Confusion, unclarified issues and a gaping hole in this year's Berlin Biennale art exhibition

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The Berlin Biennale is a contemporary art exhibition held every two to three years since 1998 at a number of venues across Germany's capital city. This year's event, the 13th, is taking place in four separate venues from June to September and features 170 works by 60 artists from nearly 40 countries. The central motif for this year's Biennale is explicitly political.

According to Biennale curator Zasha Colah, introducing the exhibition, art has "the ability to define its own laws in the face of lawful violence in unjust systems and to assert itself even under conditions of persecution and militarization—sending messages that can be passed on."

At the program presentation in Berlin, Colah further commented: "We find ourselves in a time of fear in Germany, in which the media landscape, the cultural landscape and the political landscape are characterized by enormous unrest." The Biennale presents itself as offering curators the possibility of taking "bold artistic / political approaches beyond the market."

Against a background of immense political and social tension—including the danger of a Third World War between nuclear-armed nations (80 years after the nuclear devastation in Japan); the rapid militarisation of society; support for the Gaza genocide by every major power; ecological breakdown; and unprecedented levels of social insecurity—the holding of an art exhibition in the middle of Europe seemingly devoted to tackling such issues through the medium of art is to be welcomed.

Additional encouraging signs crop up in a poem for the festival entitled "The Joker's Address," written by Colah, which declares in a series of propositions that the Berlin exhibition excludes identity politics and "is not national, not even postcolonial." One placard (quoting American novelist William Faulkner) indicates a serious appreciation of the importance of history: see photo...

A perusal of the artworks on show at the Biennale at its four centres, however, disappoints, in one major respect is deeply troubling and makes clear that enormous questions of orientation remain unresolved.

Gaza

Despite its political pretensions, the Biennale contains a gaping hole. It fails to include a single work dealing with the most abominable social and political crime taking place at present—the systematic genocide/ethnic cleansing of Palestinians by the Zionist regime and its imperialist backers in the US and Europe.

The absence of any treatment of the genocide currently taking place under the horrified gaze of the world's population is shameful. It is hard not to see this as a cowardly surrender to the brutal, pro-Zionist policies of the German government. One festival work features tea towels draped on a wall rhetorically warning against the dangers of "fascism," "mass destruction" and "collective punishment," but amongst the 170 works dealing with the consequences of arbitrary imprisonment, military dictatorship and deliberate destruction of eco-systems, not a word or brush stroke is devoted to the atrocities being committed by the Israeli government and military, supported by the German political elite.

Curator Colah was challenged about the exhibition's failure to raise Gaza at an opening press event. One member of the audience asked if any of the invited artists had refused to participate in the show, in solidarity with the Palestinians in Gaza and the repression of pro-Palestinian cultural workers in Germany. Colah admitted this was the case, with at least one artist refusing to take part in response to the call by the Strike Germany movement for the boycott of organisations and events that refrain from taking a clear position opposing the Israeli genocide.

In response to the question as to whether Colah had experienced "repression by the German government in light of the ongoing genocide in Gaza and German support for it?," the curator replied in the negative, adding, "They [the authorities] wouldn't dare." Refusing to admit that genocide was taking place, with the weasel declaration that "genocide is a legal term," she said she "face[s] many repressions," but "would not call it state repression."

Already, back in May, prior to the opening of the Biennale, Colah gave an interview in which she declared “There is no censorship, I would say, in Germany.”

In reality, there is ample and indeed overwhelming documentation of the German state’s active repression of expressions of solidarity with the people of Palestine through police force, accusations of antisemitism, targeted arrests, criminal charges, coercion through the justice system, deportation and outright banning. The WSWS features numerous articles dealing with the dozens of writers, cultural workers, political figures, scientists and ordinary citizens who have been subjected to censorship and repression by the German government. Even the speaking of languages other than German or English at pro-Palestinian demonstrations is sufficient to result in police harassment and arrest.

The curator’s indication that the festival would exclude identity politics from the Biennale also proves to be inconsistent.

One section of the exhibition by Burmese artist Sawangwongse Yawnghwe features large banners providing details of the global arms trade. From a political standpoint such information is clearly valuable, but listing such details on large banners hardly seems to merit inclusion in an art exhibition. In addition, one of the banners declares in capital letters that: THE GLOBAL ARMS TRADE IS A WHITE SUPREMICIST CAPITALIST PATRIARCAL SELF-INVENTION. WE HAVE FUELLED AND PERPETUATED TENSIONS, SELLING TO ALL SIDES SINCE 1874.”

This formulation is characteristic of the type of identity politics which has raged in academic and fake left middle-class circles in recent decades, seeking to blame the broad mass of the population for the excesses of capitalism, thereby absolving the ruling elites of any responsibility.

There were at least a handful of interesting works on show at one of the festival’s venues, a derelict courthouse in the Moabit area of Berlin. The facade of the courthouse is pockmarked with the holes left by shells exchanged between Nazi troops and Soviet Red Army soldiers during the intense street fighting that took place in the German capital at the end of the Second World War.

The courthouse was also the site of the 1916 trial of socialist revolutionary Karl Liebknecht who stood accused by the state of organizing an antiwar demonstration opposing Germany’s role in World War I. In a rigged, closed trial Liebknecht was sentenced to four years and one month in prison for high treason. Responding to his sentence Liebknecht expressed his contempt for the ruling of the judge: “Leave this comedy, where everything, including even the decision, has been prepared beforehand.”

This theme has been taken up by the Italian artist Anna Scalfi Eghenter (born 1965) whose installation “The Comedy!” fills several rooms on the ground floor of the courthouse. In the first room red political pamphlets flutter in the air, propelled by several large fans, while an audio track plays excerpts from Liebknecht’s speeches opposing German militarism. After a promising start, Eghenter’s installation, including tiny model soldiers spread across the floor and a neon sign bearing the word “Comunista,” falls flat, failing to illuminate in any way the significance of Liebknecht’s courageous struggle against militarism and his assassination a few years later by right-wing militia.

An adjacent room in the same venue also takes up a theme from the First World War. The venue features a film “From Heaven High” by German artist Simon Wachsmuth. The main character in the film is a soldier in a German military uniform with a pig’s head. The figure in Wachsmuth’s film is based on the dummy, titled originally “Prussian Archangel,” which hung from the ceiling at Berlin’s First International Dada Art Fair in 1920. A sash across the body of the dummy features the words “vom himmel hoch, da komm ich her” (I come from heaven high), as one reviewer noted, “a song attributed to Martin Luther, repurposed by Dadaists [John Heartfield and Rudolf Schlichter] as a rallying cry against war.” Heartfield and Schlichter were subsequently accused of defaming the army and put on trial.

The first part of Wachsmuth’s film shows the soldier-pig marching senselessly around a parade ground. The second part features the creature confronting a stony-faced judge as the former seeks to defend himself with cryptic language games. The film ends lamely with the stuttering splutter from the pig-soldier “It is better to be a pig than a fascist.”

It should be noted that Heartfield was one of a whole group of artists (including his brother Wieland Herzfelde, Erwin Piscator and George Grosz) who, traumatised and radicalized by the war, turned to the left and joined the newly founded Communist Party (KPD) in 1919.

Artists today do not have the example of an October Revolution to inspire them, but the masses are globally on the move. Instead of sniping from the sidelines, as was the case with many of the figures featured at the Berlin Biennale, artists will find it necessary, in order to create genuinely “new art,” in Trotsky’s words, to be “at one with their epoch” and its tumultuous, ultimately revolutionary character.