

frieze

How German is it?

Is Berlin the new Cairo?

As I leave Berlin for a semester of teaching in Los Angeles, there are things I look forward to: the Pacific Coast Highway and the immaculate weather; the heady chase to keep up with the lithe and dexterous rhythms of conversation, and the Saturday night checkpoints on Sunset Boulevard, where celebrities drive drunk to get their mugshot in the tabloids. I also enjoy the ceremonious admonition from my college not to blackmail my students for sexual favours. And I admire the range of art spaces that gracefully circumvent, overthrow or otherwise redefine curatorial conventions – the artist-run Velaslavasay Panorama, the TELIC Arts Exchange, the Center for Land Use Interpretation or the Museum for Jurassic Technology, an unforgettably magnificent mind-fuck of a place. All which combine the exhibition experience with an acute sense of histories of display, the pedagogical or performative – or even the gastronomic – constellations that are refreshing without ever being ‘clever’ or ‘experimental’ in that ‘curatorial’ sort of way. This is not to mention dozens of inconspicuous venues which I’ve only just heard about. An online search unearths a confusing range of projects that can be a bit hokey – the true mark of interdisciplinarity for its own sake – or intriguingly adept, such as Machine Project, Farmlab and Sea and Space Explorations.

What I hadn’t noticed on previous visits, however, was that every LA artist seems to have a Berlin connection. Over the past few weeks, I’ve run into a string of projects linking the sister cities and a shocking number of Berlin *Gastarbeiter*-to-be enquiring about the respective advantages of residing in Friedrichshain or Prenzlberg. I just met a former chef at Berlin’s White Trash restaurant – a happy ghetto of tattooed, monolingual Americans – after which I ran into a DJ who still lives in Mitte and speaks German, but considers Berlin to be a pathetic poser highground. The place to be right now, he warned me, is Kiev.

Others fly into Berlin for an opening or two. ‘Can you believe it? I was in this bar in Kreuzberg and they told me to keep my VOICE down. Can you imagine? Fucked UP man.’ It is hard to convey the uncanny effect of American English slowly and, it seems, irrevocably becoming the first language at Berlin openings. Ami-Englisch like my own bears the mark of Empire; you may as

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well don a khaki field jacket, safari hat, and a megaphone. Perhaps there's no harm in being told to keep your voice down; there shouldn't only be perks in embodying Empire in this day and age.

Judging by the expats, it appears that Berlin is the new Cairo. 'All that history everywhere man, all over the city, and the locals they're funny, they smoke so much, and eat all this heavy food, but they're actually totally friendly if you get to know them. And the language, man, the language. But the rents are so cheap – you can live like a king!' Much of which, of course, is true. The language and the locals are a world away from the nimble melodies of 'Hi how ya doin oh really wow well nice meetin ya'. You talk to strangers that way in Berlin and you get arrested.

Some have observed a growing tension amongst Berlin artists confronted with the booming anglicization of their city turf. It's hard to deny that an international project with decent networking clout, and decent discursive credentials, will build up an intimidating presence within minutes, and to some, what would normally pass as routine institutional marketing suddenly appears to allegorize complicated art-world rituals of cooked versus raw, semi-inclusion versus semi-exclusion.

Perhaps the notorious shortcomings of Berlin's art academies are partially to blame here, in terms of missed opportunities of sustained urban kinship. A valued local academy can be instrumental in fostering some type of edge or head start, or a sense of contentious commonality as a scene. Others, of course, will say the angst and the incommensurability are good for you.

Be that as it may, what is striking in LA is the sheer number of writers and artists who can make a living by teaching at the treasured art schools that rival Sunset Boulevard in fame. But even in LA, things aren't as bling as I remember them to be. Last year, I had the privilege of teaching at the Criticism & Theory department at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, which flaunted an exceptionally inspired and competent staff, a steadily rising reputation and glowingly enthusiastic students. This year, following a cunningly timed announcement on a sleepy summer afternoon, the school 'restructured' the program out of existence, leaving the faculty affronted and the students stranded, including, of course, some who had just enrolled. Apparently it signifies a move towards what someone has termed a Design Center College of Design. If you share a belief in innovative art education as a space for 'engaged autonomy' (Charles Esche), especially with the slow implosion of the investigational promise of museums, biennials, galleries and clever curating, then the case of Pasadena is terrifying in its potential as a precedent.

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