

8th Berlin Biennale Curator on Berlin, Contemporary Art, and Gentrification

hyperallergic.com/128652/8th-berlin-biennale-curator-juan-a-gaitan

May 28, 2014



BERLIN — Juan A. Gaitán is a typical hyphenated global art professional. The Canadian-Colombian independent writer and curator is based in Mexico City and Berlin, and he was chosen to curate the 8th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, which opens today.

Trained as an artist and art historian at the University of British Columbia and Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in Vancouver, he served as a curator (2009–2011) at Rotterdam's Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art before he became an adjunct professor in the Curatorial Practice Program at the California College of the Arts in San Francisco.

We spoke to him about the Berlin Biennale, his curatorial strategy, and how his style differs from other curators who have tackled the art event.

* * *



Views of the various 8th Berlin Biennale venues, (clockwise from top left) Haus am Waldsee (photo courtesy Haus am Waldsee), KW Institute for Contemporary Art, berlin (photo by Fette Sans 2011), Musee Dahlem (photo Maximilian Meisse), and a streetview of KW Institute for Contemporary Art (photo Uwe Walter).

Stephen Truax: *Organizing the 8th Berlin Biennale has been a two-year long project for you, and it opens to the public next week. It must feel like you're running a marathon. How has your experience organizing this group of exhibitions been so far?*

Juan A. Gaitán: The Berlin Biennale is quite a generous curatorial platform. I've found it quite an engaging process because I have been given a lot of freedom. The only rule I have to follow, is that I must be present in Berlin for no fewer than 84 days. It is the **ONLY** requirement imposed by the Berlin Biennale. Other than that, the Biennale didn't put any demands on me.

The team at KW Institute has been there for a long time and has worked with a number of pretty great curators. They know the process and are there to help me along, so in that sense, it has been quite nice. It's also good to be in a biennale that is not a young biennale anymore. I have a feeling I am participating in the growth of the Biennale, and that the decisions we are making may be reflected in the future of the Biennale.



Alberto Baraya, "Expedition Berlín, Herbarium of Artificial Plants" (2013–ongoing), mixed media, Dimensions variable, installation view
(image courtesy Alberto Baraya; Galeria Nara Roesler, São Paulo, photo by Anders Sune Berg)

ST: *The Berlin Biennale has a rich history, this being the eighth iteration ... Are you interested in specifically addressing that history with this project?*

JAG: I didn't want to address the history of the Biennial itself. Instead, I was interested in seeing what other ideas of Berlin one can explore with the Biennale.

In the past, there has been an insistence in the Berlin Biennale to examine what Berlin was 10 or 15 years ago, the period in which Berlin-Mitte was transformed. Mitte was fairly empty when the Wall came down, and exemplifies the story of the revitalization— if not gentrification — of a city. The city today does not correspond to this narrative of gentrification, but instead corresponds to the revitalization of 18th and 19th century architecture. I wanted to examine this present of Berlin.

In Mitte, the Biennale is situated where it traditionally has been, at the KW [Institute of Contemporary Art, which stands for Kunst-Werke (art work), and called Ka-Ve]. It is kind of the epicenter of Mitte. The KW is a building that was available to me immediately, so it's something I knew I was dealing with from the beginning. In most cases, it would be too small for the whole Biennial, so it becomes an anchor. The offices and the director are there, and the audience automatically comes to it. The KW is typical of Berlin insofar as it is a building that has been repurposed for contemporary art, and is in the center of Mitte. It is also a building that most people who have been to Berlin to view contemporary art, especially for the Biennale, are familiar. There's no surprise to find contemporary art here.



Otobong Nkanga, "In Pursuit of Bling, 2014), videos/Inkjet prints, lightbox, metal modulated structure, minerals, objects, texts, videos with sound, woven textile pieces, Dimensions variable, Installation view
(image courtesy Otobong Nkanga, photo by Anders Sune Berg)

ST: *The separate exhibition spaces that you have chosen for the 8th Berlin Biennale are quite different than your predecessors' choices, which primarily focused on large, empty, or otherwise underutilized spaces.*

JAG: The function of the Biennial is to address the city today, in 2014. I cannot look at all of Berlin, but I can focus on one aspect of Berlin. This group of exhibitions focuses on architecture, patterns of movement, and where people are living. These ideas are interconnected, and are all subjects and issues that I would like to address.

I selected specific architecture that deals with the revival of Prussian architectural forms from the 18th and 19th centuries, and Prussian architecture [in the West], in general. I questioned what is happening in Berlin-Mitte [in formerly East Berlin], to create the framework for the Biennale.

I selected two historically important venues in the West to be new locations for the Biennale, as well as new contexts in which one can experience contemporary art.

ST: *Your selection of multiple venues that specifically aren't merely abandoned, or underused buildings, seems to be an effort to contextualize art objects inside museum spaces that are historically devoted to art, and other precious objects. You also seem to be specifically taking on history of Berlin itself, as a city, and a site. Could you explain more why you chose these other two spaces outside of the KW?*

JAG: The three venues I have selected are very different from each other.

The Museen Dahlem is not a familiar context in which to experience contemporary art. It was built through the course of the twentieth century, in competition with the British Museum, London, and other similar museums that were founded at that time, like Musée de l'Homme (the Museum of Man), Paris, and the Peabody Museum, New Haven, CT. Museen Dahlem is three museums in one, and had run active collections from the turn of the century through the 1960s, underscoring Humanist and Enlightenment thinking. It is simultaneously an Asian art museum (Museum Asiatischer Kunst), which houses a very interesting collection of Asian art and artifacts; the ethnographic museum (Ethnologisches Museum), which among other objects, contains an incredible music and sound recording collection; and a museum of European culture (Museum Europäischer Kulturen), which is a product of a self-directed anthropological study.

The exhibition that I am organizing proposes a fourth dimension for this institution. The works' relationships to spaces become very important. The viewer is invited to see not only the works that have been commissioned for [the exhibition], but also to detour into the other collections in the three attached museums. Works that are made by hand will create a striking contrast with the works already present in the museum.

Separately, the Haus am Waldsee (House at Forrest Lake), which was historically a private villa, and a prominent institution of contemporary culture during the 20th century, now lies on the periphery of cultural production. It is an intimate space, and more demanding in terms of one's focus on contemporary artworks. The artists are competing with the house, the surrounding lake, and so forth.

For example, Glen Ligon's project deals with Prussian history. He immediately responded to one part of my processes, which was about the question: What is this obsession [in Berlin's architecture] with the late Prussian era? His piece fits in perfectly.



Mario García Torres, "Sounds Like Isolation to Me, o. D." (nd), acetate, cardboard, ink, linen, magnetic tape, oil, paper, sheet metal, sound, video, wire, wood, dimensions variable, installation view (image courtesy Mario García Torres; Proyectos Monclova, Mexico City; Jan Mot, Brussels; neugerriemschneider, Berlin, photo by Anders Sune Berg)

ST: *It is probably inescapable that your Berlin Biennale, which places contemporary artworks in a historical museum, especially one of an ethnographic and anthropological background – a place, as you say, would be an “unfamiliar” context – will be compared to Massimiliano Gioni – who has also organized his own Berlin Biennial – and the exhibition he created for 8th Gwangju Biennale, 10,000 Lives. Do you have a specific view of your own curatorial practice in comparison to other contemporary curators, like Gioni?*

JAG: I would say mine is the opposite approach. Contemporary art has nothing to do with other cultural practices (anthropology, ethnography). I want to make that distinction clear. Contemporary art has its own methods and methodologies and self consciousness.

For example, Iman Issa has created an installation of interpretation of monuments to things that are both allegorical and specific at the same time. She questions how to approach a history through not a descriptive, but more conceptual or affected way. This concern fits very much into my own process, but in a much broader and abstract way.

As one goes through the [Dahlem] museum, one is suddenly “out” of contemporary art, and in the space of “ethnography,” for example. And one can feel that transition. There are very clear markers where one ends and the other begins. I want that to be clear.

ST: *You have written that this exhibition specifically avoids “essentializing the position of Berlin.” Could you elaborate on your thoughts on your stance on Berlin, as a topic?*

JAG: There has been a narrative assuming Berlin continues to be the city of empty available space. There is also much international and local imagination that Berlin is focused in Mitte as not just the physical center of the city, but also the epicenter of activity.

Meanwhile, I have chosen two other sites in relatively peripheral districts. I want to insist that you [the visitor] understand the city is much wider than the center [Mitte], and there is no reason why we need to concentrate all of this cultural capital in the tourist areas of town.

... [This exhibition is] very much about not continuing to mythologize Berlin as being filled with available spaces for artists, cheap rent, and so on, because, in fact, it is now largely owned by different kinds of real estate speculators, and they are all waiting for the moment in which Berlin becomes worthy of being the German capital.

ST: *You seem to be directly addressing what many curators, especially ones working in cities that are so rapidly transforming, like Berlin, and New York, might avoid: the highly political topic of gentrification.*

JAG: Gentrification is unavoidable. It happens in every city; is happening in every city. Berlin must be gentrified once it becomes the capital of Germany again. The question is: How? How does this process take place? And, to whose benefit?

* * *

The 8th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, curated by Juan A. Gaitán, will be on view from May 29 until August 3, 2014 at three venues: the KW Institute for Contemporary Art (Auguststraße 69, Berlin-Mitte); Haus am Waldsee (Argentinische Allee 30, Berlin-Zehlendorf); and Ethnologisches Museum Dahlem (Lansstraße 8, Berlin-Dahlem).