

REGEN PROJECTS

Brown, Kate. "Artist and Curator Kader Attia's Relentlessly Grim Berlin Biennale Forces Audiences to Confront the Ills of Capitalism." *Artnet News* (June 10, 2022) [ill.] [online]

artnet news

Shows & Exhibitions

Artist and Curator Kader Attia's Relentlessly Grim Berlin Biennale Forces Audiences to Confront the Ills of Capitalism

The 12th Berlin Biennale opens to the public June 11.

Kate Brown, June 10, 2022



Mai Nguyễn-Long, Installation view, 12. Berlin Biennale, Akademie der Künste, Hanseatenweg (11.6.–18.9.2022). Photo: dotgain.info.

Take a deep, long breath before heading into this year's Berlin Biennale, because it is heavy.

The six-venue exhibition, which opens to the public June 11, offers little reprieve from the weight of the world. Instead, the show, titled "Still Present," has an unrelenting focus on the destruction wrought by colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism.

REGEN PROJECTS

During a rainy press preview day on Thursday, the show's curator, French-Algerian artist Kader Attia, spoke at length about the urgency of art, which makes "the invisible visible." Together with his curatorial team, seventy artists, including Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Omer Fast, and Uriel Orlow, have been invited to show across six venues, one of which is the Stasi headquarters, the central office of former East Germany's secret service.



Curator and artistic team of the 12th Berlin Biennale (from left to right Ana Teixeira Pinto, Noam Segal, Kader Attia, Đỗ Tường Linh, Rasha Salti, Marie Helene Pereira). Photo: Silke Briel

The show starts off at Akademie der Künste's Tiergarten location with a boxed-away assortment of plants in a steamy greenhouse. The work, by Sammy Baloji of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, critiques the imperialist motivation to collector the world; beside it, there is an adjoining audio recording from the early 20th century made by the state-funded Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission, which sought to index sounds made by African prisoners at the time.

Next to it is a work by the Chinese, Paris-based filmmaker Wang Yuyan that depicts a 2018 Chinese initiative to launch three fake moons into orbit to offer continuous light in order to keep society more productive.



Sammy Baloji, Installation view, 12. Berlin Biennale, Akademie der Künste, Hanseatenweg, 11.6.–18.9.2022. Photo: dotgain.info. Sammy Baloji, ... and to those North Sea waves whispering sunken stories (II), (2021).

REGEN PROJECTS

The tack of the exhibition, which triangulates post-colonialism and capitalist criticism, is not surprising given Attia's CV. In Paris, he founded a now-closed arts space called La Colonie that hosted community talks and events focused on racism and colonialism. The Berlin-based artist, who is represented by a slew of international galleries, is also well-known for his sculptures considering the symbolic relationship between injury and repair. His Berlin Biennale feels like a thesis-driven dive into the collective and individual traumas wrought by modernity.

Set against this beating sense of a foreboding, a pair of canvases by painter Calida Rawles offer a short moment of rest. Yet even these works, depicting Black children gently floating in clear blue water, deal with the trauma of centuries of oppression and the tragedies of the Middle Passage.



Đào Châu Hải, Installation view, 12. Berlin Biennale, Akademie der Künste, Hanseatenweg, 11.6.–18.9.2022. Photo: dotgain.info. Đào Châu Hải, *Ballad of the East Sea*, (2022).

“Art confronts algorithmic governance by nurturing our ability to dream and enabling us to de-automate dreams,” Attia said in his opening curatorial statement. Yet much of the work confronts disturbing realities. At KW Institute for Contemporary Art, for example, acclaimed Israeli cultural theorist Ariella Azoulay has on view a research work titled *The Natural History of Rape*, which examines the mass rapes that took place in Berlin after the end of the Second World War. And at the Hamburger Bahnhof, Jean-Jacques Lebel presents documentation of torture from Abu Ghraib prison.

The show also presents several documentary displays in an approach not dissimilar to Cecilia Alemani's in “The Milk of Dreams” at the 2022 Venice Biennale. But instead of lyrical whimsy, Attia's time-capsules offer historic books and other artifacts that bring more context to some of the contemporary art on view.

In all, one may leave the exhibition unsettled but wiser—and radicalized to alter the present moment.

The 12th Berlin Biennale takes place from June 11 to September 18, 2022.

REGEN PROJECTS



Nil Yalter, Installation view, 12. Berlin Biennale, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, 11.6.–18.9.2022. Photo: Silke Briel. From left to right: Nil Yalter, *Estranged Doors*, (1983). Nil Yalter, *Exile Is A Hard Job* (1983/2022).



Kruzifixe, Installation view, 12. Berlin Biennale, Akademie der Künste, Pariser Platz, 11.6.–18.9.2022. Photo: dotgain.info.