



## FEATURE

**We Don't Need Another Hero: Review of the 10th Berlin Biennale**

09 Jul 2018

by [Sandy Di Yu](#)

**The 10th Berlin Biennale is the much-needed art world antidote to the unforgivingly hopeless political climate of recent years. This timely event brings into perspective the necessity of art spaces to address issues that other spaces won't.**

Every time I visit [Berlin](#), I'm reminded of an artist studio. Messy, unfinished, decidedly leftist and filled to the brim with interesting things to look at, it's no wonder why so many artists (both renowned and new to the scene) are attracted to this city. For decades now, it's been a haven of non-conformity and resistance that cultivated creativity and the corresponding counterculture.

But no haven is safe from the unrelenting powers of capital. Every time I visit Berlin now, I'm also reminded of this. Gentrification is alive and well, and the once gorgeously grimy streets of the city are steadily being cleaned up and out by the tech start-up scene and profit-hungry Nordic developers. Berlin and its culture were never impenetrable, and now more than ever we see the outside world seeping in.



Fabiana Faleiros, *Mastur Bar*, 2015–18, installation view (detail). KW Institute for Contemporary Art. Photo: Timo Ohler.

The [2018 Berlin Biennale](#), now in its 10th edition, takes the city as a starting point and pits it in conversation with the world. Reading its curatorial statement, this melting away of cultural identity into the monotonous folds of economy remains front and centre. The key word here is “postcolonial”, a term that is neatly avoided by the statement but that reverberates in every room of the participating venues. Curator Gabi Ngcobo is no stranger to the conflation of these notions of capital and postcolonialism. She sets out to rewrite a history, or at least recognise a history that is contained within a single moment before the occurrence of great shifts.

The title of the Biennale, derived from the Tina Turner single of the same name, is [We Don't Need Another Hero](#). I'm fond of this title, especially in the context of the German capital. One quick internet search will yield several articles likening Berlin to a teenager, to being an economic strain (it's supposedly the only European capital whose GDP is lower than the rest of the country), or of it simply not working. But Berlin doesn't need a saviour, especially when saviours of occidental histories are the demolitionists, the colonisers, the subjectivities who perform the act of othering with near solipsistic disregard for anything that can be turned into fiscal value. I'm reminded of the [video with Raj Patel](#) posted by Verso Books talking about Christopher Columbus and his modern-day counterparts - people like Jeff Bezos (CEO of Amazon) and Elon Musk (CEO of SpaceX). The curatorial statement also mentions states of collective psychosis, and I'm reminded of [Mark Fischer's Capitalist Realism](#) wherein the single narrative and the logic of capital are (erroneously) fed to us as the objective truth.



Image: Dineo Sheshee Bopape, Installation view (detail). Untitled (Of Occult Instability) [Feelings], 2016–18, bricks, light, sounds, videos, water, framed napkin. KW Institute for Contemporary Art. Photo: Timo Ohler.

I say all this without having described the exhibitions themselves, but taken as a whole, this is a consistent thread to be found throughout the artworks. Upon entering the first room of the KW, the visitor is confronted with a dusty, reddish yellow glow that permeates the entire space. A giant disco (wrecking?) ball by Jabu Arnell constructed of cardboard and packing tape hangs above a scene of chaos, broken bricks collected in piles and buckets of paint and rubble fragmented by the cold, sterile lights of screens. I think this must be what Elon Musk envisions in his wet dreams of colonising Mars. In one corner I see a work that I recognise, *Justice for \_\_\_\_* (2014) by Lachell Workman, which was a part of group exhibition *Material Witness Witness Material* at Knockdown Center in New York earlier this year. That show was about the way that legal systems favour subjective bias. This one is about a remodelling of knowledge and power structures. One exhibition filters into the other, creating a dialogue between the two and allowing the new narrative to produce friction with the old.



Heba Y. Amin, *Operation Sunken Sea (The Anti-Control Room)*, 2018, video installation, mixed media, installation view (detail). Berlin Biennale, ZK/U Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik, Berlin. Photo: Timo Ohler.

Being the most central, [KW Institute for Contemporary Art](#) was the first of the venues I attended, and primed my experience of the Biennale as a whole. Other venues include [Akademie der Künste](#) ([Hanseatenweg](#)), [Volksbühne Pavilion](#), [ZK/U – Center for Art and Urbanistics](#), and a few performances at HAU Hebbel am Ufer (HAU 2). In each venue, the same curatorial sentiment weaves through works to provide alternative histories and visions. Heba Y. Amin provides a megalomaniacal geographic possibility between Europe and Africa in her video installation *Operation Sunken Sea (The Anti-Control Room)* at Center for Art and Urbanistics. Mario Pfeifer's *Again / Noch einmal* at Akademie der Künste examines the incident in 2016 wherein four men in the East German town of Arnsdorf tied up a mentally ill refugee to a tree, and subsequently walked free from a conviction after less than four hours in court, channelling vibes of [Forensic Architecture's Counter Investigations](#). Object-oriented works in each venue provided a blurring between art object and foreign artefact.





Mario Pfeifer, *Again / Noch einmal*, 2018, 4K video transferred to HD, 2-channel installation, color, 5.1 Surround, 23', video still.

There has been discussion in recent years about whether self-reflexive art that was inconsequential to culture as a whole deserve as much of a platform in art spaces. While art that nods to the world at large might make for more interesting conversations, the privilege to create self-reflexive art is something which artists of marginalised groups have historically been denied, and this continual denial leads to cases of tokenisation. An artwork that gives voice to an oppressed people becomes moral masturbation material for the usual class of gallery-goers. What *We Don't Need Another Hero* succeeds in doing is subvert this narrative of the saviour entirely and instead allow space for these works of art to flourish as art, ipso facto as an aesthetic experience. Even the works that spoke to traumatic events or political mishaps in no way felt like grief porn, but rather the stoic portrayal of a narrative that hasn't yet had time to be told.



Sondra Perry, *IT'S IN THE GAME '17 or Mirror Gag for Vitrine and Projection*, 2017, single channel video, loop, color, sound, 16'34", installation view. Akademie der Künste (Hanseatenweg). photo: Timo Ohler

A few weeks ago, I attended and reviewed [In Search of Dinozord](#) of Lift Festival, and stayed for the question and answer session towards the end. One British individual, perhaps completely well-meaning but not altogether well-informed, tried to correct one of the performers (who was Congolese) on the colonisation of the Congo, then asked if there was a DVD of the performance that she could purchase. In response, we were given a brief history lesson on the Congo, and it was explained that the point of a performance was the convivial energy cultivated by being in the present moment. The narrative exemplified in this situation is that of the European saviour who can shed light on other cultures from an anthropological perspective and of this incessant want for ownership. This narrative is addressed by several works in the Biennale, including [Sondra Perry's](#) video installation *IT'S IN THE GAME '17 or Mirror Gag for Vitrine and Projection*, which point towards the way appropriation happens from the archaeological collections in [the British Museum](#) and [the Met](#) to the business of new technologies.

This year's Biennale understands the way in which dialogues between disparate subjects have too often been dominated by historically sanctioned voices, precluding the possibility of a dialectical discourse. It confronts this problematic head-on with tact and often with humour. Berlin in its cultural identity is a relatively young city, its infamous wall coming down less than 30 years ago. The city in conversation about postcolonial trauma and the creation of new narratives is both timely and appropriate, and reaffirms the necessity of art spaces to provide that which other spaces conducted by the logic of capital either can't or won't.

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Listen to Tina Turner's *We Don't Need Another Hero* here:



View a comprehensive list of all events related to the 10th Berlin Biennale below:



BIENNIAL

**10th Berlin Biennale: We don't need another hero**

09 Jun 2018 – 09 Sep 2018

Berlin, Germany

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While you're in town, be sure to check out LUCKY at [Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst e.V.](#), which complements the themes of the 10th Berlin Biennale perfectly.

**EXHIBITION****LUCKY - "She's so lucky, she's a star" - Britney Spears**

07 Jul 2018 – 02 Sep 2018

Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst (nGbK)

Berlin, Germany

**10th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art: We don't need another hero**Locations around [Berlin](#)

9 Jun 2018 – 9 Sep 2018

[Get day tickets](#)**About the writer:**[Sandy Di Yu](#), London-based writer, art theorist and artist. Follow her on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#), or visit her [website](#).**Popular on ArtRabbit****Art and Pride: LGBTQ+ Artists Who Have Made an Impact****Guide to the Best Contemporary Art Shows in Europe this Summer****Two wars and no satisfaction: The Coffin Jump and In Search of Dinozord****International Workers' Day: Art and Labour****What We Learned from Spaced Out****Cardiff Contemporary Art Guide****Download the ArtRabbit app and find exhibitions on the go**



