

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

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## Berliner Sommerzeit

by Tom McGlynn

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Ferdinand Lassalle, the great early international-socialist light of 19th century Prussia, loved its capital Berlin so much that he snuck back into the city disguised as a wagon-driver after he was banished for social organizing during the 1848 – 49 uprisings in the still un-unified Germany. He's purported to have said, "Whoever lives in Berlin and doesn't die of Liberalism will never die of vexation!" With its palpable *gemütlichkeit* (friendliness or a sense of generalized acceptance), along with the seemingly inevitable, perhaps "neoliberal," gloss of post-modern gentrification, Berlin is a very particular amalgam of the fluid contemporary and the often heavily restored, yet still gravitationally centripetal, past.

A resilient Bauhaus ethos could be found in numerous manifestations throughout the city. Peter Eisenman and Buro Happold's *Memorial To The Murdered Jews of Europe* (2004) takes up almost five acres of downtown Berlin just one block from the Brandenburg Gate. The monument's 2,711 concrete stelae create a dizzyingly dystopic mathematic sublime, evoking the industrial-strength genocide unfortunately attached to the erstwhile capital of the Third Reich. In a no less historically determined Bauhaus/minimalist style, yet of a decidedly more utopian direction, was an exhibition at the dr. julius space, *Metric* (June 25 – July 26), featuring the work of minimalist sculptors Douglas Allsop (born in London) and Riki Mijling (the Netherlands). The director, Matthias Seidel, has a compelling program of artists involved with what the gallery press calls the "neo-concrete," and has featured the work of New York-based artists Matthew Deleget, Gilbert Hsiao, David Rhodes, and Don Voisine. The ultimate importation of the



Installation view: Francis Morellet, *Dash Dash Dash*, Blain/Southern, Berlin, May 2 – August 22, 2015. Photo: Tom McGlynn.

internationalist-constructivist ethic promulgated by the Bauhaus could be seen in an exhibition at the Hamburger Bahnhof, *An Interdisciplinary Experiment 1933–1957* (May 6, 2015 – September 9), chronicling the halcyon days of Black Mountain College. This comprehensive exhibit foregrounds the college’s most influential teacher, Josef Albers, an alumnus of and teacher in both the Weimar and Dessau locations of the Bauhaus before immigrating to the US in 1933 after the Nazis forced the closure of the school. Some of the fascinating details of the exhibit included the letters sent back and forth between Albers and one of the school’s founders, John Andrew Rice, which detail the logistics and compensation involved for travel, food, and a year’s worth of teaching (\$1000!). Ultimately Albers and his wife, Anni, who was also an exemplar of Bauhaus design, were swayed to travel to rural North Carolina, influencing a generation of postwar artists like Robert Rauschenberg and Dorothea Rockburne. Some extraordinary early works by Rauschenberg were featured in the show, along with little-known early examples of Robert Motherwell, Cy Twombly, and Kenneth Noland paintings, each of these artists being at one time associated with the school as teachers or students or both. The real insight, however, was evidenced in the printed matter and the extensive contemporary videos and photographs forensically reconstructing the daily creative laboratory of this now legendary collective. Black Mountain’s experiment combined the home-grown educational theories of John Dewey with some of the more advanced technical forms and concepts imported from Europe and Asia; fifty-eight years after its demise, it still represents a beautiful model of interdisciplinary learning.

A vast visual archive representing the abiding influence of Berlin’s museum collections on contemporary painting can be reflected upon at the Gemäldegalerie, which contains singular Rembrandts (*The Mennonite Minister Cornelis Claesz, Anslo in Conversation with his Wife, Aaltje* (1641)), Caravaggios (*Amor Victorious* (1602)) and Vermeers (*Woman With A Pearl Necklace* (1664)), all lit in mostly natural light emanating from huge skylights in each gallery. For me, one of the most memorable paintings in the museum was Pieter Brueghel the Younger’s *Flemish Proverbs* (1559). Illustrating such sayings as “Banging your head against the wall,” “Having one’s roof tiled with tarts,” and “The herring does not fry here” in detailed vignettes set in a Flemish village recalled similar allegorical antics in a recent show of Neo Rauch paintings at David Zwirner in New York. Both the Breughel and Neo Rauch works call forth an assumption of a commons of wit and social interrelationships that may seem charmingly nostalgic, yet is also sorely lacking in our present world of atomized interconnectedness. Perhaps it takes a less infinite jest of idiots to accurately circumambulate the global village. In light of the more recent polarizing events of the eurozone’s relationship to Greece’s debt crisis, a large helping of healthy skepticism might be useful in helping to discern the perhaps

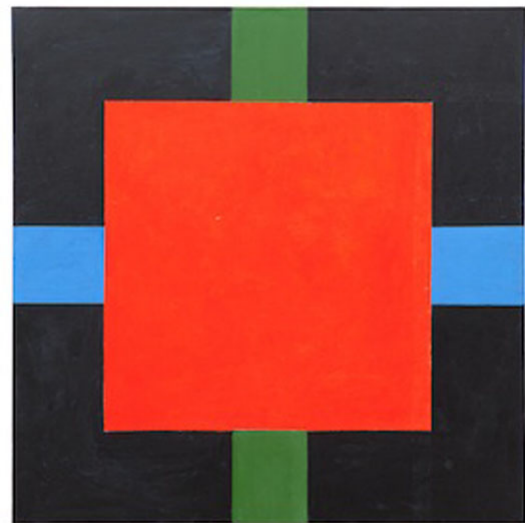


Installation view: Mario Asef, *Statements, Maniere Noire*, Berlin, March 7 – July 22, 2015. Courtesy the artist and Maniere Noire.

more complex disruptors of contemporary civil society. The Breughel could represent Berlin in a way, polyglot in its internationalist, diversified realities, yet unified in its localized and playfully skeptic *jouissance*. Berlin is a lot like New York in this respect.

The gallery complex at 81 Potsdamer Strasse, near the Kreuzberg district contains a wide variety of large-scale spaces, some housed in 19th-century townhouses. Blain/Southern Gallery's expansive space featured a major new installation and also older works by the octogenarian French conceptual painter François Morellet (*Dash Dash Dash*, May 2 – August 22). Morellet's mathematically graphic syntax feels quite contemporary in our algorithmically-determined world, putting an interesting spin on the inheritance of reductive abstraction. The more intimate Galerie Thomas Fischer, housed in a former residential building, featured a show by Margrét H. Blöndal (June 6 – July 25), whose informal sculptures perhaps represent the opposite pole of Bauhaus formalism and emanate an organic charm, despite being transparently fabricated from humble, everyday materials. I had occasion to meet with Fischer and talk about his program. He showed me some very recent paintings of Brian O'Doherty's that were hanging in his back room. The works were large-scale and brilliantly playful in their chromatic range and conceptual rigor, adding yet another layer to the accretion of abstract and conceptual works I experienced while in Berlin.

In the less trafficked but equally intriguing neighborhood of Moabit is Manière Noire space, established by the artist Majla Zeneli in 2010. Since 2014 Zeneli has dedicated the space to a series of shows and events on the appropriation and incorporation of language, which she has conceived of as an evolving social experiment in literary and visual poetics. An exhibition by Mario Asef entitled *Statements* (March 7 – July 22) brings into question customarily determined assumptions of art and language—for example, in hand-written signs containing phrases such as “Art is not an option” and “Wir haben kein ziel aber wir haben eine methode” (“We have no goal but we have a method”). The same might be said of the visionary ambition that Zeneli has for Manière Noire, as a place in which to open up dialogues of and between contemporary art practices, experimental poetics, and the social state as a fluctuating mode of being. In this way her space exemplifies the best traditions of openness and acceptance of free thought that Berlin has often historically realized and with which it still has occasion to un-vex the weary postmodern.



Brian O'Doherty, *Red Square*, 2014. Liquitex on canvas, 36 × 36 in. Courtesy Galerie Thomas Fischer, Berlin. Photo: Torben Ho'ke.

**CONTRIBUTOR**

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