

ART REVIEW: A Global Prism in Progress

In the first U.S. museum showcase of the Berlin-based art collective Rimini Protokoll, the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara broaches multiple issue and questions with the evolving show '100% City'

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'Rimini Protokoll: City as Stage'

When: through April 30

Where: Museum of Contemporary Art
Santa Barbara, 653 Paseo Nuevo

Hours: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday,
Friday and Saturday; 11 a.m. to 8 p.m.
Thursday; and 12 to 5 p.m. Sunday

Information: 966-
5373, mcsantabarbara.org

Whether by accident, providence or otherwise, Trump-era topicality has been filtering through Santa Barbara's art scene in recent weeks, virtually timed with the arrival of the new White House resident in office. At the Westmont Museum of Art, the engaging show "BOWERS/ERRE, So Close and So Far" grapples, subtly and artfully, with border issues and tensions. Meanwhile, over at the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara, matters of immigration, the veracity of polling, globalism and other



"City as Stage," by Rimini Protokoll
Brett Bollier photos



suddenly hot, contested topics are abuzz in the current show "City as Stage," by the Berlin-based collective Rimini Protokoll.

In this first U.S. museum show by the unique collective, a joint effort created by Helgard Haug, Stefan Haug, Stefan Kaegi and Danile Wetzel, the group's distinctive and hard to define aesthetic offers up its mix of theater, performance art, conceptual and installation art practices. The evolving piece called "100% City" culls material from the numerous iterations of the work in cities around the world, on carefully situated and conjoined video screens, embodying a multi-cultural and multi-location sensory mesh of places and peoples.

As with other category- and medium-defying contemporary art shows in this space, the first step in the art appreciation process has to do with acclimating to the nature of the beast, and the intended nature of perceiving what we're seeing. In a group statement in an accompanying booklet for the show, the group, speaking as a single collective entity, explains somewhat craftily, "Some people call me documentary-theatre maker, but I more like to think of myself as somebody who constantly tries to expand the limits of what could be understood as theatre."

In the case of this piece, the "actors" are non-professionals, people on the street and in a given city. As groups brought together in art encounters, filmed for later treatments and documentation, they address questions as a polled body, such as the immigration-related questions put before a group in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, on a jumbo screen in MCASB's main gallery.

Elsewhere in the gallery, several smaller screens, tethered to headphones for each site/setting, represent other gatherings for art's sake around the world. With headphones and singularity of focus, it is possible to bask in the site-specific sight-and-sound experience of individual performances, or to let the sum experience of a more global matrix of stimuli wash over us.

To that end, a smaller gallery hosts a wrap-around of 12 different video sources, in Cork, Ireland; to Philadelphia to Sao Paulo, Brazil; to Gwangju, South Korea, and elsewhere, with participants checking in at specific times. The sum effect is a warm but dizzying convergence of times, places and slices of humanity. Another sectioned-off area of the museum shows a large group in Sao Paulo on a screen flanked by two physical signs referring to identity, reading "ME" and "NOT ME." This touches on the Trump factor, which has been accused in the court of political comedy of narcissistic self-regard, and little concern for the "NOT ME" element of humanity.

In the back gallery, a darkened room dramatically demonstrates the effects of polling in an unusual way, with questions answered by people triggering constellations of lights, dancing on a black sphere. With this component of the exhibition, a certain cosmic perspective is in the air here, expanding from the global to the (perhaps slightly ironically) metaphysical.

Rimini Protokoll is also zooming in on the local angle of its visit here, collecting data and Santa Barbara-specific material in its "Engage" polling area, and the off-site performances in the "Home Visit USA" series (remaining local performances are on March 16 and April 20). Also on the home front, a blue wall is thickly marked-up with questions and answers, and three large spheres on which we are invited to apply colored stickers to answer three relevant questions: "Has art changed you?," "Are you, or would you be, proud to be American?" and "is Santa Barbara Paradise?"

Personally, my answers would be in the affirmative for each of those questions, with qualifications. Alas, polls can both illuminate and obfuscate, which is one of the many messages conveyed in this slyly, gently provocative exhibition.