ARTS OF THE WORKING CLASS

POV: WHAT IT IS TO LIVE IN BERLIN THESE DAYS?

Exhibitions from the Gallery Weekend 2025 declare: It's alienating.

Cyprien Gaillard
Wassermusik
17.10.25 – 22.3.26
Haus der Kunst
CYPRIEN GAILLARD

PERIFERAL
INTENSIVE PROGRAM OF POST-URBAN STUDIES
FROM 7 APRIL TO 19 JUNE 2026
APPLICATIONS OPEN NOW
elnoides

May 09 2025

María Inés Plaza Lazo, Mohammad Salemy and Kseniia Sivova

MI is founder and publisher of AWC, Mo founder of the New Centre and a regular contributor of AWC, K is an art history student and new member of the AWC community.

Conversations in Berlin increasingly center on the city's shifting political landscape, where conservative factions like the CDU and identitarian elements within the AfD refine their narratives to appear more moderate. This strategic repositioning echoes propagandistic tactics in texts by Ulf Poschardt and Cornelius Tittel for Die Welt, legitimizing economic austerity and cultural devastation under the guise of centralism. Meanwhile, the controversy surrounding Wolfgang Weimer, the new Minister of Culture, and the abrupt resignation of Culture Senator of Berlin Joe Chialo underscores the political volatility beneath these rhetorical adjustments.

The false binary between institutional respectability and radical critique fueled by Poschardt and Tittel distracts from the capitalist contradictions embedded in art and culture, narrowing the space for genuine diversity and dissent. Navigating these dynamics during the anniversaries of World War II's end and the fall of the Nazi regime requires balancing freedom of speech, financial security, and institutional stability without reducing political debate to ideological posturing. The challenge lies in fostering dialogues that resist co-optation by the systems they critique.

Amid this political climate, this year's Gallery Weekend Berlin presents 52 exhibitions and over 80 artistic positions across 59 venues increasingly detached from the city's immediate realities but grappling with broader social and economic narratives—from post-war reconstruction to ongoing gentrification, mirroring the political situation previously described.

Now in its 21st edition, its branding as a "private initiative" lies in a landscape shaped by market imperatives, the dialectics of intellectual gatekeeping and aesthetic consensus between art workers and everyone else. We meandered through 18 exhibitions—not to provide a comprehensive overview but to examine where cultural production and economic power converge, where art oscillates between commodity and critique.

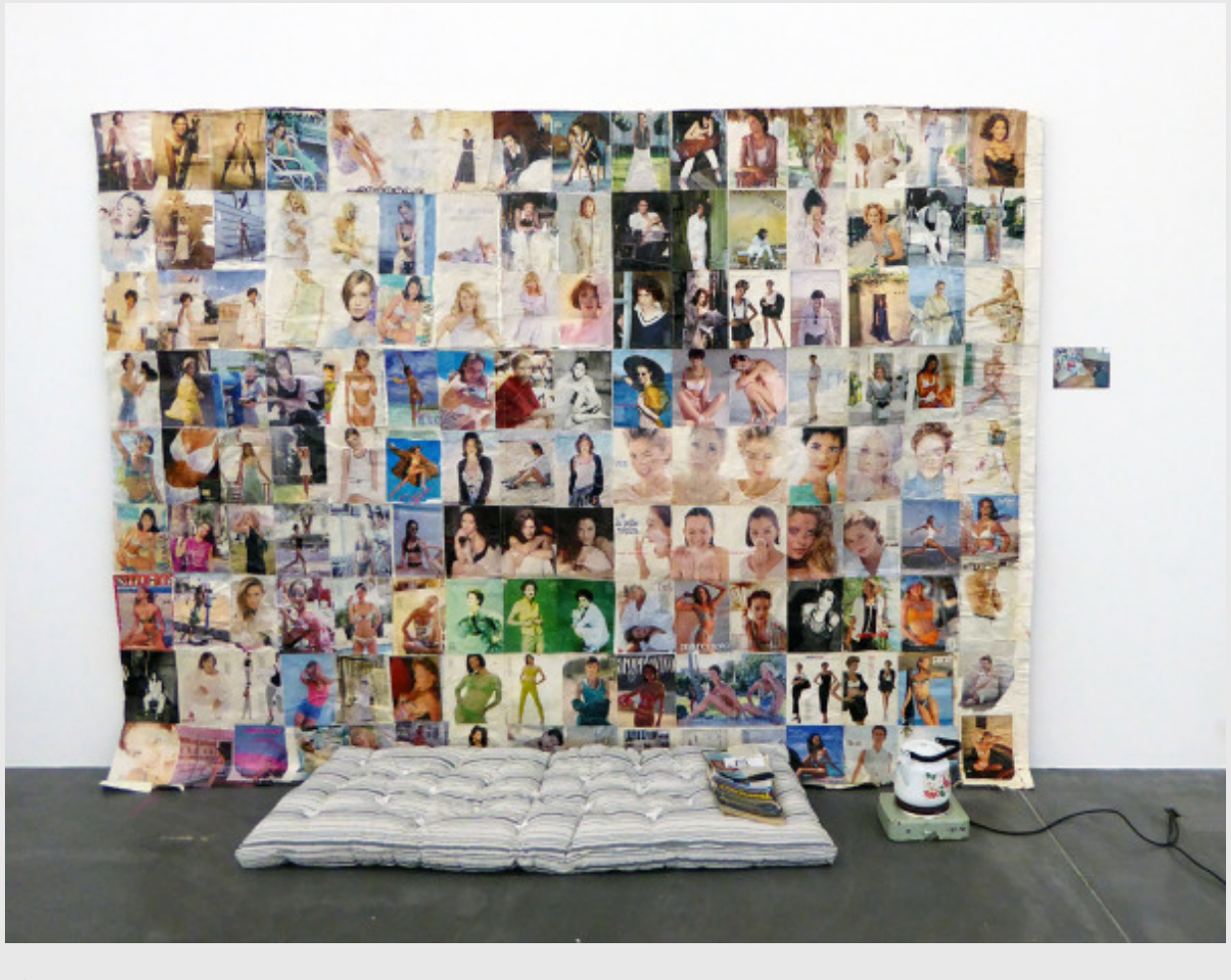


Fig. 1

POV Mitte: Post-Capitalist Ruins Filling the Void between East and West Germany

Berlin-Mitte, once a center of creativity and renewal, now grapples with the residue of vanished ideologies and the persistent specter of economic standardization. From the anarchic provocations of **The Brotherhood of New Blockheads** at BQ to the spectral landscapes of **Serban Savu** at Galeria Plan B, these exhibitions map the friction between critique and complicity in a city where cultural spaces hang precariously in the balance.

BQ disrupts the standard Gallery Weekend inviting former director of Kunsthalle Zürich, **Daniel Baumann**, to curate a museum-level presentation of a Russian artist collective whose lush and sharp performances critiqued the emergence of capitalist spectacle in post-Soviet Russia, departing from the archive of the body under authoritarian rules.

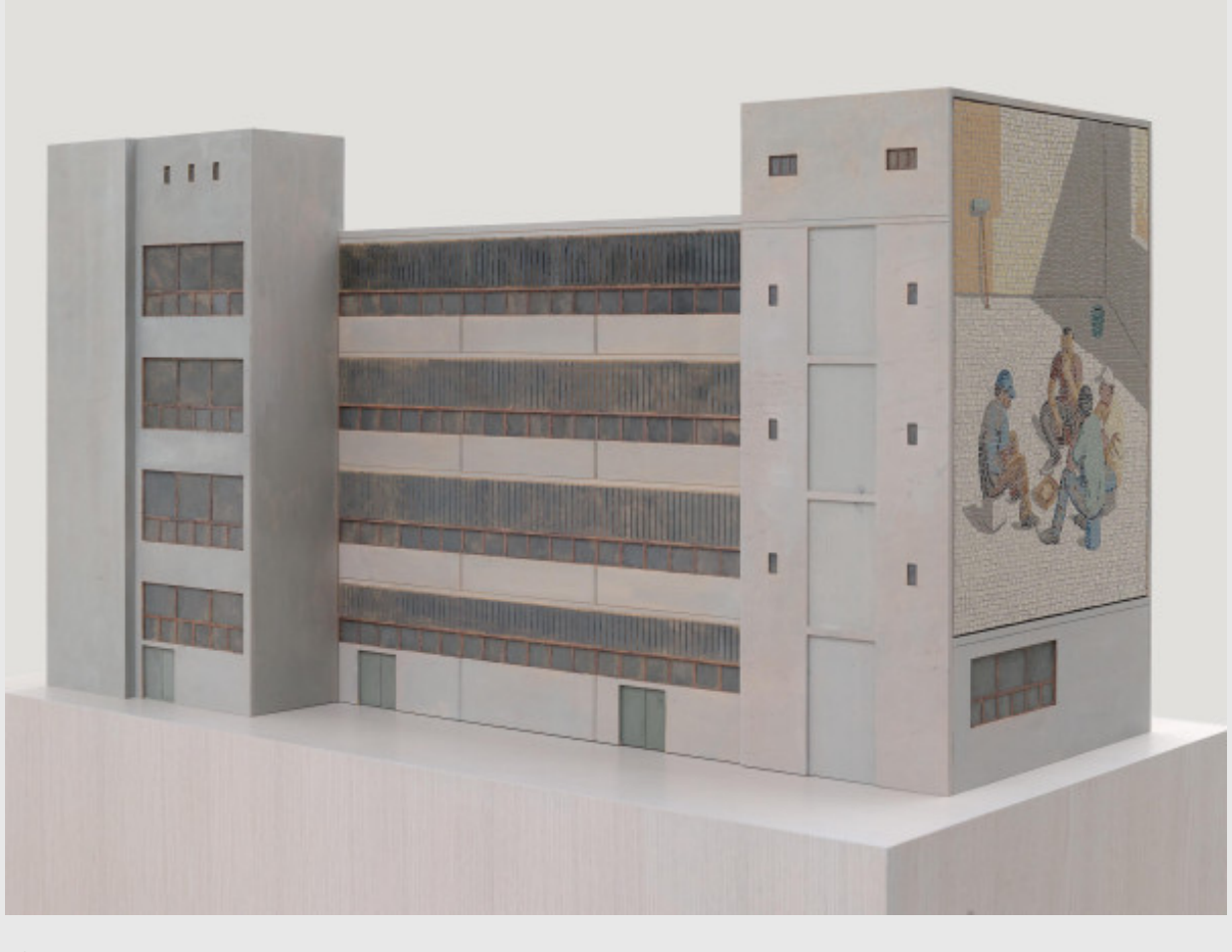


Fig. 2

Savu's paintings and installation at Plan B articulate a suspended temporality not only of post-communist Romania but also Berlin itself, where the fate of cultural spaces hangs precariously in the balance. A maquette in the exhibition depicts a former industrial building turned art hub, now lying in disrepair—a reminder that Berlin's so-called cultural renaissance is often predicated on the exploitation and erasure of precarious spaces, haunted by the ghosts of a socialist past and the monsters produced by dreams of capitalism.

Thomas Bayrle's latest works at Galerie neugerriemschneider extend his materialist critique of consumer image culture into the digital and organic realms. In *Pianta Robusta V* (2024), pixelated plant forms emerge from serialized digital textures, evoking a new kind of visual organism: a world in which capitalist production doesn't just consume life but replicates and simulates it, turning the organic into endlessly reproducible images.

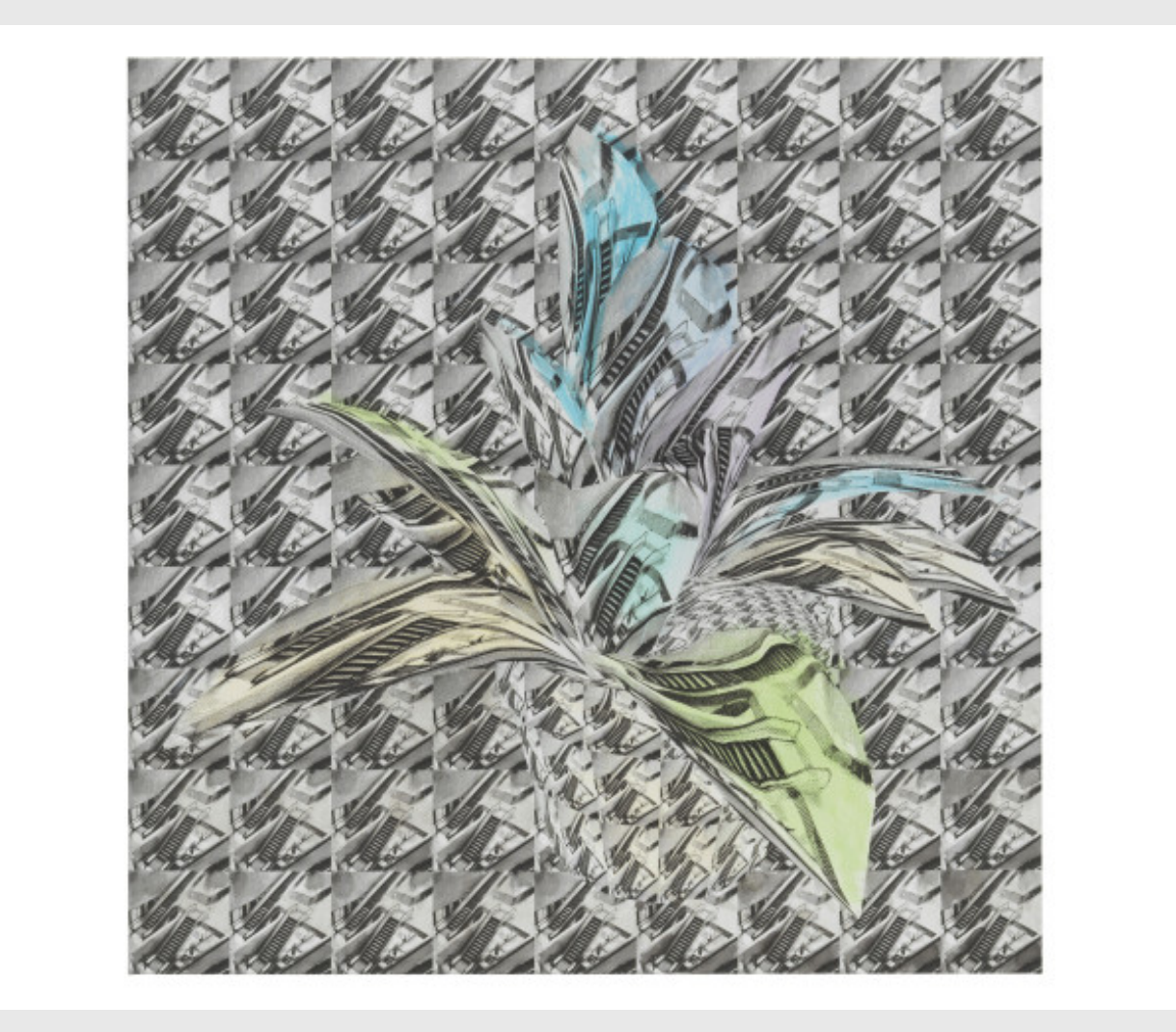


Fig. 3

A room brimming with bright microplastic balls. Each one symbolizes a day in the artist's life. Thousands of disposable, environmentally-toxic artifacts that seduce visually while suffocating the air: this is the visceral opening gesture of **SoiL Thornton**'s *The Rest* at Galerie Neu. Yet the heart of the show lies in framed screenshots and documents tracing the loss and partial recovery of Thornton's storage unit, which contained years of work. The institutional response to this loss is chillingly indifferent: bureaucratic emails and receipts reduce Thornton's artistic labor to a mere commodity, underscoring the violence of eviction and the precariousness of being a trans artist in an overcapitalized, hyper-surveilled art world.

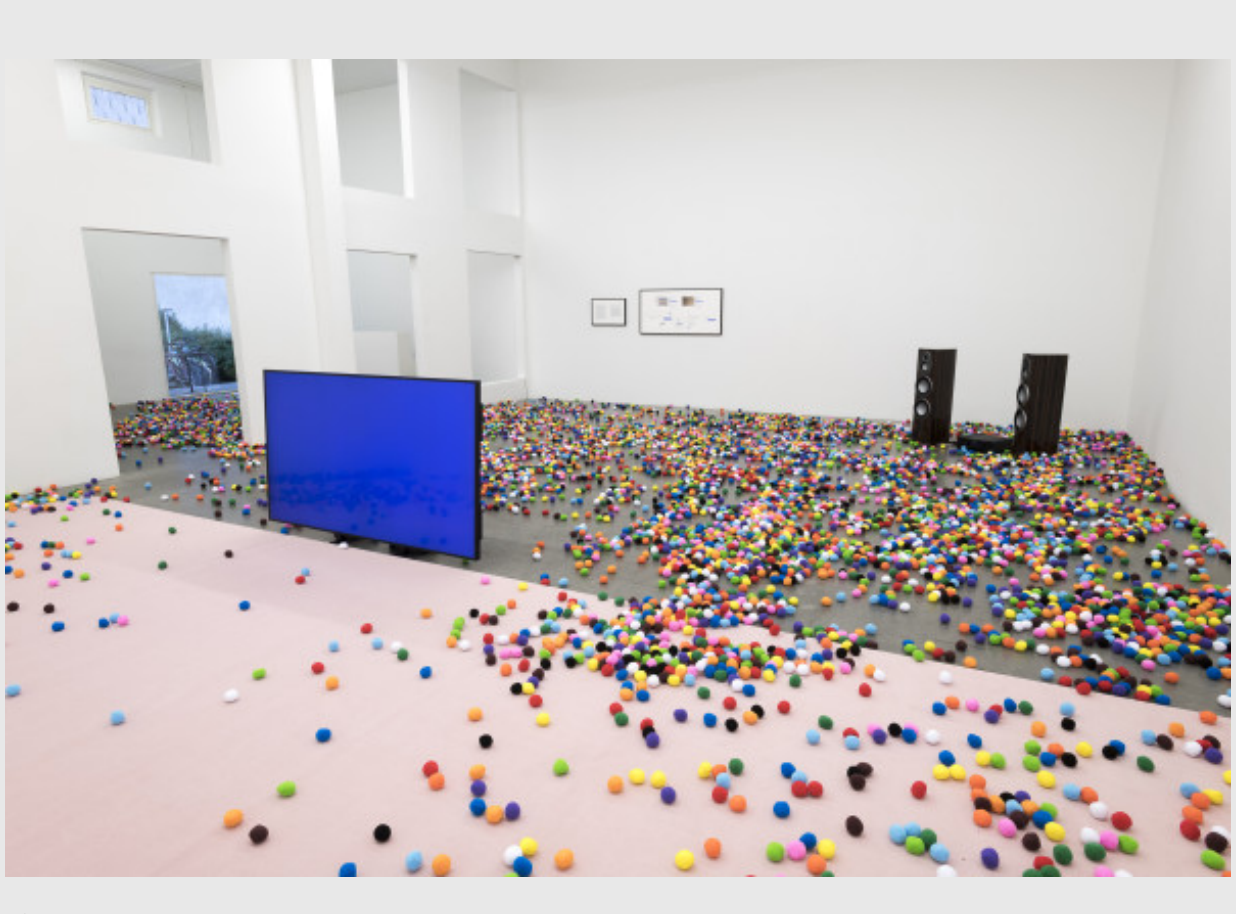


Fig. 4

At Sprüth Magers, two exhibitions confront the unraveling of imperial and aesthetic narratives. In Seven Springs, **Michalis Pirgelis** reconfigures decommissioned aircraft into sculptural fragments, invoking the twilight of American imperial symbolism. Vintage American Airlines wallpaper adorns the gallery walls, its twin-eagle logo a relic of mid-century globalism, now flanked by fuselage parts that hang like dried carcasses. Pirgelis transforms the gallery into a mausoleum for a failed empire—air travel as myth and the USA as a declining brand, both crumbling into hollow relics of a once-thriving, upwardly mobile middle class.

Meanwhile, **Cyprien Gaillard**'s *Retinal Rivalry* emerged as the weekend's main draw with a 3D film that merges personal footage with viral clips, mapping a world where image production and decay are indistinguishable. Flies swarm out from the screen, collapsing the digital and the material into a haunting cycle of proliferation and erosion. The film becomes a phantasmagoria of the present—Gaillard's Berghain-sized crowd witnesses a spectral world where the mediated image refuses to die, its afterlife as haunting as the ruins it depicts.

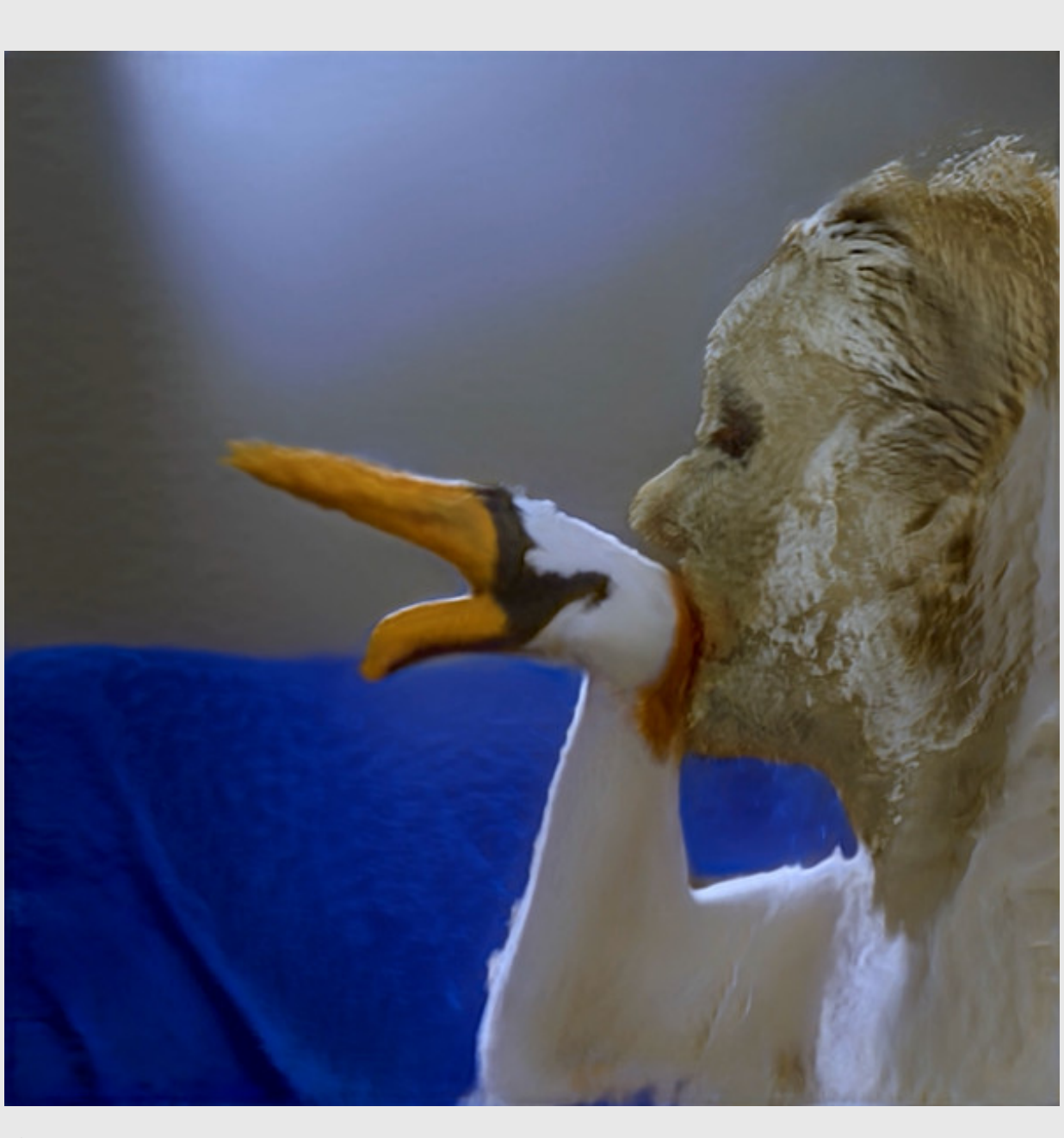


Fig. 5

POV Charlottenburg: Selling Alienation Within the Immoveable Structures of the Bourgeoisie

At **Société**, **Marianna Simnett**'s visceral video works, paintings, and sculptures frame the body as a site of vulnerability and monstrous transformation, while What Are You Looking For?, a group show curated by **Brandy Carstens**, critiques surveillance culture, consumerism, and the commodification of desire. Here, every twitch, spasm, and rupture is no longer just a gesture—it's raw material for consumption, the body dissected and reassembled as a spectacle of profitable decay. In these works, ancient bacchanals and fantasies of excess become decadent cycles of extraction, where the body is both product and pawn.

Anne Imhof's *Cold Hope* at Galerie **Buchholz** presents itself as a conceptual aftershock—a calculated attempt to transform a widely panned Armory show into a critique of her own failed spectacle. The hipster performers and idling SUVs that clashed with audiences in New York now return as aestheticized relics, preserved in video loops that transform failure into marketable introspection. Imhof reframes her misstep as conceptual currency, an ouroboros of self-referential critique where the spectacle of collapse is endlessly repackaged as art. In a system that turns even backlash into brand equity, the only thing that truly fails is failure itself.

Fig. 6

At Mehdi Chouakri Fasanenplatz, *The Art of Survival/Baby Doll Saloon* excavates the early 1990s collaborations between **Sylvie Fleury and Angela Bulloch**. Pyrotechnic performances—fireworks detonated indoors—once confronted audiences with the dissonance between explosive spectacle and confined space. Now, decades later, their blunt gender metaphors are reintroduced as archival relics: Bulloch's limp rocket and Fleury's donut-wrapped female figure—phallic symbols deflated, women encased in sugary rings of consumerist banality.

The irony of these exhibitions coinciding with May Day—a day meant to honor labor struggle and collective resistance—keeps dripping through every surface. Charlottenburg's art spaces, far from sites of radical critique, operate as enclaves of elite hyper-networking, where the art of survival is less about collective struggle and more about the aestheticization of alienation.

Fig. 7

POV Schöneberg: The Post in Postwar is an Illusion as Wounds Remain Unhealed

Diane Severin Nguyen's *Spring Snow* at **Galerie Molitor** unfolds like a cinematic set, crafted entirely by the artist. The title itself hints at an impossibility—a season and weather phenomenon alien to Vietnam—constructing a surreal, fabricated space where memory, history, and the uncanny mingle quietly. In this staged environment, snow falls against a blue sky, a scene that is both visually captivating and deeply unsettling, questioning the power of art to fabricate its own reality.

Nguyen's work draws from the eerie broadcasts of Hannah, a Vietnamese radio host during the war, whose presentations as psychological warfare blurred seduction and manipulation through pop songs, whispers, and lullabies. Her spectral voice, echoing through the jungle, aimed to erode the morale of American soldiers, blending nostalgia with alienation. In Nguyen's interpretation, snow—a rarity in Vietnam—becomes a contradictory symbol: purity laced with the threat of death, its whiteness recalling both colonial violence and the erasure of local memory. The work becomes an indictment of how war influences perception, with art reenacting these manipulations under the guise of aesthetic experience, as she softly intertwines historical trauma and constructed memory, staging violence and loss as visual tableaux, complete with fake snow and swelling soundtracks.

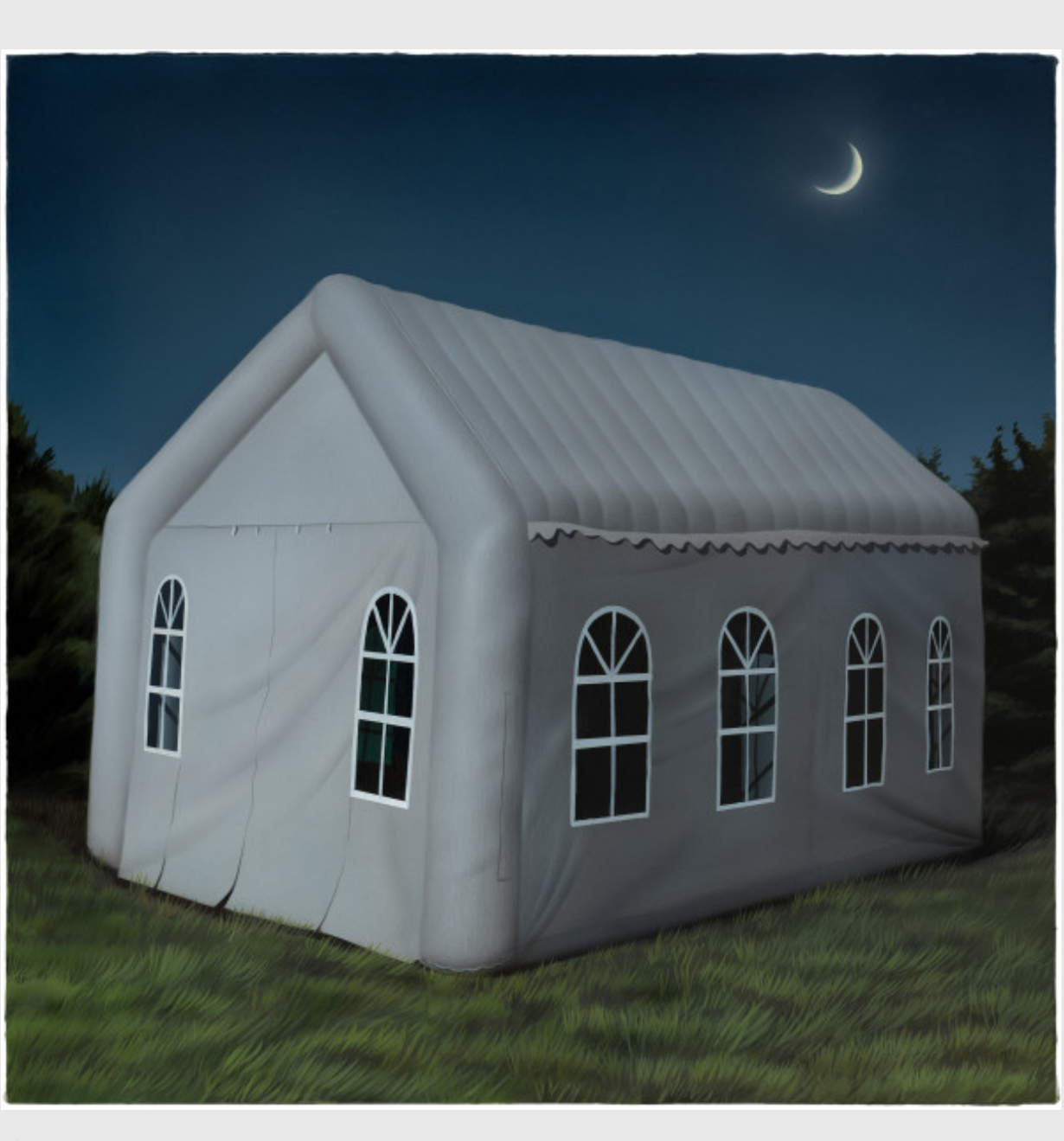
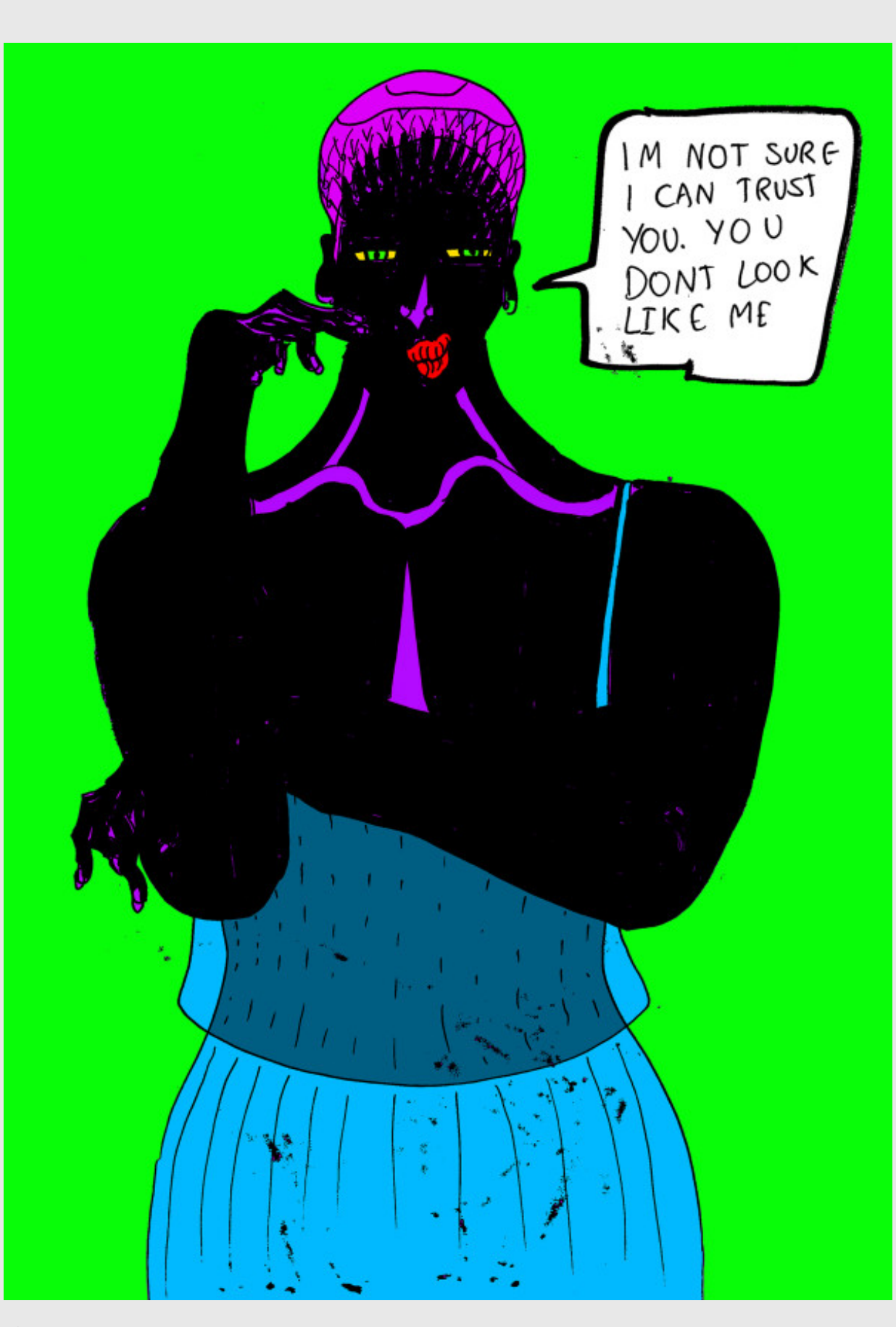


Fig. 8

In stark contrast, Sun Yitian's Romantic Room at Esther Schipper trades in superficial surrealism, presenting painted illustrations that feel more like graphic placeholders than serious reflections. A green TV labeled "Beijing" awkwardly hints at cultural anxiety about the rise of China, but the work's over-reliance on visual clichés dilutes any critical potency. The gestures toward surrealism lack the intensity needed to subvert the familiar, leaving behind only vague echoes of critique.

Galerie Barbara Thumm presents Roméo Mivekannin, whose altered colonial-era photographs challenge the visual legacies of racial violence by reinserting Black presence into images that once objectified and erased it. Mivekannin's self-insertion into these colonial records contests the fixed narratives of dominance, asserting visibility where there was once absence. Yet, the gallery's framing risks diluting this radical gesture into mere archival fascination—once again placing the burden of representation on the subjugated body rather than interrogating the system that made such erasure possible.



I M NOT SURE I CAN TRUST YOU. YO U DONT LOOK LIKE ME

Fig. 9

Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley's speculative worlds at **NOME** reclaim Black trans narratives from historical oblivion, utilizing interactive installations that demand active participation rather than passive consumption. Unlike the static presentations elsewhere, Brathwaite-Shirley's work resists commodification by destabilizing who gets to tell whose story. One painting, with the text "I am not sure I can trust you. You don't look like me," skewers the limitations of identitarianism with biting humor, exposing how surface-level affinity often masks deeper structural dissonance.

Álvaro Urbano's work welcomes us at **ChertLuedde** like a hushed reverie, where queer narratives slip through the cracks of architectural memory and botanical illusion. His trompe l'oeils of Tiergarten flora—meticulously replanted after WWII—linger like ghostly apparitions, invoking both the erasure and quiet persistence of queer histories. These delicate, almost spectral scenes suggest a longing for failed utopias, where desire remains suspended in spaces that oscillate between ruin and renewal. Urbano's subtle gestures become acts of seduction, luring viewers into spaces where intimacy and fragility persist despite the city's relentless transformations.

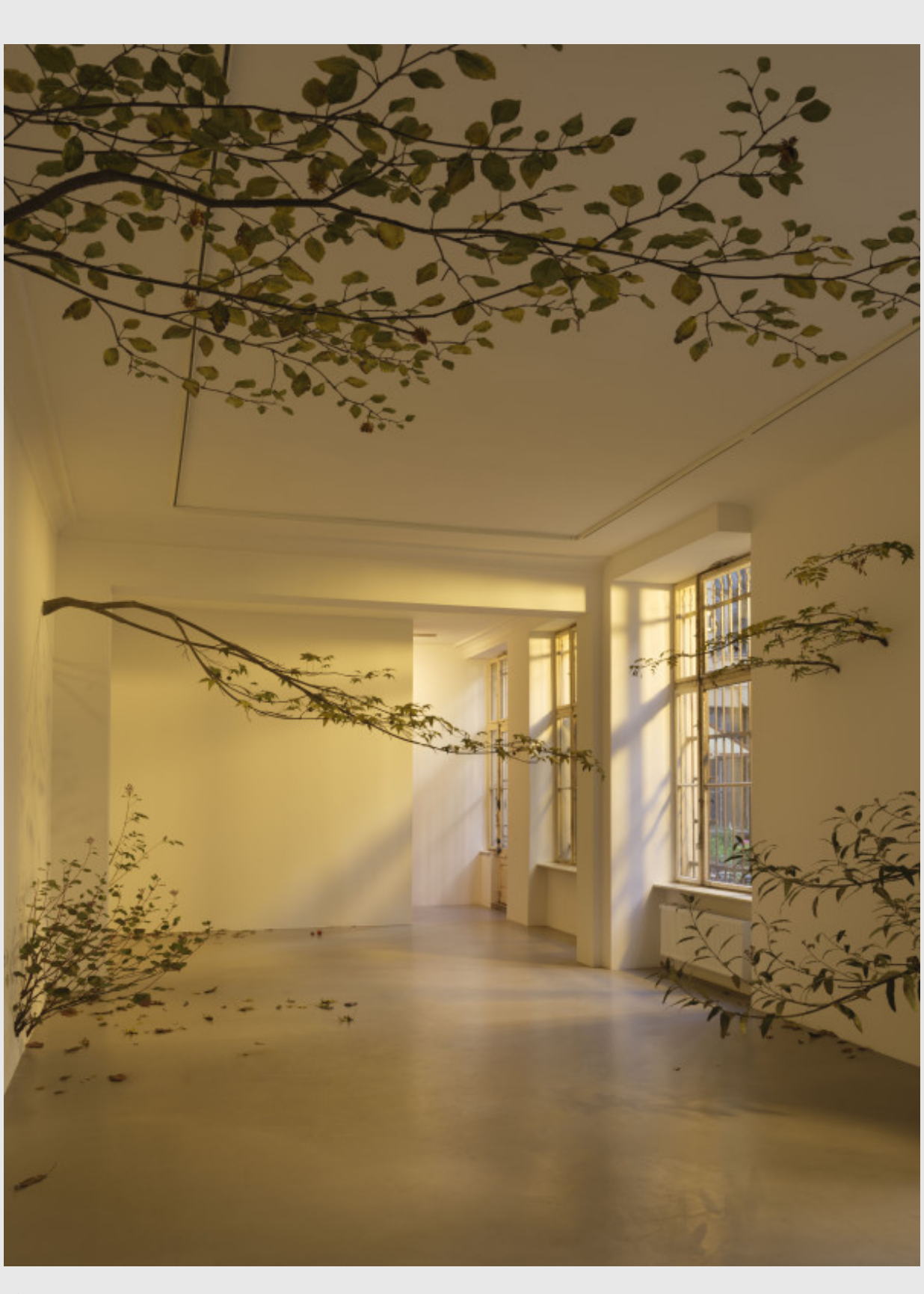


Fig. 10

Heidi's solo of **Benjamin Lallier,** whose sculptural installations juxtapose organic decay with industrial detritus, are here the most progressive proposal: By invoking ruin, Lallier's ensembles go after the extractive logic of urban development, but in a setting that itself exemplifies gentrification's creeping presence. They document urban collapse and their unavoidable fetishization as we all get expelled from the city's affordable, livable spaces. **Hudinilson Jr. 's** Xerox works and performance archives at **KOW** are a testimony of resistance to the assimilation of queer bodies into normative narratives no matter to which decade we look at. The state of the art is a joyful display marking public space as a site of erotic and political defiance.

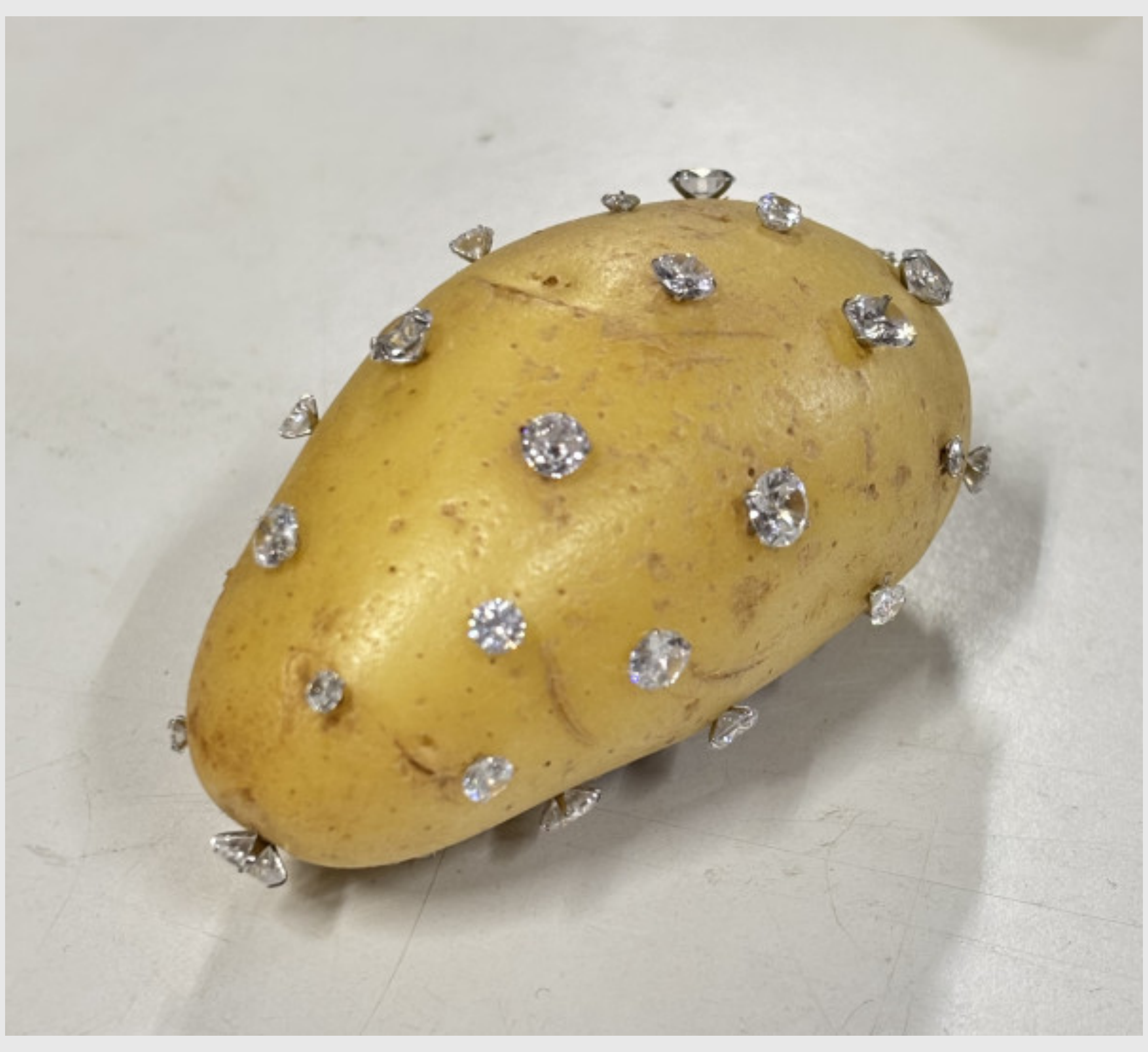


Fig. 11

POV Kreuzberg: Gentrification’s Ghosts Keep Inflating

Puppies Puppies (Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo) navigates trauma and transformation through minimalist, anticapitalist appropriations of brands like Grindr. Her installations, echoing the monumental vocabularies of Ellsworth Kelly and Robert Indiana, expose the porousness of flesh as a site of both vulnerability and radical reconfiguration. By invoking LGBTQA+ experiences, Kuriki-Olivo reframes mutability as a mode of resistance, where states of flux become acts of survival against the relentless commodification of desire—the unsettling grid of consuming for affection.

Like a mirage, tucked in a basement of the Mercador Höfe, Darklands X appeared to blur the line between boutique and cultural node without making too much noise about it. A third of the 600-square-foot space was cordoned off for a vinyl DJ set by Luca Laurini, founder of Label Under Construction—while guests sipped black currant tequila cocktails. No overbearing wall texts or market cynicism here—just a well-dressed crowd sharing presence, not pitches. A brief, brilliant break from the art world’s heavy script.

Fig. 2

Daniel Hölzl’s new sculpture *Soft Cycles*, billed as an intervention at **Berlinische Galerie**, functions like an analogue AutoCAD rendering—translating architectural interiors into an inflatable exterior. In this exhibition, Hölzl collapses his past spatial copies into a new work: a stitched, volumetric replica of the gallery space above itself. The piece breathes—literally—via a programmed loop that inflates and deflates an inner membrane, creating a shifting void between this quilted layer and a translucent outer shell. This way, the gallery becomes alive,' with the inner inflated form actualizing the space, while the outer skin further abstracting and virtualizing it as a minimalist rendering.

Kreuzberg’s streets, just like the site of the 1933 book burnings, still bear the scars of history. *It’s Just a Matter of Time*, curated by Liberty Adrien and Carina Bukuts at **PalaisPopulaire**, forces us to confront this enduring violence of erasure. Shilpa Gupta’s For, In Your Tongue, / Cannot Fit presents golden monoliths, sealed behind glass, inscribed with names and excerpts—symbols of censorship and the absence of silenced voices. Nearby, an empty library with bare shelves echoes this loss. Julian Irlinger’s Kites, made from paper notes from Germany’s hyperinflation, reflects on the collapse of value and the social upheavals of the Weimar Republic and today. The kites, soaring in the rotunda, symbolize a defiant play amidst current whirlwinds. Meanwhile, Petrit Halilaj’s *Several Birds Fly Away When They Understand It* uses birds as a metaphor for Yugoslavia’s disintegration and the multiethnic coexistence of the past. A visit to the Deutsche Bank’s exceptional collection prompts us to reflect on our own patterns, urging us to confront the material consequences of capitalist crises and their persistent influence on history—revealing the enduring inequalities that shape our present. These are the fragments we share, as we sustain our awareness through art in another searing summer.

Images
Cyprien Gaillard, *Retinal Rivalry* (still), 2024. 3D motion picture, DCI DCP, dual 4k projection at 120fps, 2-channel audio, 29:03 min. © Cyprien Gaillard. Courtesy of the artist, Sprüth Magers, and Gladstone Gallery.

Oleg Khvostov, *ME MYSELF / CENTRAL RUSSIAN ELEVATED STUPIDITY PROJECT*, 1998. Performance exhibition: “The Brotherhood of New Blockheads and Photographic Art,” “Anatomy of Contemporary Art in Saint Petersburg” Art Festival, Art-kollegiya Gallery, Saint Petersburg. Photo: Alexander Lyashko.

Serban Savu, *Lunch Break*, 2023–2024. Mixed media, mosaic, 60 x 42 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Plan B, Cluj/Berlin.

Thomas Bayrle, *Pianta Robusta V,* 2024. Pigment print and acrylic on linen, 90 x 90 cm. © Thomas Bayrle. Courtesy of the artist and neugerriemschneider, Berlin. Photo: Jens Ziehe.

SoiL Thornton, *decentralized portrait selves*, 2025. 2-inch pompom balls (12,901), dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Neu, Berlin. Photo: Stefan Korte.

Diane Severin Nguyen, *Spring Snow*, 2025. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Molitor, Berlin.

Anne Imhof, *Romeo*, 2025. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Galerie Buchholz.

Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, *Skeptical*, 2025. Archival inkjet print, 100 x 70 cm. Courtesy of the artist and NOME, Berlin.

Álvaro Urbano, *September and the Lions*, 2025. Installation view at ChertLüdde, Berlin. Photo: Marjorie Brunet Plaza. Courtesy of the artist and ChertLüdde, Berlin.

Benjamin Lallier, *Untitled (Potato + Constellation)*, 2024. Potato and fake diamond studs, 10 x 5 x 4 cm. © Benjamin Lallier, 2025. Courtesy of the artist and Heidi, Berlin.

Hudinilson Jr., *Narcisse, Exercício de Me Ver II*, 1982. Documentation of the performance, detail. Courtesy of the Estate of Hudinilson Jr. and KOW, Berlin.

Data Privacy