

Last week there was some time to roam around Berlin so we went to see films, exhibitions and hung out in parks, cafes and restaurants. On May First we went to see the [Soviet War Memorial](#). One afternoon we went to see the [4th Berlin Biennale](#), a survey show of contemporary arts. It's obvious that this show has to be read as a response to the previous Berlin Biennale, curated by Ute Meta Bauer and Documenta X and XI. No more global, critical non-Western art. We're tired of post-colonial realism. Dark moods and death are apparently exclusive European values. The show has a sense of classic 1980s doom and gloom. With the weather being so nice, you would almost think the event is happening in the wrong season. But these observations are more or less obvious. What is less transparent is the economy behind such shows.

What struck me this time is how many artists are in fact representing their countries, or, to be more precise: their funding bodies. There was hardly any work that was not (co-)financed by a national arts council or similar organization. This means that there is an unprecedented power of art bureaucrats which artist, with what work, gets shown at such biennales. If you ever got in trouble with your funding body, they do not like your work or haven't heard of you, most likely you're not going to enter the international biennale circuit. This may, in part, explain why we always get to see the same small group of artists at such biennales, no matter where you are in the world. It also means that the classic distinction between the Venice Biennale (with its national pavilions) and the theme-based biennales (in this case: "Of Mice and Men") needs to be questioned. In fact all biennales display their very own, tidily curated collection of "national artists".