

## THE EXHIBITION MIRACLE OF BERLIN THE ARTISTS TAKE OVER. HOW THE IDEAL MUSEUM WAS CREATED IN THE PALAST DER REPUBLIK.

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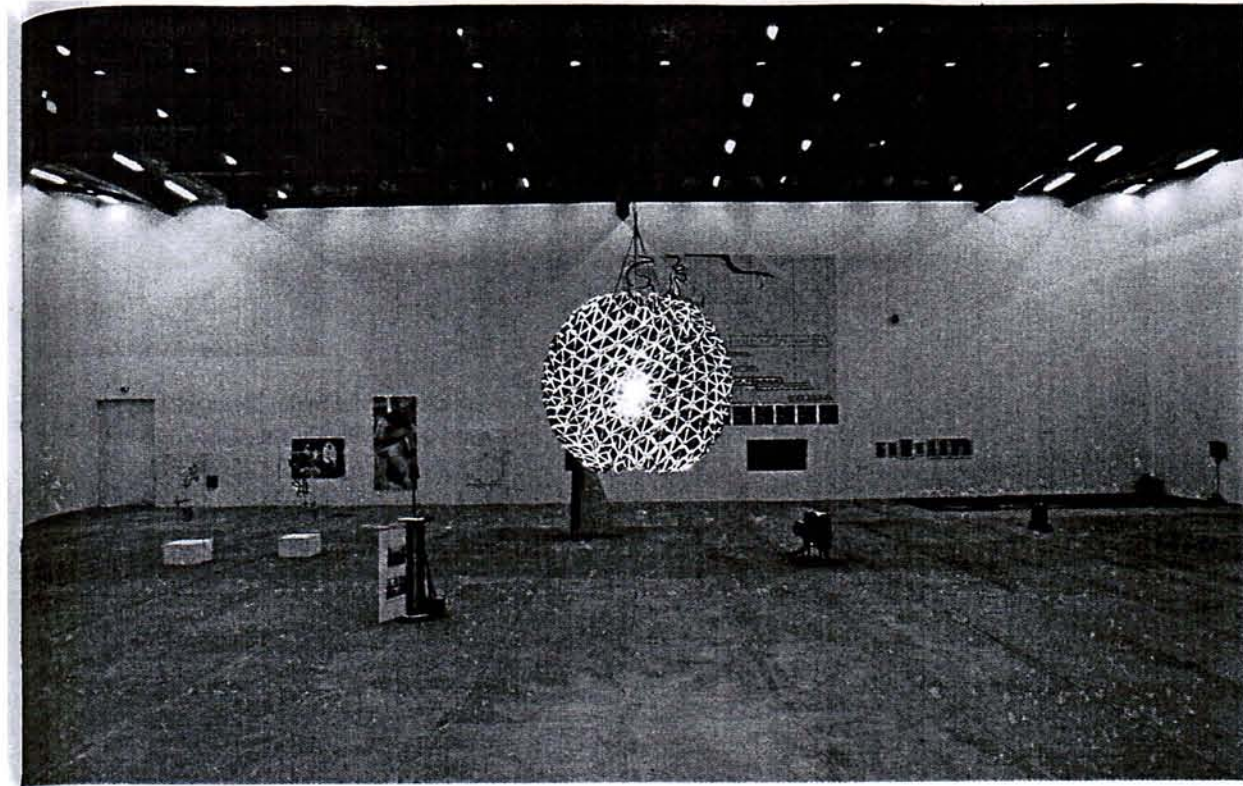
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Just before the end of last year, there was one last sensation. Berlin had a new art space – and just one month before, no one knew about it. Not the artists, not the organizers, not the city. All that existed of it was a gleaming white room, 36 meters long, 27 meters wide and 10 meters high. It had been built inside the Palast der Republik in Berlin for the dubious exhibition *Fraktale IV*. When the exhibition closed in mid-November, the organizers asked White Cube Berlin what could be shown here until the palace was to be torn down in January. They called Thomas Scheibitz, the Berlin-based artist who had represented Germany at the Biennale in Venice the previous year. What happened then is already a legend.

Scheibitz called up some artists he knew. Who in turn called more friends. And so, in just 19 days, without curators, without institutional backing, the 36x27x10 exhibition came together, the likes of which Berlin hadn't seen in a long while. More than thirty internationally renowned artists, most of them living in the city, presented mostly new works in the White Cube, and seldom has such a significant overview of contemporary art being made here crystallized. Franz Ackermann showed a monumental-utopian Combine Painting with the title *Zugang zum Meer* (Access to the Sea); with his "reversed mirror lamp," Olafur Eliasson called to mind the modernism of the East that had once made its home in the palace, with its playful balance of decoration and abstraction; Thomas Demand showed a small, subtle work turning a rear building doorbell panel into a polychromatic abstract art work; Scheibitz himself was represented by a painting and a sculpture; video artist Candice Breitz, who also saw her breakthrough at the Biennale, showed a work in which she deconstructed the facial expressions and gestures of actress Sharon Stone; and there were works by artists as varied as Olaf Nicolai and John Bock (*Babysambles*, 2005), Eberhard Havekost and Rirkrit Tiravanija, Christoph Schlingensiefel, Martin Eder, Manfred Pernice and many others.

Many of the artists have been living in Berlin for some time now: Olafur Eliasson, Thomas Demand and Tacita Dean, to name just three of the most well-known, may have studios within shouting distance of Peter-Klaus Schuster's window, but though he's the top director of the Hamburger Bahnhof, the "Museum for the Contemporary," none of them have had a solo exhibition there. Eliasson was shown in London instead (no fewer than two million visitors came), Demand in New York's MoMA, Tacita Dean in the Musée de l'Art Moderne in Paris. You have to travel far and wide to see the art being made in your own city. The young Berlin-based artist Clemens von Wedemeyer, too, was honored with a solo exhibition in New York in March. In Berlin? Nothing.

For this reason alone, when it came to the exhibition in the Palast der Republik, the question didn't even come up as to whether or not the building should really be torn down; the question instead was of much greater import: Why haven't local art institutions – particularly the "Museum for the Contemporary" in the Hamburger Bahnhof, which receives substantial financial support from the government – been able in ten years to put together an exhibition like the one the artists themselves organized in a mere 19 days? More than anything else, this exhibition is a crushing critique of these institutions. In a startlingly unusual way, it shows what's been missing in the city since



the first Berlin Biennale, and what would be possible if a space like the Hamburger Bahnhof weren't primarily an offload ramp for pre-confectioned grand exhibitions à la Flick. In the White Cube Berlin, things came together that could otherwise only be discovered in widely scattered studios and galleries or in special art fairs.

36x27x10 also thrived on its location – the middle of the city. One wandered past the Christmas market on Unter den Linden, winding one's way under a giant Ferris wheel through a small door in a fence surrounding the construction area, stepping into the dark shell of the Palast der Republik, spread out there like a wrecked and abandoned Soviet marine ship in the winter Berlin twilight – to suddenly step into another world. The gleaming, bright, perfectly white room invites experimentation. The massive steel beams on the ceiling make it an art factory, a new sort of stage. The imaginative pragmatism with which artists like Scheibitz go about their work here is encouraging after all the hard-set battles of the last few years in which headless campaigners fixated on ruins and nostalgia for the East ran up against just-as-headless campaigners fixated on resurrecting the Berlin Schloss of the Second Reich. The exhibition, Scheibitz says now, is "not a statement by artists living in Berlin for or against keeping the Palast" – instead, it is an attempt to show where the riches of the notoriously financially strapped city actually lie: in the clever improvisation in ruins, in the temporary, in a system of chaotic creativity.

The White Cube made a lot possible without hindering anything. Suspicions that it was some sort of Trojan horse that the Palast revolutionary guards rolled onto the Schloss supporters' construction site were unfounded. Which is why politicians who did not dig in their heels and insist on tearing down the Palast, but instead realized what opportunities lay in a temporarily extended use of the White Cube as an art space, must be praised as well. With this wonderfully improvised, unexpected exhibition, Berlin was given a place where the hidden developments in the art world of this city were made visible in one centralized location. Why not, as a next step, a similar exhibition investigating architecture in Berlin and another, more curatorially thought through exhibition devoted to new art in Berlin?

[www.white-cube-berlin.de](http://www.white-cube-berlin.de)



Exhibition photography by Stefan Maria Rother.

