

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

ArtSeen

March 4th, 2016

## HOW TO . . . IN BERLIN

### *How to Be Unique*

by Joan Waltemath

THE KIENZLE ART FOUNDATION/CAVUSPACE, BERLIN  
FEBRUARY 6 – MAY 1, 2016

*I contend that the notion of mere knowledge is a high abstraction, and that conscious discrimination itself is a variable factor only present in the more elaborate examples of occasions of experience [. . .]  
How the experience constitutes itself depends on its complex of subjective forms.*

—A. N. Whitehead, *Objects and Subjects*, 1931

*How to be Unique*, an eclectic exhibition selected from the private collection of Jochen Kienzle, includes the work of thirty-two international artists from three generations and eight countries. Spread over two locations, the show features works by Bertold Mathes, Cheryl Donegan, Christopher Williams, Claudia Kugler, David Reed, David Lamelas, Elizabeth Cooper, François J. Chabrilat, Franz- Erhard Walther, Gary Stephan, Jack Goldstein, Jack Whitten, Jasmine Justice, Jonathan Lasker, Jos van Merendonk, Ketty La Rocca, Klaus Merkel, Louise Fishman, Marieta Chirulescu, Michael Ballou, Wolfgang Betke, Paul Klee, and others less familiar to a U.S. audience. With curatorial assistance from artist Bertold Mathes, *How to be Unique*, whose title is borrowed from one of Jonathan Lasker's paintings, was occasioned to celebrate parts of the collection that will be on extended loan to the Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, Vaduz, beginning in the fall of 2016.

The Kienzle Art Foundation in Charlottenburg is primarily showing paintings from the collection, and leans heavily towards a kind of abstraction based in the 1980s that has been seen a bit more often as of late. In the main hall, *The Multiple Eyed* (2010), a floor-to-ceiling canvas by Wolfgang Betke, student of the influential Franz-Erhard Walther, dominates the room. Heavily worked, its battered surface plays the elegance of decay off the evolution of form; when it catches you in its multi-layered currents it doesn't let go. I found myself going back to it again and again as I moved through the gallery's rooms and yet I never found a point I could put my

finger on. Betke provides the context to easily slip into a multi-level reading of Lasker's *Why Things Are* (1991) that pushes a classic pictorial view to be simultaneously read with, or as, a plan view, mysteriously. Lasker isn't someone whose work we typically think of as mysterious, but in this context it can be seen in another light, that reveals the complexity embedded in his straightforward approach. Also included here is a younger painter named Jasmine Justice, whose work emanates a bright light in the entrance hall. Her field of inclusive and exclusive "networks" winds in between and through each other; citing the familiar, it sits well in this company of like minds.

These are the singular moments of my initial view, yet as I went deeper into the thoughts behind the exhibition, I found a kind of curious pairing that mimics the two venues of the show and provides a number of poignant reflections on the collector's preferences.

Two paintings by Gary Stephan create an opportunity to see one of his well-known early abstractions, *The Third Drink* (1992), composed of buoyant lozenge-like forms suspended in an atmospheric ground, alongside one of the artist's more recent works. Stephan's new works fascinated me when I first saw them in Chelsea. In *The Future of Reading* (2011), a series of parallel brushstrokes look like a floor, yet initially seem to function as a figure on a narrow, bounding blue-gray ground. When a close-up view clarifies what is painted on top of what, it subverts the initial assumption of what the ground is and forces the preliminary ground to morph into a figure. The affect is a kind of double-take on the level of assumption—you don't know where the ground is stable. My formal read of the subject walks in step with the problematics of speed and virtuality in our time; as Stephan moves away from the more classic approach of his earlier work, the artist stays his course.

Two similar but differently sized vertical canvases by Marieta Chirulescu, hung side by side, delicate and modest, exerted a fascination over me that appeared out of proportion to their means. On the left, tiny ovoids of purple, red, sienna, and brown nestle in the lower half of a glamorous field of feather-like strokes that move from blue to crimson in a flurry of self-revealing marks. The luminosity of their pure color creates a focal point in the ovals; simple, open and unremarkable, their presence slowly emerges and speaks of the inevitability of the mind/matter dialogue.



Louise Fishman, *Untitled*, 1971. Acrylic, glue, rubber, and grommets on canvas, 19 1/2 × 10 1/2 inches.

In the one on the right, a dark brown—caput mortem perhaps—is laid down in a thin wash more or less invisibly, so that the broad, rough strokes of the gesso ground below are made visible. As the expedient gesture of the ground rises up to the surface of the painting through the perfectly painted wash, the two layers meld into one. At a distance or in a photograph, the relationship reverses and the thin wash becomes visible. A red line, clearly painted wet on wet in three movements, runs around just inside the framing edge. If you take this work at face value you miss the point: a symphony of subtle and complex emotion opens the door on the artist's inner world. Then the quietude of this female voice is reassuring.

The exhibition at Cavuspace, some distance away, privileges works that are conceptual, photographic and architectural, but not only; it delves into the breadth of the collector's interests. The world feels small again when seeing Cheryl Donegan's 2008 *Car Street of the Problem*, with her *Scenes and Commercials* show concurrently on view at the New Museum in New York.

Works of a number of the artists, including Jack Whitten, span both venues. His *Delacroix's Palette* (1974) is a dense thick layer of blue-gray and flesh colored paint that has been scraped across the surface in one fell swoop, a gesture that feels as natural as a drip or a pour and yields a topology that is tectonic. *Double Dutch* (1985), a pair of grids composed of raised squares, garners its texture from the support in an altogether different strategy.

In my glimpse of New York painters and their German confreres in Berlin, Louise Fishman stole the show. Her *Untitled* (1971), made of acrylic, rubber and grommets had the look and feel of an accoutrement left over from Berlin's burlesque past. Sleek and raunchy with its overtones of S & M, it looked and felt right at home.

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**CONTRIBUTOR**

**Joan Waltemath**

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**RECOMMENDED ARTICLES**

## *Berlin Metropolis: 1918 - 1933*

by Virginia McBride

**DEC 15-JAN 16 | ARTSEEN**

On the second floor of the Neue Galerie mansion, a pig is hanging from the ceiling. The pig—really more of a porcine puppet man—wears the World War I uniform of a Prussian soldier, with a cap over his ears, and jackboots jutting out at odd angles.



## Letter from BERLIN

by Terry R. Myers

**FEB 2014 | ARTSEEN**

I've written about exhibitions by two of these artists before. With Ruff, I remain captivated by what I called the "swaying" of his rigorous production, functioning as focus instead of distraction; with Tillmans it's still about how he consistently reminds me to never take anything for granted.



## “Good luck, Bauhaus and Berlin Comrades, and See You After the Revolution”

by Elizabeth Otto

**JUNE 2015 | CRITICS PAGE**

At a time when sales of artworks for record sums compete for newspaper headlines with the stories of the tragic deaths of migrants and refugees, it's worth reflecting on the life and politically-inflected artworks of a fascinating and transitory figure of history.



## THE DIVIDED CITY STADT/BILD

by Michelle Standley

**DEC 15-JAN 16 | ARTSEEN**

Berlin is a divided city. Its inhabitants' polarized reactions to the sudden influx of thousands of refugees—from acts of arson to massive volunteer campaigns—reveal a city torn between fear of change and a desire to embrace it.

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