

January 5, 2015 | by Ben Mauk

No Sale

In Berlin, art and commerce shake hands—sort of.



Photo: Kathrine Lund, 2014. Courtesy of Friends with Books, Berlin.

Despite its homespun name, Friends with Books: Art Book Fair Berlin bills itself as “Europe’s premier festival for contemporary artists’ books and periodicals by artists and art publishers.” I have no reason to doubt them. Last month, more than a hundred publishers—ranging from the large to the very, very small—spent two days squeezed behind tables in the main hall of Café Moskau, a haunted leftover of the German Democratic Republic aristocracy on Karl-Marx-Allee. Outside, the building resembled a modernist cake topped with sans-serif signage and a gleaming silver Sputnik. Inside, bespoke chapbooks abutted objets d’art, free posters, and glossy five-hundred-Euro retrospectives, often at the same table. It seemed a stark contrast to the Miami Beach scene from which some attendees were still recovering: the one that had featured Miley Cyrus, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and a veritable fleet of private yachts.

Yes, here was a scene more fitting Berlin, the pink-mohawked little sibling of the art world. Some of the usual industry suspects were present, such as the magazines *frieze*, *e-flux*, and *Texte zur Kunst*, along with international art publishers like Valiz, Walther König, and Sternberg. But these were easily outnumbered by the

small presses, many of them volunteer-run passion projects. As I entered the long exhibition hall, I had to sidestep embraces meant for friends who'd just flown in from London, Lisbon, or Copenhagen. (The greeter's country of origin determined the number and directionality of air kisses, and before long I'd witnessed every conceivable variation without once seeing an awkward fumble. Luckily, no one wanted to kiss me.) As I began to browse the publishers' tables, I felt like I really was walking among a group of friends who'd gathered for a bookshelf-bragging party. Maybe a hundred people were pressed together in the room and talking at the same time, but softly, with the velvet-lined savoir faire that makes dinner parties here such subdued operations. And they were even talking about the books! Somewhat astonishingly for an art fair, art seemed to be the main subject of conversation, rather than the forthcoming after-party or which infamous collector just walked through the door or whose painting sold for how much. The hall was crowded, the mood convivial, the money nowhere to be found. To witness an actual sale was rare, and I almost felt I'd committed a faux pas when I asked a local distributor for a copy of Raphael Rubinstein's *The Miraculous*. Then, when I handed the bookseller a twenty, we discovered he had no change.

By noon, each table played host to a dedicated rhizome of artists and writers, who would jaw casually for a minute or two before moving to an adjacent group. Maneuvering around the room became tricky. I squeezed past the frowning lumberjacks of Belgium's Bartleby & Co., who were displaying their beautiful and expensive compendiums a few tables down from a British artist selling self-xeroxed projects for three Euros apiece. At *e-flux*'s table, neither the saleswoman nor I knew what Jalal Toufic was up to these days (my most pressing concern), but she showed me their latest anthology and one of the fair's big releases, *The Internet Does Not Exist*, to be published this year by Sternberg. It's already available as a small USB stick, which I declined to purchase, along with the book's accoutrements: a baseball cap and a coffee mug, each featuring the title in a nineties-era WordArt font.

John Waters once wrote that, for him, being rich meant the ability to walk into a bookstore and buy whatever he wanted without checking the price tags. What I like most about this definition is how democratic it is. Even expensive, oversize art books are pretty cheap compared to what is still sometimes thought of as the "real thing." You can line your room with Taschen's for less than the cost of a single contemporary painting from a midlist gallery. At Saturday's afternoon panel discussion on Danish art books, the artist Jesper Fabricius observed that the ease of making and distributing a book is no less crucial for artists themselves.

"It's important to feel like you're an artist," he said, flipping through several decades' worth of his irreverent magazine, *Pist Protta*. "That's why we made this—to become famous artists! We printed two hundred copies of the first issue in 1981 and took them to Stockholm." "We did manage to sell them," he added, "but we didn't get very famous." Books, Fabricius implied, are a cheap way to make both

art and connections among artists, mechanical reproduction—style. Unlike painting or sculpture, though, they do not make money or fame. This was a refrain I heard more than once at the fair: that art books are a kind of extra-market phenomenon, providing direct contact between people without the art-world “problem” of money. An echt Berlin idea.

But was it true? And does Berlin—or anywhere else—really exist “outside” the art market, as the cashless proceedings at the fair seemed to suggest? This question was answered for me in spectacular form when I dropped by *Texte zur Kunst*’s table. There, in this past summer’s Berlin Update issue, I found Isabelle Graw’s indispensable essay on the city as perpetually upcoming art metropolis.

Berlin, she writes, continues to be defined by the myths of bohemianism and vitality even as it attracts more and more developers and cultural VIPs. (Its former mayor famously sloganed, just as rents began to rise, “Berlin is poor, but sexy.”) By perpetuating these myths, the city presents itself as a counterculture of openness and opportunity to be distinguished from the superficiality, exclusivity, and glitz of—oh, say—Miami.



Installation View, Chitti Kasemkitvatana, *Messy Sky Magazine*, presented by Berliner Künstlerprogramm des DAAD / DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program. Photo: Anai Lee Ender, 2014. Courtesy of Friends with Books, Berlin.

The truth is somewhat fussier. However accurate, the notion that Berlin's heart bleeds art, not money, is a prerequisite for maintaining the city's perceived distance from the art market—and, consequently, its authenticity. In the hierarchy-averse scene that Berlin still purports to maintain, authenticity is code for information; the authentic artist (or “creative nonconformist,” as Graw has it) is defined by her ability to navigate the scene that money can't buy. Ironically, this proves to be highly marketable. The appearance of authenticity enables artists and critics to achieve positions of influence in the art world. As Graw writes, “the more networking connections, information, and sense of style the creative nonconformist has at his or her disposal, the better the chances that he or she will one day transform this symbolic capital ... into economic capital.” Not for nothing is so much art made in Berlin sold elsewhere, at galleries in New York or London. Berlin is where the ore of cultural capital—“vitality, free time, a bohemian attitude toward life, extravagance, excess, communication, and creativity”—is mined.

I was reminded of Graw's portrait when I later overheard two booksellers complain to one another that they'd hardly sold anything all day. It wasn't books people were buying! Authors appeared at regular intervals for signings but were relegated to a hard-to-access corner, and the few panels and back-room installations I visited were sparsely attended. Instead, information and informal self-branding comprised the hall's real market. The books themselves served more as tactile stimulation than as product: something to thumb through during the productive conversation.

Not that I'm complaining. Watching the slippage between different market realities became part of the fun of the fair. As evening approached, poets exchanged unsold chapbooks—phone numbers penned into the flyleaves—and back catalogues reached vertiginous discounts. Latecomers glided into the hall carrying bags that suggested they'd just come from shopping sprees at Uniqlo or Dr. Martens (“Love My Docs!”); others carried totes that proclaimed love for local *Buchhandlungen*. After closing, the event vendors repaired to Babette, the old East German bar next door, where, under red neon that turned the whiskey a bilious green, acts of friendly bartering continued late into the night.

On Sunday, *e-flux* hosted a mini-symposium for *The Internet Does Not Exist* that served as the fair's de facto conclusion. For me, though, the encapsulating moment of the weekend had already occurred at their table on Saturday afternoon, when I'd overheard a bearded young man say, “I'll take the USB stick and the hat.”

“Are you sure you don't want the mug?” the woman replied. “It's only another ten Euros. The whole set is thirty.”

I left him standing there, palming the mug, lost in indecision.

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