

BERGEN, NORWAY

Bergen Assembly
VARIOUS VENUES

In 2009, the city of Bergen hosted a conference called “To biennial or not to biennial?” Under discussion was a proposal to establish a new biennial in Norway, ambitiously envisioned as becoming the biggest international art event in the region. In the end, the city settled on a project called the Bergen Assembly—An Initiative for Art and Research, and opted for a triennial cycle instead, considering the two-year model rushed. Its first edition, “Monday Begins on Saturday,” curated by the Moscow-based duo Ekaterina Degot and David Riff, was conceived as a rewriting of the titular 1964 Soviet sci-fi novel by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, an absurdist satire about a secret research institute dedicated to investigating the nature of human happiness by employing every conceivable method, from biology to witchcraft and black magic. Trapped between their love of scientific inquiry and a Kafkaesque machinery of Soviet bureaucracy, the researchers work ceaselessly, ignoring their social right to rest.

With works by some fifty artists and collectives spread over eleven venues throughout the city of Bergen—including such art institutions as the Bergen Kunsthall and the KODE Art Museums, as well as post-industrial art spaces in the port and a non-art venue, the School Museum—the exhibition was staged as an archipelago of fictitious research institutes with absurdly poetic names. Cheerfully embracing fiction and forgery instead of didactics and discursiveness, the show unfolded as a convoluted narrative in space and time. The search for a blurred socialist past linking Norway and Russia was one leitmotif, but topics ranging from the magical nature of artistic research to the end of the welfare state added to the surreal blend of history, politics, and fiction. At the entrance of each “institute,” one was greeted by a digital clock, a potted plant, and a copper plate featuring a quote from Strugatsky’s novel alluding to its specific atmosphere—a framing device that turned the show itself into a kind of artwork.

The works constituting the Institute of the Disappearing Future at the Bergen Kunsthall questioned the very idea of progressiveness. A beautiful selection of Soviet science photography from the 1960s was juxtaposed with Kiluanji Kia Henda’s *Icarus 13*, 2008, which documents a fictional Angolan space program whose grand aspiration was a journey to the sun. The mission’s allegoric launch was evoked via photographs staged against leftover monuments of Socialist-era architecture. Chto Delat’s enchanting *A Border Musical*, 2013, at the Institute of Love and the Lack Thereof (at the artist-run gallery KNIP-U), adopts the form of Brechtian singspiel to tell the story of Tanya, a Russian accordion player

who marries a man from Finnmark, in Norway’s far north, to escape the impoverished mining town where she sees no future for herself or her teenage son. In an ironic twist, upon arrival, her son is taken from her by social-welfare officials in the land “of impeccable citizens.”

Some of the show’s most surprising juxtapositions included historic works, such as Carlfriedrich Claus’s written drawings from the 1970s in the Institute of Anti-Formalism at KODE 4, or unpublished prints from Karelia by Aleksandr Rodchenko at Østre, a venue for sound art and electronic music, in the Institute of Pines and Prison Bread. Jan Peter Hammer’s *Tilikum*, 2013, at the Institute of Zoopolitics—fittingly situated in a former sardine factory—leads the viewer on a gloomy dive through the marine entertainment industry and beyond. Taking off from the story of a bull orca that killed two people at SeaWorld Orlando, Florida, the video unravels a bizarre chain of connections between Cold War military research, sensory-deprivation techniques, and fatal neurological experiments on dolphins, with fantasies of interspecies communication and B. F. Skinner’s operational conditioning leading back to Adam Smith’s definition of the free market. Finally, Josef Dabernig’s film essay *Hypercrisis*, 2011, at the Institute of Lyrical Sociology at the School Museum, beautifully adapts the institutionalized absurdity described in the novel. Shot in the rundown neomodernist architecture of a former recreational home for Soviet filmmakers in Armenia, *Hypercrisis* centers on the single resident there, a writer suffering from creative block, surrounded by a demonstratively superfluous administrative staff. With these and other highlights, the curators created a parallel universe full of tragicomic poetry and political vision, celebrating artistic magic and casting Bergen as “the last socialism on the planet.”

—Eva Scharrer

MEDELLÍN, COLOMBIA

43 Salón (inter) Nacional
de Artistas

VARIOUS VENUES

Is there really a need for yet another international biennial? I wouldn’t have thought so, but this exhibition, titled “*SaberDesconocer*” (To Know Not to Know), following no less than forty-two previous incarnations of the “national salon of Colombian artists,” has revised its designation to become the *43 Salón (inter) Nacional de Artistas*—and with those gingerly parens and that distinctly lowercase *i*, the biennial has managed to find just the right balance, showcasing the strength of Colombian art by indicating its broader context, highlighting both connections and particularities. Along with a team of four curators, artistic director Mariángela Méndez has gathered works by 108 artists, of whom more than half are Colombian and another quarter from elsewhere in Latin America. The inclusion of a few regulars on the biennial circuit (Ernesto Neto, Jimmie Durham, Jeremy Deller, Kader Attia) does not detract from the freshness of the whole.

Although most of the works were sited at the Museo de Antioquia and its annex, the Casa del Encuentro, along with the nearby Edificio Antioquia, the former headquarters of a shipping company that now belongs to one of the local universities, the best introduction to “*SaberDesconocer*” was probably at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Medellín, which featured two “chapters,” or mini-shows within the show, each the brainchild of one of the two non-Colombians on the curatorial team. One of them, “*Estado Oculto*” (Hidden State), was put together by Rodrigo Moura, curator of the Instituto Inhotim in Minas Gerais, Brazil, in collaboration with anthropologist Paulo Maia. Inspired by a collection of fake pre-Columbian objects known as the Alzate



María Isabel Rueda, *El fin (The End)*, 2013, printed polyester banner, 98' 5" x 78' 9". From the 43 Salón (inter) Nacional de Artistas: “*SaberDesconocer*” (To Know Not to Know), Edificio Antioquia.

Karin Sander and Jorge Macchi’s paradoxical sculptures, among others, stand out for their insistently restrained presences.

The themes concisely articulated by Moura and Malbrán were threaded through the rest of “*SaberDesconocer*” in a looser but elegant way. Most of the Colombian artists were entirely unknown to me and there are many whose work I hope to encounter again. Let me mention just three: Leyla Cárdenas (a multilayered graphic/photographic/sculptural meditation on the architecture of industry), María Isabel Rueda (a gorgeously hypnotic video of nothing more than waves splashing back and forth under a dock), Angélica Teuta (who also played games with the fiction of time, or rather, of the clock). One notes among Colombian artists a special feeling for drawing (José Horacio Martínez, Lucas Ospina) as a technique and a deep fascination with the extraordinary local plant life. These two aspects are synthesized in the work of Abel Rodríguez, described as “a traditional expert of the Nonuya people of the mid-Caquetá river,” who has created delicate and finely detailed illustrations of the trees of the Amazon. But for me the show’s emblematic work was by the Guatemalan Regina José Galindo, who was represented by a casket-like iron box and a video showing the performance in which, after she climbed into it, the box was covered and then held aloft, with great difficulty, by a sort of cortege of bearers who slowly, painstakingly, passed it along from hand to hand until the last bearers set it down. The point is not so much that the artist constitutes the “content” of the work as that the work is realized when it conceals her as an individual and the weight of meaning is supported by others, the receivers. Showing contemporary Colombian art in an (inter)national context, this exhibition strengthened viewers in shouldering the burden of knowing and not knowing.

—Barry Schwabsky

DÜSSELDORF

Thomas Ruff

KONRAD FISCHER GALERIE

Thomas Ruff is always full of surprises, and his recent show in Düsseldorf was no exception. A photographer who trained with Bernd Becher

ceramics—produced by forgers in the late nineteenth century with what now seems, it must be said, a wonderful sense of fantasy and freedom—the show is a meditation on similarities and differences between “art” and “artifacts,” and on fictions and realities of the indigenous. It includes videos of ceremonies in Brazilian indigenous villages produced by the villagers themselves, as well as powerful images of the Yanomami made by Swiss-born, São Paulo-based photographer/activist Claudia Andujar, in addition to neo- or pseudo artifacts by the likes of Armando Andrade Tudela and Jac Leirner. The other chapter, “*Destiempo*” (Out of Time), is the work of Argentinean critic/curator Florencia Malbrán and seems to articulate its Borgesian “refutation of time” by way of a Mallarméan poetry of blanks and absences, in which “*Mailed Paintings*,” 2004–, by

and whose early works are black-and-white images of ordinary residential neighborhoods around Germany, Ruff became well known in the 1980s for his large, passport-picture-style color portraits of friends and fellow artists. Starting in 1989, he began conducting experiments with the photographic medium, sometimes making pictures without a camera. As he explained in a 1993 interview with Philip Pocock, his goal was not to capture reality with the camera—the original ambition of photography—but to create a picture. The experiments continued apace, often by way of questioning conventions of authorship: In 1995, for instance, he manually colored the illustrations from a medical textbook, producing a series of pictures he titled “*Retuschen*” (Retouches). Other series have included “*Sterne*” (Stars), 1989–92, for which he bought negatives produced at the European Southern Observatory in the Andes; “*Nudes*,” 1999–2010, digitally manipulated pornographic images from the Internet; and “*Zycles*,” 2008–, pictures automatically generated by a mathematical formula whose undulating three-dimensional lines Ruff output onto large-format canvases using an ink-jet printer.

Ruff’s most recent images have been made via a technique that does not seem new at all: They resemble what used to be called photograms or rayographs, à la El Lissitzky, László Moholy-Nagy, Man Ray, and many other modernists—cameraless photographs made by placing objects directly onto photosensitive materials (such as photographic paper) and exposing them to light. But Ruff has transposed this analog technique into the digital realm. The darkroom is set up inside the

computer, as it were: Imaginary objects are moved around in a virtual space, and the effects of light coming from different angles are captured in a variety of perspectives. In this computer-aided creative practice, virtually generated and lit waves, crystals, spirals, lenses, and stencils leave traces on similarly virtual paper, and the results are transferred, a C-print process, to sheets of real paper measuring roughly eight by six feet. Framed, the pictures look light and otherworldly; it is striking how painterly they are. Some, such as *phg.01_1*, 2012 (all the works are titled this way, with the letters “phg” followed by a number) are rigorously geometrical, with a play of light and shadow building an illusion of depth, while others are more chaotic and random. Some are of crystalline clarity, while others are blurry or lightly tinged in a bluish or green, yellow or brown hue. In the six such works in this show (there were also eight pieces from other series), the association with the classical photogram is faint. These works represent a true invention and a genuine expansion of the medium of photography.

Among the other works on view were six large-format pictures sourced from imagery produced by the Mars Reconnaissance Survey, which was launched in 2005—hence the title “*ma.r.s.*,” 2012—and put online by NASA. The artist has altered them by adding color to the original black-and-white, turning them into almost romantic landscapes one would be hard-pressed to associate with the red planet’s rough surface. Also created by Ruff without his own camera, they serve to further demonstrate his tireless exploration of the photographic medium.

—Noemi Smolik

Translated from German by Gerrit Jackson.

Thomas Ruff, *r.phg.s.06*, 2012, digital C-print, 94½ x 72½”.



Jan Peter Hammer, *Tilikum*, 2013, digital video, color, sound, 25 minutes. From the Bergen Assembly. Visionsrommet USF.