



AN URBANIST MASTERMIND AT THE NASHER

BETTINA POUSTTCHI'S *DRIVE-THRU MUSEUM* EVOKES DALLAS' AUTOMOBILE ROW

German-Iranian artist Bettina Pousttchi makes space through innuendo and urban device. Using metal barriers, rubber bollards, and the photograph as would-be building material, she rethinks borders, monuments, public plazas, and infrastructure in terms of collective memory.

She is a mastermind of urbanism. Two particular projects work in dialectical tandem proving this thesis: her upcoming *Drive-Thru Museum* at the Nasher Sculpture Center opening April 12 and *Echo* (2009-10) in Berlin. Each work gets to the core of national character, with one zeroing in on the tie between the automobile and mythologies of freedom in the United States, and the other, on the social promise of collective living within the German Democratic Republic. If *Drive-Thru Museum* pays homage to the American engine of free-market urbanism that is the car, then *Echo* is a poem in pictures to architecture of the fun-loving peaceful collective within communist society. One installation hones in on the centrifugal force that drove American suburbanization; the other on the centripetal energies which created the proverbial *Maison du peuple*—the House of the People—bringing people together in the heart of Berlin.

As part of the ongoing Sightings series at the Nasher, Pousttchi's *Drive-Thru Museum* will transform a gallery at the Nasher into an *ersatz* streetscape replete with all the accoutrements that make up our "democratic" car culture, including gas stations, parking lots, and car dealerships. *Drive-Thru Museum* plays on lost urban memories by dredging up the former function of Ross Avenue when it was Automobile Row in the 1950s. At once clever and reverent, Pousttchi works through shifts in the American political economy, focusing on the layered functions of urban space as it has shifted from an old manufacturing paradigm to an information economy in which global art pilgrimage sites such as the Nasher flourish.

Similarly unpacking memories of past political regimes and seemingly outmoded economic paradigms, Pousttchi's *Echo* was a *tour de force* of photography, public architecture, and the psychoanalytics of the mirage. Pousttchi covered the facade of the Temporary Kunsthalle in Berlin with 970 separate pieces of paper, recreating the full appearance of the Palace of the Republic, which had been levelled in 2008 to make way for the controversial reconstruction of the 15th-century City Palace (a.k.a. the Hohenzollern palace or Stadtschloß). Reflected in the adjacent Spree River, the modern reflective bronze box of this famous Communist-era building seemed to be haunting the now-unified city of Berlin. Before the fall of the wall in 1989, the Palace of the Republic was an architectural omnibus, serving as the seat of Parliament in the German Democratic Republic and the People's Chamber while also hosting 13 restaurants, two auditoria, several art galleries, a bowling alley, post office, and discothèque. Cooped up in a hotel room in the small town of Erlangen, Germany, I once watched a documentary on the Palace of the Republic: In German with French subtitles, the documentary

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IMAGE • Artist Bettina Pousttchi brings her distinctive take on collective memory to the Nasher Sculpture Center starting April 12. ©Bettina Pousttchi, 2013. Photo by Bettina Pousttchi Studio.

showed an exotic and free-spirited world of cosmopolitan splendor: disco dancers, bowlers, and political functionaries all meeting in one place. Here lay the true origin and incarnation of Walmart's promises of happiness in one-stop shopping.

In her work, Pousttchi binds urbanism and people, place and memory, social function and economic value with elegance and razor-sharp acuity. Our digital dialogue is below.

The project *Echo* seems at once about looking to and back—at photography and the Palace of the Republic. Could you explain a little how the cultures of photography, architecture of the collective, the GDR, and memories of a leftist block might coalesce here?

Echo was a photo installation located in the Berlin's city center for six months, from September 2009 until March 2010. It covered the four elevations of the Temporäre Kunsthalle Berlin, a temporary art institution, with 970 paper posters, glued directly onto the building. Together these posters formed one motif, which recalled the Palace of the Republic, a building that had just been demolished on that very site. The Palace of the Republic was a fascinating building. During the time of the GDR, it served as their parliament, but at the same time it was an entertainment center with a theatre, a dance club, restaurants and bars for the public. After the fall of the Wall in 1989, the building was used for various cultural purposes. In some ways, over time, it lost its Leftist connotations and in the last 20 years it had somehow also become a symbol of a re-unified Berlin and Germany.

The building's demolition from 2006 until 2008 was a very dramatic moment for the city. The experience of loss was evident.

With my photo installation, I wanted to create an afterimage, using photography as a medium for memory. Photography has a very special relationship to time, freezing one moment in one frame, which is something I also follow up on in my long-term photographic series of the *World Time Clock*.

Does your work at all get into identity—emerge from being a Persian-German woman?

I was born in Germany to a Persian father and a German mother. I grew up in Germany, but in my childhood in the seventies I also spent some time in Iran. This dual cultural background is an integral part of my identity. It's hard to tell where my work is influenced by it.

What is the subject of your work in Texas? How will it look?

My project for the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas refers to the history of the museum's location. In the mid-20th century, Ross Avenue, where the museum is located, was known as Automobile Row. At that time, automobile dealers, repair shops, and gas stations occupied the area.

Referencing that history, one of the upstairs galleries will be transformed into a closed *Drive-Thru Museum*. The floor of the gallery will be "blacktopped" and road markings will be painted on it to resemble a street. A semi-transparent photographic pattern recalling expanding scissor gates will be applied to the glass façade of the gallery. Selected works from the Nasher Collection will be presented within this new setting. Additionally, some of my own sculptures made from police barricades and street bollards will be placed in the spaces surrounding the gallery.

Have you ever been to Texas? Please be frank about any preconceived notions you might have about this state.

I went to Texas for the first time to prepare for this show at the Nasher Sculpture Center. Dallas offers such a different spatial and urban experience compared to Berlin and the rest of Europe. It is much more about driving, about the automobile. There is so much space in Dallas that buildings can be more widespread. Construction is flatter—buildings are very often only one or two storeys high. This different urban experience was another starting point for the installation. The *Drive-Thru Museum* for the Nasher Sculpture Center is a site-specific installation that enables a different spatial perception of the museum and its collection.

—CHARISSA N. TERRANOVA

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