

BOOKS

Round-up: A Selection of Collections of Perspectives

Many who have tired of being in harness have thought at some time or other of moving to Berlin. **Mythos Berlin**, a collection of short essays and image-led pieces on the settler's life in the city, aims to excavate Mayor Klaus Wowereit's epithet for the place, 'poor but sexy', which reflects the standard line that life in Berlin is cheap, due to being overlooked by the rest of Germany, its divided past being a difficult wound to heal and precisely what makes it interesting. But, as the book relates, the subsequent influx of international artists has functioned like a caged canary in a mine, precipitating a slow creep of commercialisation and gentrification which has pumped up property prices and forced artists further and further out.

The collected texts are short and few get beyond a bland description of a creative community once comparatively free from commercial pressure but now under threat of full absorption into the system. A self-valorising tone pervades too, with one artist collective, formed in response to what they saw as the government's exploitation of the city's art scene for branding purposes, describing the creative community in Berlin as 'one-armed patients who have learned the initiative to self-dependently bind their own wounds' – a touch hyperbolic in an international context. The exhibition from which this book sprang perhaps contributed, through demonstration rather than description, nuanced debates around nomadic practices, flow of capital and entitlement in the arts in neoliberal societies and the fascinating particularities of Berlin as a historical archive. As a publication, though, the idea of the myth of the city is disappointingly untransgressive, rooted in unspectacular stories of cheap rent and under-regulated recreation.

It is difficult to think of two books more different from one another than Dora Garcia's **All The Stories** and Guy Mannes-Abbott's **In Ramallah, Running**. Where Garcia dashes between hundreds of sketched vignettes of potential worlds, Mannes-Abbott travels methodically on foot along Palestinian byways of various viability and access. Garcia has amassed skeletal storylines via open call, calling structural anthropologists to account on the assertion that there are only seven or eleven or 26 or however many stories. Garcia's collection, which continues in website form, offers a rip-roaring ride through human possibilities, each small propositional nugget

potentially expandable in the mind. Mannes-Abbott, by contrast, comes at literature from a very different angle, the repetition of acts of obstruction, threat and discomfort serving to communicate the lived experience of containment and oppression. Written during a residency in Ramallah, each narrative relates a journey peopled with Israeli soldiers and Palestinian civilians, past concrete occupier settlements and ancient olive groves, and haunted by poets and NGOs. Outrage at the limits placed on passage – although way more relaxed for EU citizens than for Palestinians – is a daily refrain in the region, so to set about running, literally, up against these limits is a vividly direct method of critique.

More conventionally discursive, Tom Finklepearl's **What We Made** is a good sourcebook of art that tackles politics through participation and collaboration. The author's introduction provides a useful overview of the situation in contemporary America regarding art-historical precedents, such as Joseph Beuys, Augusto Boal and Allan Kaprow, as well as the influence of the civil rights movement, second-wave feminism and radical pedagogy. Finklepearl draws an axis between scripted encounter and dialogue-based works that are created collectively (his favoured term for this is 'social cooperation'), which he feels most contemporary relational practice can be situated along. He personally expresses a preference for the latter category, from which many of the featured projects are drawn, and he is particularly keen to understand how this way of working operates in a society that valorises individualism. The bulk of the book, bar a concluding chapter on pragmatism, comprises interviews with and between artists, curators and participants; many snags and snarls raised between interviewees are critically addressed to reflect the broader field of discourse and, despite a net positivity, there are nuances in position that make apparent its many contradictions. For instance, Grant Kester lays out his defence of constructive collaborative and socially engaged practices, while Claire Bishop, with whom he has tangled in printed form before, responds to Tania Bruguera's seven-year-long art school project in Havana. Rather than pitching them against one another in broad abstract terms, Finklepearl's approach produces a less categorical, if somewhat tangential, debate. Indeed throughout the book, the range of voices and extent of discussion starts to demonstrate the causal, interdependent and oppositional relationships, not just between critical positions, but between ideas, styles of rhetoric, processes and outcomes too.

Other recent publications that might prove useful to those looking for survey, round-up or revisionist texts are Camiel van Winkel's

During the Exhibition the Gallery Will Be Closed and Ben Parry's **Cultural Hijack: Rethinking Intervention**. Van Winkel's collection of essays spans the period 2001-10 and aims to reassess conceptualism anachronistically, examining how it is currently related to by artists, but also, and more specifically, by art historians and critical theorists – the temporal spread of van Winkel's own essays being a self-reflexive instance of this. He posits that the common claim for Conceptual Art as anti-visual is inaccurate, categorising it rather as primarily informational. He also identifies the historical milieu of the conceptual artist as important, with politics and the changing nature of industry exerting palpable influence, and suggesting that, consequently, design and photography are modes through which some of the paradoxes of conceptualism can be addressed, which the introduction handily compacts and considers in the writings of Benjamin Buchloh, Alexander Alberro and others. Such contradictions include the figure of the revolutionary artist who employs bureaucratic methodologies, radical dematerialisation or anti-visibility managing to enter conventional historical collections and auction rooms, institutional critique maintaining parasitic relations with these very institutions, and artworks that invoke critical evaluation despite a claim for the lack of intrinsic qualitative markers. But, van Winkel argues, it is just these unresolved issues that are conceptualism's most potent leavings.

The remit of Parry's edited collection of texts is more ideologically rallying, less academic in tone and more lavishly illustrated. Alongside canonical pieces, such as Gordon Matta-Clark's cut buildings and Philippe Petit's illegal high-wire walk between the Twin Towers, the book features many lesser-known pieces, from posters and projections to pop-up shops and inflatable sculptures, the lack of visibility of which are to a great extent due to their institutionally unsanctioned or commercially unviable nature. The anecdotal often leads in this field of activity, since consumer resistance, infrastructural forays and interruptive acts in public space function in the moment of experience and necessarily undergo translation into the language of blogs or rumour for subsequent transmission. This collection of interviews and accounts, from perpetrators and participants, then, is an apt means and useful placeholder for activities that attempt to create causal links between such slippery stuff as aesthetic proposition and politicising effect. ■

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