

Art & Photography

6 artworks that teach us about borders

As the German capital gears up to look back on 30 years since the fall of the Wall this November, Berlin's Gropius Bau takes on the meaning of contemporary walls and barriers in a new exhibition

15 October, 2019



Sibylle Bergemann, Berliner Mauer, Bernauer Strasse, Berlin, 1990. Estate Sibylle Bergemann; Ostkreuz, courtesy: Loock Galerie, Berlin.

Although this November marks 30 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, we live in a time where barriers are more complicated and divisive than ever. The ongoing tragedy of refugees at the borders of Europe, Northern Ireland's fragile border in the face of impending Brexit, and Trump's wall between the US and Mexico have hurled barriers to the forefront of public consciousness. Gropius Bau's latest exhibi-

ion, *Durch Mauern Gehen* (“Walking Through Walls”) is a powerful reminder of how new walls form as old ones settle into history. Through an array of art works, including pieces by Marina Abramović and Ulay, Michael Kvium, Regina Silveir, and Mona Hatoum, the exhibition considers contemporary barriers and what they mean for the people they divide. Curators Till Fellrath and Sam Bardaouli situate their exhibition in a gallery that overlooks a section of the Berlin Wall—at Niederkirchnerstrasse—and remind viewers to consider less visible barriers too: how easily they can be created and how difficult they are to dissolve. Below, we take a look at how these varied works tackle the ever-prevalent subject.

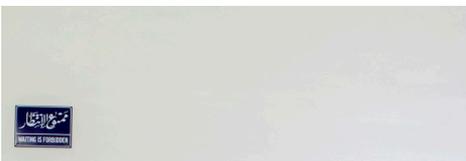
***Beach of Plenty* (2017)—Michael Kvium**



Michael Kvium, *Beach of Plenty*, 2017. Photo: Anders Sune Berg. Courtesy the artist & Nils Stærk Gallery.

In this oil painting, three vacationers stand on a beach as a pontoon boat of refugees approaches from the deep blue of the Mediterranean Sea. Danish artist Michael Kvium based his work off an actual press photograph, which he has expanded over three canvases to create an image that, when you stand in front of it, is so close to life-size that you might as well be on the beach yourself. The weirdest and most powerful action happens in the leftmost panel: a refugee has jumped off the boat and is swimming for shore, while one of the vacationers stands just metres away on the beach, a yellow sun hat on his head, his hands linked behind his back as though in the universal posture of someone surveying flowers in a botanical garden. Why doesn't the vacationer go down to help the person in the water, or at least run away? It's as if he's stuck in the part of his mind that believes this beach is just a beach, that the water couldn't be anything other than somewhere to take a quick dip.

***Orbital I* (2018) and *Pile of Bricks* (2019)—Mona Hatoum**



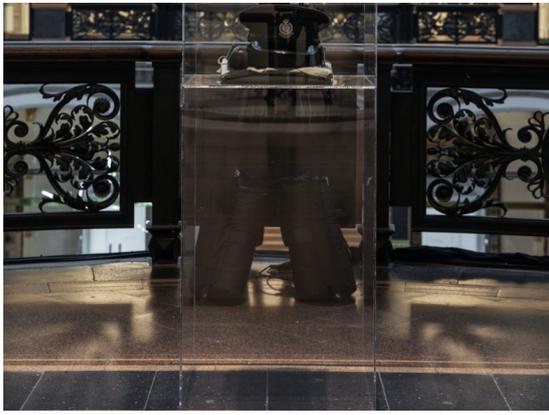


Left: Mona Hatoum, *Orbital I*, 2018. Right: *A Pile of Bricks III*, 2019. Photos: Luca Girardini. Courtesy: the artist & White Cube.

Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum's spherical sculpture *Orbital* is surprisingly large in real life as opposed to how it looks in photographs. Sitting in front of it, I'm reminded of the cross-shaped beam that was excavated from Ground Zero, an accidental sign of hope formed in all of that horror. You can almost imagine finding this globe in the rubble of a blown-out wall, the rebar foundation warped into an artifact. Hatoum's work doesn't seem interested in encouraging people to project optimism onto it, though; if anything, the hollow form invites you to imagine something that used to surround it, something that has been destroyed. At the same time, the steel frame signals the solidity of its earlier structure, the structure hasn't been completely wiped out, it still stands there in front of you. On the floor, a single metal bracket around a section of rebar holds the globe to the floor, tethering it in place. Across from *Orbital* is *Pile of Bricks*, which is exactly what it sounds like, but sitting on a trolley. I wonder whether it would move if I pushed it?

Canon #2 (2016/2019)—Samson Young





Samson Young, *Canon #2*, 2016/2019. Image courtesy of Gropius Bau.

Rotating on a balcony that overlooks the Gropius Bau's central atrium is an LRAD (Long Range Acoustic Device), which is basically a laser gun that uses sound instead of whatever it is that lasers ordinarily do. LRADs have become a weapon of choice for riot cops, who use them to pummel crowds with super loud frequencies that have the same dispersive effects as tear gas but are less likely to produce evidence of bodily harm. Probably even freakier than the crowd blasting is that LRADs can also be used to send concentrated beams of sound to specific individuals, so that, for example, they can target a single person out of a big crowd. Young's device does this automatically: it picks a person somewhere in the atrium and follows them as they move, playing recordings of birdsongs. As I was writing this on the balcony, the LRAD started tracing me, beaming little chirps in my ear as I walked until I hid behind a column. Even as states reinforce protections on their borders, surveillance technologies are tearing down borders of personal privacy—*Cannon* is a frightening demonstration of how this tracking can become weaponised.

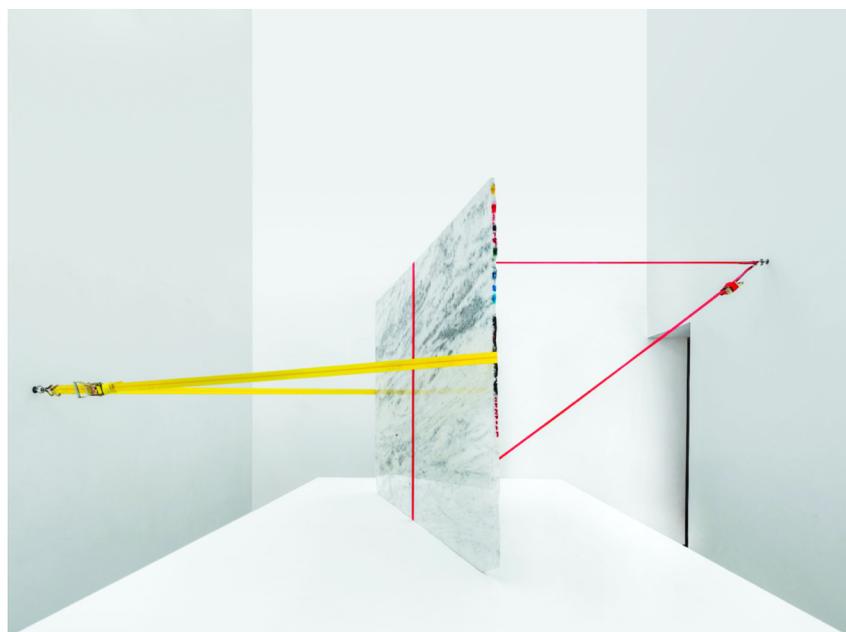
***Intro 2* (2019)—Regina Silveira**



Regina Silveira, *Intro 2* (Irruption Series), 2019. Photo: Mathias Völzke. Courtesy: the artist.

Something like 40 square metres of large black footprints cover the walls and the windows of one of the Gropius Bau's staircases. Brazilian artist Regina Silveira's *Intro 2* is a nod towards the architectural relationship between the building and the Berlin Wall, which ran so close to the main entrance of the venue that, for as long as it stood, visitors had to come in through a back door. The footprints are refreshingly irreverent, blocking light from getting through the glass, wandering onto the delicate gold leaf carvings on the window arches. As one of the handful of pieces that "breaks out" of the blueprint of the gallery space, it also happens to be accessible to anyone who comes into the building, whether or not they have a ticket—as far as I can tell, you won't run into any guards on your way to see it.

***Untitled (Allure) (2014)*—Jose Davila**



Jose Dávila, *Untitled (Allure)*, 2014. Photo: Enrique Macías. Courtesy: the artist & König Galerie.

In this installation, a slab of granite is balanced on a plinth that takes up most of the room. As you walk around the plinth you end up in front of a big window looking outside onto a section of the Berlin Wall. Certain parts of the wall are covered by a glass ceiling, and every metre or so is a placard with diagrams or quotes. You can watch tourists mill around, taking photographs, checking their phones. The view is the same whenever you walk through this part of the gallery, but standing next to the granite plate, you think differently about what you see outside; the outside is suddenly a subject of consideration. Maybe the more startling realisation is that you, the viewer, have been guided to the space so that you can be confronted with this juxtaposition—that you've become the object of the work.

***All Along the Watchtower (2012)*—Nadia Kaabi-Linke**



Nadia Kaabi-Linke, *All Along the Watchtower*, 2012 / 2014. Photo: Timo Kaabi-Linke, Courtesy the artist.

The biggest “wow” moment in this exhibition looks, at first, like the shadow of a watchtower, stretching over the floor and up the corner of the wall. As visitors walk into the room, they tend to look backward, into the opposite corner, where the source of the shadow should be. (I saw several people try to make shadows of their own on the floor and then walk away, unsettled, when they could not). As it turns out, the shadow isn’t a shadow at all—it’s been painted on, somehow, with some perfectly shadowy grey tone of paint. If you try to follow the “shadow” out the window to its source, you’ll find yourself looking out at the Topography of Terror, the site of the former Gestapo headquarters, which sits just beside the Gropius Bau and directly in front of the Berlin Wall—the shadow lives on.

Walking Through Walls runs through to 19 January 2020 at Gropius Bau.

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