

Over the last few years, debates about cultural politics have shown local policy makers in Berlin to be completely focused on "competitive exhibitions," which they believe will bolster the city's image as an international cultural metropolis. Cultural politics in Berlin, it seems, have become increasingly entangled with city-branding—a neoliberal instrument of urban development. Politicians are eagerly selling off urban space, foreclosing on non-market-based social and creative possibilities, and reconfiguring it to attract and facilitate touristic consumption habits, which the city is counting on in times of scarce public funding. It is within this cultural context that politicians have begun to re-animate an event format with a highly dubious history—the World's Fair.

The historical relationship between the violence of imperialist colonization and 160 years of World's Fairs is obscure, though several moments are instructive. The "Great Industrial Exhibition of Berlin" of 1897-at the height of European colonialism-was staged beyond city limits, on the grounds of what is now called Treptower Park, and showcased the period's most advanced industrial technology and commodities. In the exhibition, so-called "human zoos," which had already been around for 20 years through the activities of the Hamburg businessman and zoo founder, Carl Hagenbeck, were included as a feature. More than a hundred inhabitants of German colonies, including five Herero and four Nama people from what is now Namibia, were placed in a so-called "Negro Village," exposed to the exoticizing gaze of an audience curious to witness the spectacle of traditional craft production by people wearing costumes inappropriate for a central European climate-indeed, exposure would eventually kill some of these captive actors.

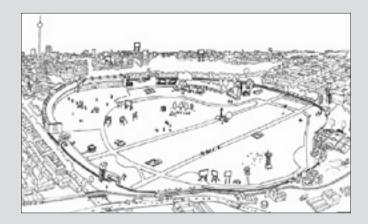
Another destructive register of the fairs was manifest in the intrusions into the local urban infrastructure of the host cities and their effects on the lives of the people living there. We can look to the Vienna World's Fair of 1873, for which the course of the Danube River was altered to make place for the expansive exhibition architecture. Today, with streamlined branding and a focus on "sustainability" (the key to a vision of the future), whole new urbanisms are rapidly emerging in metropolises all over the planet-tokens in an international race of ideas to provide humanity with an image of a better world. Recently, in Shanghai, in order to make room for the construction needs of a large-scale exhibition called "Better City, Better Life," around 8,000 families were forcibly evacuated, and then, as paving guests, loaded onto tour buses and carted back in to their now radically restructured living quarters.

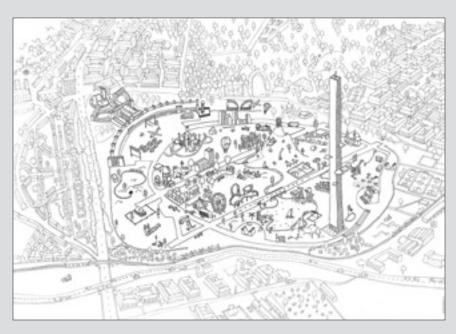
Often, however, such exhibitions have given rise to fascinating and visionary architecture. The Victorian "Crystal Palace," created by Joseph Paxton for London's "Great Exhibition" in 1851—the first-ever World's Fair—remains well known to the present day. The technological breakthroughs of the industrial revolution made possible the construction of a steel-and-glass monument supported without structural mason-

ry. About a hundred years later, at Expo 67 in Montreal, the formal legacy of the "Crystal Palace" and its transparent architecture was revived with Buckminster Fuller's design for the American Pavilion—an imposing steel honeycomb made out of prefabricated acrylic material forms a geodesic dome, reaching a height of 62 metres and a width of 76 metres. A 36-metre-long escalator in the middle served as an efficient transport system, providing access to the four great theatrical, thematic worlds on seven levels. After a turbulent history of damage and repair, the building now houses the "Biosphere," an interactive environmental museum. Much more frequently, however, the ambitious exhibition projects have landed in the rubbish heaps of history. The grounds of the New York World's Fairs held in 1939-1940 and 1964-1965, the "Exposición Universal" in Seville in 1992, and Expo 2000 in Hannover are today abandoned or half-heartedly dismantled wastelands, eloquent witnesses of past dreams of the future, remnants of an almost categorical belief in economic expansion and technological progress.

Such futuristic buildings set an ideal stage on which to present the most advanced developments of the burgeoning commodity capitalism to a mass audience, composed mainly from members of the working and the middle class. "World exhibitions." wrote Walter Benjamin in The Arcades Project, "glorify the exchange value of the commodity. They create a framework in which its use value recedes in the background. They open a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted. The entertainment industry makes this easier by elevating the person to the level of the commodity." So, despite (or because of) such visionary and groundbreaking architecture, the greater underlying force of the World's Fair serves to deeply implicate consumers within the dubious logic of capital.

Considering such excesses of capitalism and urbanism, and the collateral damage they cause, the architectural collective raumlaborberlin, in cooperation with Hebbel am Ufer, created a counter-proposal to the format of the "Expo" in Berlin. Under the title "The World is Not Fair—The Great World's Fair 2012," an exhibition with 15 pavilions, was set up for exploration on the grounds of the former Tempelhof airport, from 1–24 June, 2012. These pavilions





were not to be understood as state agents for nation-branding, but instead as places of highly subjective artistic and political reflection. Beyond the boundaries of cultural disciplines, architects, theatre artists, and visual artists sought to examine ideas, systems, and phenomena by which even the most peripheral cultures are now connected across the globe. What was exhibited was not the world as it is or should be, but how we perceive, understand, and interpret it.

The architecture of the pavilions can be understood as a contribution to a discussion about the sensible management of resources—cultural, natural, and spatial. A third of the exhibition spaces involved reconfigurations of existing facilities at the former airport. Other structures were erected from modules that were used in the summer of 2011 for the "Über Lebenskunst" festival at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt. Only three pavilions were new structures, and these only to a limited de-





gree. The following five examples provide some detail on the ways in which this project challenged the tradition of the World's Fair.

In an architectural structure reminiscent of the damaged reactor blocks in Fukushima, the playwright and director Toshiki Okada, together with his theatre troupe chelfitsch, examined the abstraction and immeasurability of the catastrophic events in a language of reduced gestures and limited words. Hans-Werner Krösinger, one of the earliest representatives of contem-

porary documentary theatre, created a living sound installation in an antenna building and focused on the military's history of using forced labour at the Tempelhof Airport. The video artist, performer, and activist Tracey Rose, with the help of non-professional actors, staged a soap opera that spanned the duration of the exhibition. Her stage was an oversized reconstruction of a black-and-white Blaupunkt television, which had provided her family in South Africa with access to world events





during Apartheid. Berlin-based filmmaker Harun Farocki showed the first part of a long research project titled *Vorbild/Nachbild*, examining the role of computer animation in simulation systems and prognostic services. It concerns the global circulation of air, fire, and water—and the desire to control a world that is marked by a growing instability and unpredictability of systematically defined events. The Stuttgart architecture collective Umschichten built a festival centre from found materials. For

three weeks, this hybrid cultural space served as an event space and a place of meeting and exchange for visitors of "The World Is Not Fair." A comprehensive program of lectures, discussions, film screenings, and concerts was also carried out here.

Tempelhof Field has a variable and variegated history: a former drilling ground, the site of early aviation experiments and thus a prominent node in a nascent globalized commercial network, the base for Nazi aerial warfare and a key locus for the

arms industry during Hitler's regime, and later, most famously, the stage for the historic airlift between Berlin and West Germany, a symbol of the Cold War and the politics of Western alignment. It was thus an ideal site for our counter-exhibition project. The size of the grounds provided a scale that diminished the kind of monumental architecture and competitive spectacle familiar to past World's Fairs. While these grounds would dwarf even some of the most ambitious structures of recent Expos, the site offers an unfamiliar per-

ception of depth, allowing us to reflect on the proportions of cultural plans in relation to the normative and topographic frameworks for which they are designed. In essence, it was a contribution to a debate that has been ongoing since the fall of the Berlin Wall about the cultural use of buildings and spaces that have lost their original functions, as well as an opportunity to apply to them a poetry of failure, ultimately—if temporarily—making productive the contradictions that have since arisen.×

Endnotes

1 Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Keven McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1999), 17.

Bios

With its participation in the "Volkspalast" project, **Hebbel am Ufer** entered into a discussion about fundamental questions of urban planning, the use of public space, and a considered approach to historical structures. Several productive artistic collaborations between Hebbel am Ufer and raumlaborberlin have recently taken place, such as "Fassadenrepublik," where visitors could explore the flooded "Volkspalast" in small dinghies, and the "Dolmusch-Xpress," which used the idea of collective taxis for theatrical expeditions of urban space in Kreuzberg.

raumlaborberlin has been working at the boundaries of architecture, art, and urbanism since 1999. Strategies for urban restructuring are examined in interdisciplinary working teams. Rather than thinking of a city in terms of inclusion and exclusion, raumlaborberlin is on the lookout for a city of possibilities. In terms of its practice, architecture is a labour of experimental, collaborative, passionate action in urban space. Construction is thus not so much to be understood as working on an object, but as developing narratives that become part of a place.

...The Great World's Fair 2012