban planning that meticulously defines who may walk, stand, and park where. Polished to a high shine, the bollards also fit with this idea of regulation and control, preventing vehicles from passing and clearly separating one urban space from another. The bollards project casual normality when in fact they are instruments of control. In the wake of attacks on events like the Christmas Market on Berlin’s Breitscheidplatz in 2016, the justification for dividing and monitoring public space seems to have increased. Protecting people is the primary concern, but controlling flows of people evidently calls for strict rules, and the resulting measures cause any forms of behavior that diverge from the norm to be if not penalized then at least registered and recorded in the form of video surveillance. This links to an earlier work of Pousttchi’s entitled *Take Off* (2005), a series of photographs taken at Berlin’s Tempelhof airport. As a filmic sequence tracing an imaginary scenario, the edited large-format photographs with their horizontal stripes and monochrome palette recall CCTV footage, underlining the fact that the artist’s focus is both on Tempelhof as a historically charged location, and on airports more generally as non-places in which the individual is restricted in particular ways by the territorial claims of the nation-state.

³ Andreas Eckert, “Zeit, Arbeit und die Konstruktion von Differenz. Über die koloniale Ordnung in Afrika,” in *Comparativ* 10:3 (2000), pp. 61–73.

In this last room, the metal sculptures are joined by the ceramic relief *Framework* (2019), which connects to the façade work and underlines Pousttchi's interest in transcultural forms, once again referencing Oriental patterns. Fired and glazed clay has been used in architecture for millennia. Pousttchi has individual elements fired and then assembles them into multipart reliefs. The handmade elements are unique—the firing process can only be controlled to a limited extent via temperature and duration, and the chemical reactions in the glaze cannot be exactly predicted. As a result, minor variations exist between the individual pieces—barely perceptible differences that set the relief in motion, giving the wall a dynamic appearance. Glazed bricks were often used to clad façades in the courtyards of buildings in late nineteenth-century Berlin. Referring to this history, architects Dieter Frohwein and Gerhard Spangenberg used them to structure façades directly opposite the Berlinische Galerie in their project for the International Building Exhibition (IBA) in the nineteen-eighties, so that Pousttchi's choice of work inside the museum creates another link to the building's immediate surroundings.

Such networks of references, often grounded in subtle humor and whose connections gradually emerge, are characteristic of Pousttchi's approach. Developing her works and exhibitions against a backdrop of philosophical, art historical, and sociological knowledge, she qualifies each presentation as a specific installation that enters into dialog with the location.