

## Where am I (and who are all these people)?

**Gallery EXIT**, B.Vukmirovic / 27, Pejë, Kosovë

July 24 - August 29, 2004

Opening: Saturday, July 24, 2004, 20:00 hrs

### **Participating artists**

Nina Fischer/Maroan el Sani

Christoph Keller

Daniel Pflumm

Heidi Specker

### **Curator**

Inke Arns, Berlin

### **Organized by**

EXIT Contemporary Art Institute, Pejë, Kosovë

### **Abstract**

The exhibition »Where am I (and who are all these people)?«, conceived and curated by Inke Arns, presents works by five Berlin-based artists whose works reflect Berlin as a specifically local and at the same time global cityscape and an urban space in transformation. The works of the participating artists Nina Fischer/Maroan el Sani, Christoph Keller, Daniel Pflumm and Heidi Specker are formally very diverse. They deal on the one hand side very directly with the architectural and urban heritage of real existing Socialism. Heidi Specker, for example, analyses the structural elements of late-Socialist concrete architecture of the 1970s which can be found in many post-socialist countries (and not only here). Nina Fischer and Maroan el Sani had been documenting the Berlin club scene that developed in the 1990s in run-down houses and basements. Since 2001 they have been focussing on the (past) future and (future) fate of the Palast der Republik (Palace of the Republic), built in the 1970s, which hosted the Volkskammer (i.e. the parliament) of the GDR until 1990. While Christoph Keller constructs his own photographic strip cameras to produce what he calls »Rundum Photographs« (static images depicting the movement of the camera during recording) enabling him to record the urban space and the people and objects moving in this space, Daniel Pflumm presents Berlin as a global cityscape. He does this by meticulously dissecting the elaborate global language of advertisement, of corporate identities and logo culture he finds in the urban space, on television and the Internet.

This project takes place in the framework of relations

relations is a project initiated by **kulturstiftung des bundes**  
(Federal Cultural Foundation, Germany)

[www.projekt-relations.de](http://www.projekt-relations.de)

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## Concept by Inke Arns

In the 1990s, Berlin underwent dramatic changes.<sup>1</sup> The city, which had been divided into a Capitalist and a Socialist showcase by the (in)famous Berlin Wall for almost 30 years, has been a city in heavy transformation since the German re-unification in 1990.

In the early 1990s, specific local conditions led to the development of a very special independent Berlin (sub)cultural scene. This new urban culture – or subculture – complete with off-galleries and illegal bars and clubs in basements of abandoned houses, developed in what has been called – after Michel Foucault – a heterotopia, or heterotopias.<sup>2</sup> One could also call it, more simply, an unclear property situation. This situation (mainly) in the Eastern part of the city lead to the largely open and unoccupied spaces/territories in the center of town that proved to be so fruitful for new projects. These largely undefined territories made what happened in Berlin very different from West European capitals.

By 1990 the historical center of Berlin – located in the eastern part of the city – had almost become an urban void. Why was this so? Since 1975 the administration of East Berlin had been erecting high-rise estates on the outskirts of the city, like Marzahn, and had started to re-settle the inhabitants of Berlin-Mitte (i.e. the historical center) to these new building areas. Most of the old buildings in the historical center were planned to be torn down in order to make way for the large-scale construction of a genuine Socialist capital. By 1990 whole apartment blocks in the center of Berlin

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the presentation/workshop »Art in Transformation. The Berlin Cultural Scene after Re-Unification« held by Inke Arns and Claudia Wahjudi at the Laboratory, Prishtina, Kosovo, May 27 and 28, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> See on this Stefan Heidenreich, The Berlin Clubs, in: Nina Fischer/Maroan el Sani, *Klub 2000. Rom Paris Marzahn*, Berlin 1998, pp. 12-16.

had been abandoned by their former inhabitants, and entire factory buildings were left empty because the production was discontinued.

These buildings were not only emptied, but in addition, their former owners were literally expropriated by the State. In Berlin alone some 183.581 requests for restitution of real estate property have been registered until 2003. To give you an idea of the amount of expropriations: Since 1990 there have been 2,1 million requests in total in Germany for restitution of property by former legal real estate owners. The numbers for Germany as a whole and for Berlin also include property that was expropriated from Jewish owners between 1933 and 1945 and that was not returned during the time of the GDR.

Due to a long-lasting neglect most of the real estate in the German Democratic Republic (GDR, or East Germany) was in a very bad shape. It were exactly these derelict and run-down houses in the center of Berlin that became the basis of intensive artistic and cultural activities after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when squatters and artists started occupying the empty spaces of East Berlin. Temporary projects like Botschaft e.V. (\*1990), the WMF club (\*1990) which by now has moved to its sixth location at the Café Moskau, the cultural projects ACUD and the Haus Schwarzenberg all developed in this unclear property situation. This situation was characterized by the fact that on the one hand side nobody would invest in the houses, and on the other hand side nobody would expect a »return of investment« which would have only been possible by running the spaces commercially.

This situation changed radically in the second half of the 1990s. Now, also with more and more houses being returned to their former owners and/or sold to new ones, the process of gentrification got into full swing, leading (again) to major displacement of the population. The integration of the real estate of East Berlin into the economic system of the west (as the cultural theorist Stefan Heidenreich calls it) lead to marginalising and relegating certain (elderly and poorer) people to the fringes of the city and attracting new well funded inhabitants to the central districts of Berlin. In the late 1990s, Berlin has been called »the largest building site of Europe«. The by now finished Potsdamer Platz, built by Daimler-Chrysler and Sony, is only the most visible and well-known symptom of this 15-year long process of (re-)construction and gentrification.

Thus one can say that since the late 1990s, the »inner city's heterotopias are on the retreat.«<sup>3</sup> One reason for this is certainly the growing transformation of urban public space into corporate space. To put it metaphorically, instead of the somewhat puzzled question »Where am I (and who are all these people)?« today more and more people seem to be able to think only in terms of »Where do you want to go today?™«<sup>4</sup>. Daniel Pflumm's work deals exactly with this fact. At the same time, there still remain quite a lot of open spaces in Berlin.<sup>5</sup> Compared to other cities in Europe, Berlin is very attractive to many artists, musicians and cultural producers because of, amongst other reasons, a) the creative potential gathered in the city and b) because

<sup>3</sup> Heidenreich 1998, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> This is a trademarked phrase owned by the Microsoft corporation. See on this Daniel Garcia Andujar, Language (property), 1997, <http://www.irational.org/ttpt/TM/trademark.html>

<sup>5</sup> The famous starting phrase of Asterix and Obelix comes to one's mind: »We are in the year 50 before Christ. Whole Gallia, as nearly whole the rest of the known world, is occupied by the Roman Empire. Whole Gallia? No. One small village in the northwestern corner of the country does not stop to resist the occupants.«

of the low costs of living (e.g. rents for studios and apartments) that still remain affordable.

The exhibition »Where am I (and who are all these people)?«, conceived and curated by Inke Arns, presents works by five Berlin-based artists whose work reflects Berlin as a specifically local and at the same time global cityscape and an urban space in transformation. Nina Fischer/Maroan el Sani, Christoph Keller, Daniel Pflumm and Heidi Specker who belong to a generation of artists today aged 35-40, have spent their formative years in Berlin and have all been important agents in the development of the city's independent cultural scene since the beginning of the 1990s.

Being formally very diverse their works on the one hand side deal very directly with the architectural and urban heritage of real existing Socialism. Heidi Specker, for example, analyses the structural elements of late-Socialist concrete architecture of the 1970s that can be found in many post-socialist countries (and not only here). Nina Fischer and Maroan el Sani had been documenting the Berlin club scene that developed in the 1990s in run-down houses and basements. Since 2001 they have been focussing on the (past) future and (future) fate of the Palast der Republik (Palace of the Republic), built in the 1970s, which originally hosted the Volkskammer (i.e. the parliament) of the GDR until 1990. Since then, the immense building, located at the very center of Berlin, has been closed for the public because of contamination with asbestos. After the complete evacuation of the building leading to the destruction of anything except the supporting structure and the exterior walls, the building is now ready for demolition (approved by the German Bundestag and scheduled for 2005). Over the last ten or so years hefty discussions have been going on whether to keep the Palace of the Republic or whether to replace it by a reconstruction of the former Imperial Palace (torn down for ideological reasons by the GDR administration in the 1950s).

Both Christoph Keller and Daniel Pflumm have been members of Botschaft e.V. and have, amongst other activities, been involved in or running important temporary clubs like Friseur der Botschaft, Museum für Zukunft, Elektro and Panasonic during the 1990s. However, their works deal with very different topics. While Christoph Keller constructs his own photographic strip cameras to produce what he calls »Rundum Photographs« (static images depicting the movement of the camera during recording) enabling him to record the urban space and the people and objects moving in this space, Daniel Pflumm presents Berlin as a global cityscape. He does this by meticulously dissecting the elaborate global language of advertisement, of corporate identities and logo culture he finds in the urban space, on television and the Internet.

Altogether, the artistic works included in »Where am I (and who are all these people)?« display a two fold interest: On the one hand side they address the specific local circumstances that developed in Berlin after the re-unification (dealing with urban voids, coping with the architectural heritage of Socialism). These elements, however specific for Berlin they might be, are, at the same time, reflecting global developments that exist in many other (post-socialist) places in the world. Corporate logo culture, e.g., is a global phenomenon infiltrating local (sub)urban structures almost anywhere on the globe. Questions about how to deal with typically ready-made concrete housing blocks built in the 1970s – the heritage of the International Style – are not only asked in post-socialist countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, but also in the West, where one can actually find an amazingly similar

architectural language. The question »Where am I (and who are all these people)?« thus leads us to the conclusion that Berlin is special, but not unique.

### The artists and the works in the exhibition

**Nina Fischer/Maroan el Sani** (1965 Emden, D / 1966 Duisburg, D) have been working together since 1993. Initially, their works, which make use of different media – installations, films, Internet – ironically dealt with supernatural phenomena like telepathy and connected them to the latest communications technologies (*Be supernatural*, 1995; *Aura research*, 1994-1997). Other works dealt with the possibility of telekinesis – of influencing and materially altering distant matter, in this case film material (*Berlin sunrise – 10 Sekunden an die Zukunft denken*, 2000) – or researched the whereabouts of a vanished film character in Michelangelo Antonioni's 1960 film *L'avventura* (*L'avventura senza fine*, 2000). Another important subject in their work is the temporary Berlin club scene of the mid-late-1990s. For their photographic series *Phantomclubs* (1997/1998) they photographed the entrances of temporary (mostly illegal) Berlin clubs during the daytime, preferably at noon. Nothing in these photographs indicates the nightly existence of these clubs. In their short film *Klub 2000. Rom, Paris, Marzahn* (16 mm, 12 min., 1998) they tell the fictional story of Dani and Poge who, after a boring night out clubbing in Berlin-Mitte, drive into the suburbs of Berlin-Marzahn in order to find a suitable location for a new club. They are convinced that the future lies at the margins of the city, but have to learn the hard way that this idea is not compatible with the urban realities of Marzahn.

In the exhibition »Where am I (and who are all these people)?« Fischer/el Sani show their work *Palast der Republik - Weißbereich* (*Palace of the Republic – White Area*, 2001). The artists call it a kind of »imaginary reconstruction of a place they did not know« (because they have not been inside when it was still in function during the time of the GDR). It consists of two 7 min. long camera/dolly drives through the completely emptied Volkskammersaal, i.e. the place of the former parliament of a vanished state. One camera records the empty interior space, while the other records the view through the dirty windows. »White Area« designates an area that has already been cleansed from asbestos.

**Christoph Keller's** (\*1967 Freiburg, D) working method is a genuinely inter- or transdisciplinary one. After studying mathematics, physics, and hydrology, he became a member of the interdisciplinary art and media group Botschaft e.V. in 1993. By now, Christoph Keller holds two patents officially registered with the patent office. His first invention, registered in 1992, was »Rundum Photography«, a small photographic strip camera which allows for the recording movement (or, in physical terms: motion) of people and objects in time and space. In the camera, the film is pulled steadily along a fixed exposure slit. A picture ensues only through the movement of an object in front of the camera. Static objects produce even, horizontal lines on the film. Fast objects are compressed, slow ones elongated. *Menschen am Alex* (*People on Alexanderplatz*, 2000) or *Weltzeituhr* (2004) – on display at EXIT – are only the most recent results of a series of panoramic photographs Keller has been producing with his patented camera since 1993/94.

Keller's second patent *Helioflex* (1998) is a sun mirror for dark urban backyards. It is obviously inspired by and based on the form of all pervasive satellite dishes. Designed to be mounted on a rooftop window, helioflex functions as a solar mirror that traces the path of the sun and reflects its direct light into areas that would

otherwise remain in the shade. In Berlin alone, thus reads the blurb, »150.000 potential customers are waiting in their dark homes for the sun to rise.« (Keller 1998)

Since the end of the 1990s, Christoph Keller became more and more interested in archives. An archive, for him, is »an arbitrary quantity of the world«. His project *medfilm – Ein Archiv der medizinischen Filme der Charité-Berlin 1903-1990* (1998) and the film *retrograd* (1998) document the medical film archive of Berlin's Charité hospital, *Encyclopaedia Cinematographica* (2001) deals with a scientific film archive initiated by the behavioural scientist Konrad Lorenz in the 1950s that aimed at recording the entire spectrum of specific types of movement of the living world.

Christoph Keller's most recent project is the *Cloudbuster Project – Reenactment of the scientific experiments of Wilhelm Reich from 1953-54 to influence the atmosphere by the means of Orgone-energy* (2003). Wilhelm Reich, an Austrian born psychologist and scholar of Sigmund Freud, developed a political theory of sexuality in the 1920s. In the 1950s, he started his experiments with making changes to the atmosphere. Christoph Keller's reenactments of Reich's cloudbuster project which took place on the roof of P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in Long Island City and on the top of the Clocktower in lower Manhattan, New York, had the aim of making rain over New York in the spring and summer of 2003. In fact, it rained through the entire duration of the Cloudbuster reenactments, »setting a hundred year rainfall record for the season« (Ben-Joseph/Keller 2003).

The fact that the title of **Daniel Pflumm's** (\*1968 Geneva, CH) latest video is *Paris* (2004) is only consequent in a show that deals with Berlin and is entitled »Where am I (and who are all these people)?«.

Operating with the illusory polish of smooth surfaces, Daniel Pflumm's videos initiate a fast-and-furious flow of colourful logos, corporate IDs and trademarks. These logos point to supra-national corporations, geographically distributed enterprises selling products in a globalised economy, and therefore requiring images that can be understood by a global audience. The international language of advertisement which is constantly present in the urban space, thus informing the collective global subconscious, indicates the velocity of an almost instantaneous worldwide presence.

Pflumm detaches labels and spots from the original TV or Internet context, reconstructs them on his computer, breaks them down into their structural elements and sends the components spinning in endless loops. In his *anti-logo video* (1997), he »censores« or »de-cores« (Loers) logos – i.e. he strips them of all text, manually eliminates lettering of any kind and reduces them to their minimal graphic form, or electronically screens it until they are illegible. For his own projects, Daniel Pflumm designs logos that are almost impossible to distinguish from corporate logos: In his videos, the boundaries between Elektro (a club he has been running between 1992-94), EMD (Plumm's music label Elektro Music Department), AT&T, Panasonic (his second club he's been running between 1995-97), Esso, PAN AM, WMF, Swiss Air, and Microsoft get fuzzy.

The videotape *EMD 009* (Elektro Music Department 009, 5:30 min., 1998) shows passing trains that merge together to become a series of lines flying past, followed up by extremely blurred video footage of neon signs flashing on and off in urban space. The effect obtained is similar to that of the de-cored logos of his earlier works: although the words were missing, the advertisements remained almost instantly recognizable. The third component of this videotape are recurrent excerpts from ad spots – a stream of crystal-clear water, crisp colours, soft shapes, mashed potatoes being stirred. As a minimalist Daniel Pflumm works with the grainy quality of existing

material, de- and re-constructs the glossy veneer of the advertising aesthetic. Minimalist techno music rhythmically accompanies Pflumm's loops (mo, icetrain, emd009).

His latest video *Paris* (2004) is divided into two parts. In the first part we encounter stereotypical images of e.g. exploding cars and chocolate bars, from the world of advertisement and entertainment (»we love to entertain you«). Deviating from the standard rate for commercial spots, the frequency of repetition breaks through conventional patterns of perception. Yet the monotony of the visual sequence demonstrates the symbolic character of visual forms apparently shot at random. In the second part we see undulating masses of people as they walk along a street as if they were dancing to the minimal techno beats, we see police cars with flash lights blinking just too rhythmically, we see a sunset over Mexico City and city lights sending mysterious morse code messages over the urban sprawl. The video ends with a short and blurred scene obviously recorded at the airport Paris-Roissy Charles de Gaulle: in the background one hears the announcement of departing and arriving flights accompanied by the typical futuristic soundscape. Very faintly, one also hears an intimate conversation between two people one does not see. »Intimacy«, as the art critic Ulrich Clewing notes, »is the only way out of the nervous and exhausting beginnings of the new century.«

**Heidi Specker** (\*1962 Damme, D) belongs to the most renowned and internationally well known German photographers of her generation. It was her early series of architectural photographs *Speckergruppen* (*Specker groups*, 1995), now on display at EXIT in Peje, that made her famous.

In *Speckergruppen* she is depicting structures of modern architectural surfaces and facades as strict geometrical patterns by consequently using digital image processing software and printing technique. We see extremely blurred images of 1960s/1970s buildings in former East and West Berlin, located at Leipziger Strasse, at the Alexanderplatz, the Ernst Reuter Platz or at the Hansaviertel, and can recognize corporate buildings like Schering and Philips, the former Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the GDR in Mitte along with some architectural maquettes of Friedrichstrasse. The painterly element which is very prominent in these photographs – or should one rather call it an anachronistic watercolor style? – makes the depicted buildings look like a »new computer simulation of old 1970s architecture« (Christoph Blase), thus making them oscillate between fiction and reality. In fact, in Specker's photographs these buildings become a series of »timeless and placeless models« (Georg Elben) that can remotely be associated with buildings from the 1960s and 1970s.

In her more recent works, Heidi Specker slowly moves closer to the mass-produced architecture and starts analysing single (if not individual) elements (e.g. in *RGB Routine*, 1997). *Teilchentheorie* (*Particle Theory*, 1998) consist of twenty parts depicting various modules of serial architecture, torn apart, and rhythmically re-arranged and repeated. We see a façade of a high-rising building, and a highway landscape in Los Angeles, but what dominates the arrangement are commonly available, modular sections of architectural surfaces and façades (e.g. the element »Betonblume«, »concrete flower«). In the series *Concrete* (2002) Specker re-arranges basic architectural elements of the main building of the University of Cologne in a similar way. »In Specker's world of preferred motifs, concrete appears everywhere. Yet she reinvents and celebrated it in her photography in a way not seen since the nineteen-sixties and seventies [...]« (Georg Elben).

Ultimately, in her most recent work *Im Garten II* (*In the garden II*, 2004), nature has its grand entrance. Here, she combines the organic forms of trees with architectural façades into minimalist tableaux.

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