Terrible Beauty: Art and Fear in the City


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PROPOSAL

Title
Terrible Beauty: Art & Fear in the City

Aim
This exhibition considers how a range of international artists since the early twentieth century have engaged with their cities to reveal and express forms of anxiety, insecurity and fear within its boundaries. The main theme running through the display is the tension revealed between moments of striking beauty and formal intrigue and of consistent threat and unease in urban environments. Unsafe corners, menacing shadows, politically precarious situations and disconcerting social realities should logically contradict a sense of reverence for the cities captured, yet despite a consistently lingering threat, the artists in Terrible Beauty manage to reveal their cities’ wondrous appeal, their aesthetic marvels. From Rosario, Argentina to Moscow, Russia, and from 1920s Paris to modern-day London, they stage unsettling psychic surrealities, reveal the abstract poetic dimensions of everyday life and critically address concrete political problems.

Lay-out
Spread out over two exhibition rooms, an entrance hall, stairwell and library at the Institute for International Visual Arts (Iniva) in Shoreditch, the exhibition will consist of three main sections. In the first, Capturing City Specters, artists’ efforts to photographically capture the poetic uncanny in the city are presented. Taking pre-war Surrealism as a point of departure and historic reference, half the space on the ground floor will be taken up by a visual narrative relating and juxtaposing different artists’ photographic works.

The exhibition will continue in room 1 into a section called Urban Interventions, presenting artistic interventions into the urban landscape. Performances by Sheila Legge in pre-war London and Adrian Piper in 1970s New York will feature alongside Fernando Traverso’s graffiti work in Argentina. In each of these, city phantoms are actively conjured – instead of merely documented – to tackle fraught social situations and concrete political anxieties.

Subsequently, in a third section entitled Concrete Powers, Iniva’s entrance hall, stairwell and second floor spaces will present artists’ critical engagement with the power dynamics of architecture, of public space and of movements through the city, predominantly through video work documenting urban space. Finally, two works will feature outside the gallery walls, where they will blur the boundaries between city and gallery and function as introductory pieces to draw in audiences from the street.
**Location**

*Terrible Beauty* is designed for Iniva, London. Located at Rivington place in Shoreditch, in a narrow alley in Shoreditch, it draws from the gallery’s location in the heart of one of the city’s most dynamic neighborhoods. The gallery’s quintessential urban identity is not only reflected in its location, but also its open plan and large glass façade, oriented towards the street. *Terrible Beauty* intends to make full use of this visibility of the gallery’s interior by placing Fernando Traverso’s installation *In Memory*, directly behind the glass in room 1, making it visually accessible from the street during daytime.¹

After dusk (occurring early in the winter months), the glass façade will be illuminated by a projection to be commissioned from Jenny Holzer, who, known for her critical stances towards the politics of public space, can be expected to critically address the gallery’s urban context.² Her projection will draw the attention of the young crowd who will be out in Shoreditch after gallery opening hours and peak their interest in the exhibition. Finally, the deconstruction of in- and exterior of the gallery space will be furthered by the placement of David Batchelor’s *Skip* on the street. Like Traverso’s, his work will also be visible through the glass façade, formally relating to the photographs displayed in room 1. Outside, *Skip* will relate to construction-work objects in the surroundings, making the familiar strange and blurring the boundaries between the grimy, ever-developing city and the clean, seemingly static exhibition space.

**Theoretical underpinnings**

Sigmund Freud’s concept of the uncanny will provide a central theoretical pillar, his three conditions for experiencing the unsettling sensation being fulfilled throughout the show. According to Freud, the uncanny arises upon encountering: 1) a confusion of the animate and inanimate, exemplified by mannequins, which appear living but nonetheless remains lifeless; 2) a seemingly compulsive but rationally inexplicable repetition of things, such as a recurring visual sign; and 3) a revelation to things that seemingly should have remained hidden, but have nevertheless come to light.³ Each of the works in *Terrible Beauty* carries at least one of these markers, allowing for the familiarity of the gallery space to turn strange.

The engagement of pre-war Surrealists with both the city and the medium of photography will provide the show’s main historic reference point, especially for

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¹ Besides suiting Iniva’s urban identity, *Terrible Beauty* furthers the gallery’s mission to provide increased exposure to artists from diverse backgrounds. A wide range of nationalities are represented and most the artists in the show belong to groups occupying minority positions in today’s art world, such as female artists, non-white and non-European artists.

² For past project, see Holzer’s website: http://projects.jennyholzer.com/projections

section 1, since the Surrealists were the first to use photography to draw out cities’ marvellous psychic energies. Classic Paris works by Eugène Atget and Brassaï are included at the entrance to illustrate the earliest attempts to capture uncanny city specters, whether formed by lifeless mannequins or anonymous graffiti grimaces. Without negating the obvious distance between the work of this historic avant-garde and that of the contemporary artists, Terrible Beauty will consider a possible continuity across space and time of artists disrupting everyday conceptions of the real through photographic engagement with the city.

Also relevant are the Surrealists’ efforts to disturb the rational capitalist order by drawing attention to things left behind in society by the ever-turning wheels of industrial modernization. The show engages visitors with the notion of the Surrealist ‘outmoded’ as theorized by Walter Benjamin, especially in relation to Atget’s works. Again, without suggesting a direct transferal, Terrible Beauty proposes a relevance for this anti-capitalist discourse in relation to contemporary cities and our modes of consuming our way through them.

Target audience
Shoreditch, as well as London, provides the larger frame for Terrible Beauty. In this light, Benjamin’s diagnosis of capitalism as the driving force of transformation of the urban environment is relevant. London’s more dilapidated, run-down East-End, once considered little more than a post-industrial relic of the manufacturing era, has, over the past decade or so, experienced immense levels of gentrification. Its new demographic of young, hip and well-educated internationals constitutes the exhibition’s target audience. This group will be invited to reconsider both the poetics and politics of their own living environment.

4 ‘Bretonian Surrealists were the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the ‘outmoded’, in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct [...]’ According to Benjamin, Surrealism’s highlighting of things mundane, old-fashioned or destitute could reveal the artificial, insidious nature of industrial capitalism, allowing for the public’s ‘profane illumination’; an awakening from the ‘dream sleep’ that it had fallen under since capitalism’s advent. The Surrealist outmoded thus posed the cultural detritus of the past moment residual in capitalism against the socioeconomic complacency of its present moment. See W. Benjamin, ‘Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia’, 1929. Available at: http://www.generationonline.org/c/fcsurrealism.htm, accessed on 2/3/15.

5 The same dark streets and alleys of East London in which Jack the Ripper gruesomely murdered prostitutes in 1888 are now littered with the hippest bars and restaurants and the racially diverse immigrant population that moved here in the latter half of the twentieth century is now joined by an influx of young, white twenty-somethings keen on the affordable rent prices (increasingly rare in London) and the area’s ‘cool-factor’. See http://www.economist.com/blogs/blighty/2014/04/gentrification-london and http://edition.cnn.com/2012/07/26/opinion/olympics-east-london/
Photographic work
As a post-war Surrealist, Czech photographer Emila Medková’s work will constitute a
transition point in the exhibition from interwar Paris to the contemporary. Medková
documented the ambiguous anthropomorphism that presented itself in the cityscape of
Stalinist Prague in a full-frontal, objective format. Exhibited near each other, her image
of a Prague hair salon relates conceptually to Atget’s image of the same subject matter
in Paris and provides a formal continuity with Brassaï’s smirking graffiti head. Moving
on from Medková, Rut Blees Luxemburg captured contemporary London night scenes in
colour and instead of an objective reality, they stage a subjective, nightmarish
surreality. They range from a beastly bull’s head and a totemic multi-arm body to an
enigmatically ‘veiled’ wall and a claustrophobic container posing as an individual’s
secret hide-out. Together her evocative titles, these enticing images appear to illustrate
imaginary narratives of urban horror.

David Batchelor’s series of white monochromes might not, in their blank innocence,
appear to continue the frightfulness. Yet his endless range of photographs stages the
uncanny by compulsively repeating the square voids that have come to be highly visible
to him, but remain unnoticed to others. Batchelor has described his intrigue with the
monochromes as related to their fleeting condition. Their transitory status as an ‘in
between’ means that their individual presences are temporary; here now, but
potentially no longer tomorrow. Terrible Beauty will feature the portrait-oriented works
in the series, projected as a steady stream on to a large panel on the far wall of room 1,
where they will be juxtaposed with Blees Luxemburg’s equally ephemeral shadow
forms.

On the other side of Bachelor’s projections Olga Chernysheva’s photographs of bright,
colourful hats will relate to his work visually and conceptually. The fluffy amorphic
forms in Waiting for the Miracle conjure uncanniness through their repetition and
interchangeability in the environment of contemporary Moscow. Alongside, her much
more austere On Duty series documents repetition and modularity too. Here the fronts
of heads feature, but only as the statue-like markers of an underpaid and overlooked
working class that silently performs their duties of safeguarding the Moscow subway
escalators. Like Batchelor’s monochromes, their days are likely numbered, since their
jobs will become obsolete as soon as the subway system’s safety technology is
automated. Fascinated with the capitalist individualism that was once alien to Russian
society (as it was in Medková’s Prague) Chernysheva documents the tension this creates
with the ‘outmoded’ residuals of collectivism.

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6 Blees Luxemburg has referred to the imprisonment of writers like Marquis de Sade and Jean
Genet in relation to this work. See http://en.cafa.com.cn/the-photographic-articulation-of-the-
city-by-rut-blees-luxemburg.html
**Performative works**

In the exhibition's second section, *Urban Interventions*, the work of one relatively unknown male and two very famous female artists will be presented. Argentinean artist Fernando Traverso’s carried out graffiti interventions in the urban landscape of Rosario, Argentina during the country’s ‘Dirty War’ between 1976-83. His eerie documentary photographs of his ‘phantom’ bikes will be on display above a vitrine providing contextual material such as newspaper items and documentation of the artist’s actions. Considering the important, yet troublesome political nature of Traverso’s practice, the display of his 27 silk flags will both be prominent (visible through the glass) and solemn. The dividing panel inside room 1 will provide a degree of privacy and separation from the other displays, allowing the work’s physical and conceptual size the space it deserves.

Adrian Piper also addressed political anxieties during the 1970s, albeit in North instead of South America. Piper’s renowned examinations of race, gender and the politics of behaviour in the public spaces of New York City are represented by her performance of *The Mythic Being*. The work will be shown on an old-school television set with headphones provided. *I am the Locus*, an extension of the performance, will feature on the wall beside it. This section and the overall display in room 1 will come full circle with the small yet very well-known photograph that documents Sheila Legge performing her famous Surrealist happening *Phantom of Sex Appeal* in London’s Trafalgar Square in 1936. Representing an emblematic Surrealist protest of society’s repression of sexuality alongside Traverso’s protest of political oppression and Piper’s against racial prejudice, Legge’s image provides the visual link between Piper’s work and the pre-war photographs displayed at the start of the display in room 1.

**Video work**

Moving upstairs, a video installation entitled *Shotgun* by Italian artist Monica Bonvicini – to be projected on two large panels in the corner of room 2 – will address the political implications of urban development under capitalism more aggressively than the calm aesthetic of the photographs downstairs. Bonvicini’s ‘shots’ of economically depressed Los Angeles neighborhoods will appear jarring and uncanny; each screen will be moving at different speeds, capturing and inducing a sense of anxiety. Meanwhile, the juxtaposition of the visuals with a charming cello and guitar soundtrack that is overlaid with a voice-over from a home improvement radio program will make a black humour seep from the work. This dimension will reveal itself to the visitors when they put on the headphones that will be dangling from the ceiling in front of the large screens, allowing a full immersion into the work.

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7 As a subversive protest of the disappearances that were carried out by Argentina’s military regime, the artist stenciled silhouettes of bikes – the only thing left-behind indicating a disappearance – onto the city’s walls. See L. Reuter (ed.), *Los Desaparecidos/The Disappeared*, exh. cat. North Dakota Museum of Art, North Dakota, 2005, p.58
The visitor will already have encountered Bonvicini’s irony in the wall along the stairs leading up to the second floor. Commenting on the sexual politics of urban architecture, her *Architecture is the Ultimate Erotic Act* will be installed in one of the square openings in the stairwell, allowing a view through the glass work onto the opposing hallway wall. Here, Andy Warhol’s single shot video-work *Empire* will be projected. This large, grey projection will constitute a vibrating, phallic point of reference for the work of Bonvicini. Having left room 1 with a final view of Alfred Stieglitz’s image of New York city’s skyscrapers by the door, the visitor will have gradually been led into the exhibition’s final section *The Powers of Architecture*.

In the same room as Bonvicini’s, Anri Sala’s video-work *1395 days of Red* will equally examine the movement through a destitute architectural environment and its juxtaposition with music. Created to remember and relive the anxiety of Sarajevo under siege between 1992-96, Sala stages a dialogue between people’s movements, running in order not to get ‘shot’ by snipers and Tchaikovsky’s *Pathetique*. Again, the beautiful melody stands in stark contrast with the violence of the content, yet Sala insists that the music forms a genuine driving force for the body to move through the urban space, encoding how it experiences and remembers physical actions performed under anxiety and duress. Tchaikovsky’s music will be heard out loud inside room 2, equally providing a score for Bonvicini’s *Shotgun* when a visitor is not wearing headphones.

In addition to a wall text in the second-floor corridor introducing the exhibition’s final section, an A4 sheet of paper will be made available in a plastic wall holder explaining the narratives of the three video works. This will avoid that the final video piece on this floor be overlooked: Suki Chan’s *Sleep Walk Sleep Talk*, made up of several digitally manipulated time-lapses, will be shown on high definition television screens in the library, again with headphones provided. Although staged in ‘free’ and liberal London, Chan’s work also examines the constraints and conditions the city imposes upon the behaviours and movements of its inhabitants. Constituting the end-point to the exhibition as a journey to different cities worldwide, viewing Chan’s contemplative work in the quietude of the library will draw the visitors’ minds back to contemporary London before releasing them back into its streets.

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8 http://channel.louisiana.dk/video/anri-sala-music-language
SAMPLE EXHIBITION LABEL:

Suki Chan, *Sleep Walk Sleep Talk*, 2009
2-Channel High Definition video
21 mins 50 secs

Suki Chan’s series of dream-like photographic time-lapses study the movements of London’s diverse inhabitants through their city. *Sleep Walk Sleep Talk* is the artist’s poetic documentation of people’s efforts to forge their own personal and psychological space outside the architectural restrictions and behavioural patterns imposed by life in the city. Moving from a pedestrian’s hazy rush through the drudgery of daily city life to weary travelers dozing on buses, Chan mediates between public and private, investigating the underlying social, cultural and political structures of London’s streets, architecture and transportation systems.

*Sleep Walk, Sleep Talk* draws on Chan’s interest in urban planning and her experiences of her home-town Hong Kong and the Westernization of the towns on their periphery. Her practice combines light, moving image, electronics and sound within mixed-media installations to explore physical and psychological experiences of space through simple, repetitive and sometimes painstaking processes, abstracting familiar materials and objects to create uncanny narratives.
SAMPLE CATALOGUE ENTRY

The photography of Emila Medková

'The world of poetry is the world of consciousness, of reality. We want dialectical, harsh and conscious realism.'

- Emila Medková

The work of Emila Medková represents one of the most sustained and critically engaged examples of surrealist documentary photography, yet has rarely been exhibited outside of the Czech Republic until now. Born in 1928 and active from the late 1940s until her death in 1985, Medková’s invisibility echoes the phantom existence of the post-war Czech surrealist group of which she was a central member. This fascinating intellectual circle enjoyed hardly any public existence during Medková’s lifetime however, since the group was forced to operate underground due to the strict cultural and intellectual censure that Stalinism imposed upon the country almost uninterruptedly from 1948 to 1989. As a result, Medková’s works are cloaked in mystery. This not only relates to their furtive provenance, but also to their documentation of the aesthetic enigmas of urban Prague’s reality during these years.

Medková’s photographs are unedited, unromanticised and present reality in a full-frontal, unassuming fashion. Yet despite their objective realism, they stage an undeniable anthropomorphism that stimulates our imagination through ambiguous metaphors, wondrous uncertainty and uncanny doubt. Our suspicion that they document the traces of human presences – now lost or disappeared – is strengthened by Medková’s evocative titles. Thus, we feel sorrow upon beholding Two Widows, the mere documentation of two pieces of rigid fabric hanging from a wall. Equally, we feel anxious seeing and questioning the origins of the paint-streaked traces in Hands. The discolouration of a wooden fence miraculously evokes the Torso of an angel and the shattered window of a hair-salon seems to reflect a bust, with the photographer’s shoulders visible in the glass underneath that which poses as a head. This head has exploded however, the outwardly diverging cracks (ironically representing hair in need of fixing?) violently negating the wholeness of the human skull, the locus of all reason. Calling these absurd aesthetic finds instances of ‘concrete irrationality’, Medková reveals how the reality of post-war urban Prague desperately cried for the attention of the imagination.

At the time, this imagination was oppressed; contained and hidden away, yet Medková forced it out of the fabric of the real. Although her desire for a concrete consciousness based in reality - harsh and dialectical - appears contradictory to Bretonian Surrealism’s famous devotion to subconscious desires and dreams, her photography is exemplary of the Czech group’s post-war activities. For the Czech Surrealists operating under Stalinism, the cultural and political situation – a far cry from Paris during the 1920’s and
30's – demanded new tactics for creating art that would avoid bargaining with this reality. Medková’s development of an evocative visual language based on ‘concrete irrationality’ was just this. While the state’s manipulation of culture and language was paralysing structures of both signification and thought in Czech society, she resisted by carrying out a type of uncorrupted creative practice that demonstrated the unwavering power of the imagination and its potential for free and subjective interpretation.

Bibliography


Effenberger, V., 'Variants, Constants and Dominants of Surrealism' in Analogon (1967), pp. xxix-xx


Fijalkowski, K.,'Emila Medková: The Magic of Despair’ Tate Papers, Issue 4, 2005


Websites

http://projects.jennyholzer.com/projections

http://www.pacegallery.com/london/exhibitions/12712/olga-chernysheva

http://www.economist.com/blogs/blighty/2014/04/gentrification-london


http://www.artangel.org.uk//projects/2011/1395_days_without_red/excerpt_anri_sala/1395_excerpt_anri_sala

http://www.artcritical.com/2003/10/01/monica-bonvicini-anxiety-attack/


http://www.sukichan.co.uk/sleepwalkinfo.htm
ILLUSTRATED CHECKLIST

1. Jenny Holzer, site-specific commission for the glass façade of Iniva, Rivington place, to be projected from dusk to circa 2 am for the duration of the exhibition. (image shown is Holzer’s site projection onto Somerset House on the 11th of April, 2006 for her project For London)


Each of these small, pre-war photographs will be framed by white passe-partouts as well as simple, black, narrow outer frames.

8. Emila Medková, We’ll do your Hair, 1950s, black and white photograph, 110 x. 86 cm. On loan from the artist’s estate
9. Emila Medková, *Two Widows*, 1965, black and white photograph, 80 x 120 cm. On loan from the artist’s estate

10. Emila Medková, *Hands*, 1962, black and white photograph, 75 x 100 cm. On loan from the artist’s estate
11. Emila Medková, Torso, 1965, black and white photograph, 115 x 100 cm. On loan from the artist’s estate.


15. Rut Blees Luxemburg, *Narrow Stage*, 1998, C-print on aluminium, 130 x 180 cm. On loan from a private collection

Each of Rut Blees Luxemburg's photographs will be hung in unframed state.

16. David Batchelor, *Skip*, 2012, skip and neon light tubes, 150 x 300 x 250 cm. On loan from a private collection (shown as installed outside its Brighton Town Hall)

These portrait-oriented photographs will be projected as a steady, slow flow of images onto a large screen on the back wall of room 1.
18. Olga Chernysheva, *Waiting for the Miracle*, 2000, 5/12 works out of the series, analog photographic print, 100 x 150 cm. each. On loan from the collection of Pace Gallery, London

These works will be framed without passe-partout by simple, narrow, white frames.

These works will be framed without passe-partout by simple, black, narrow frames

SURROUNDED AND CONSTRAINED

BY ANIMATE PHYSICAL OBJECTS
23. Adrian Piper, *I am the Locus (1-5)*, 1975, oil crayon drawing on photograph, 50 x 70 cm. each. On loan from the collection of the Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago.
24. Andy Warhol, *Empire*, 1964, 16mm film transferred to video (black and white, silent), 8 hours 5 min. at 16 frames per second. On loan from the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York
25. Monica Bonvicini, *Architecture is the Ultimate Erotic Act. Carry it to Excess (From the series Quotations on Glass)*, 2006, Black enamel on broken safety glass, 123 x 166 x 1 cm. On loan from private collection

See the simulated installation views below for a visual explanation of the installation of Warhol’s *Empire* and Bonvicini’s *Architecture is the Ultimate Erotic Act*


29. Suki Chan, *Sleep Walk Sleep Talk*, 2009, 2-Channel High Definition video 21 mins 50 secs

This work will be shown on two HD flat-screen televisions, suited to its technologically advanced use digitally constructed time-lapses and futuristic aesthetic.
INSTALLATION SHOTS & SITE VIEWS

Schematic exhibition lay-out (numbers correspond to exhibition checklist):

GROUND FLOOR

Lay out ground floor with numbered works and lettered interpretative elements

SECOND FLOOR

Lay out second floor with numbered works and lettered interpretative elements
Simulated installation views (created in Sketch-up):
Exterior view from street onto glass façade

View upon entering gallery room no.1 on the ground floor
View upon entering gallery room no.1 on the ground floor

View of entrance section, space for introductory wall text and photographs by Medkova
View of entrance section, space for introductory wall text and pre-war Surrealist works

View of ‘interventions’ section alongside dividing panel, with space for Urban Interventions wall text
View from behind Traverso’s flags, with his photographs and vitrine with documentary material visible directly behind.

View of Iniva’s entrance hall from the stairwell (main entrance in the left lower corner), with Warhol’s Empire projected onto wall, to be viewed through Monica Bonvicini’s work.
Site views:

View of Iniva’s glass façade. Here the view through the window, which will reveal the interior of the gallery space during Terrible Beauty, is obstructed by a black text panel.

View of Iniva’s entrance