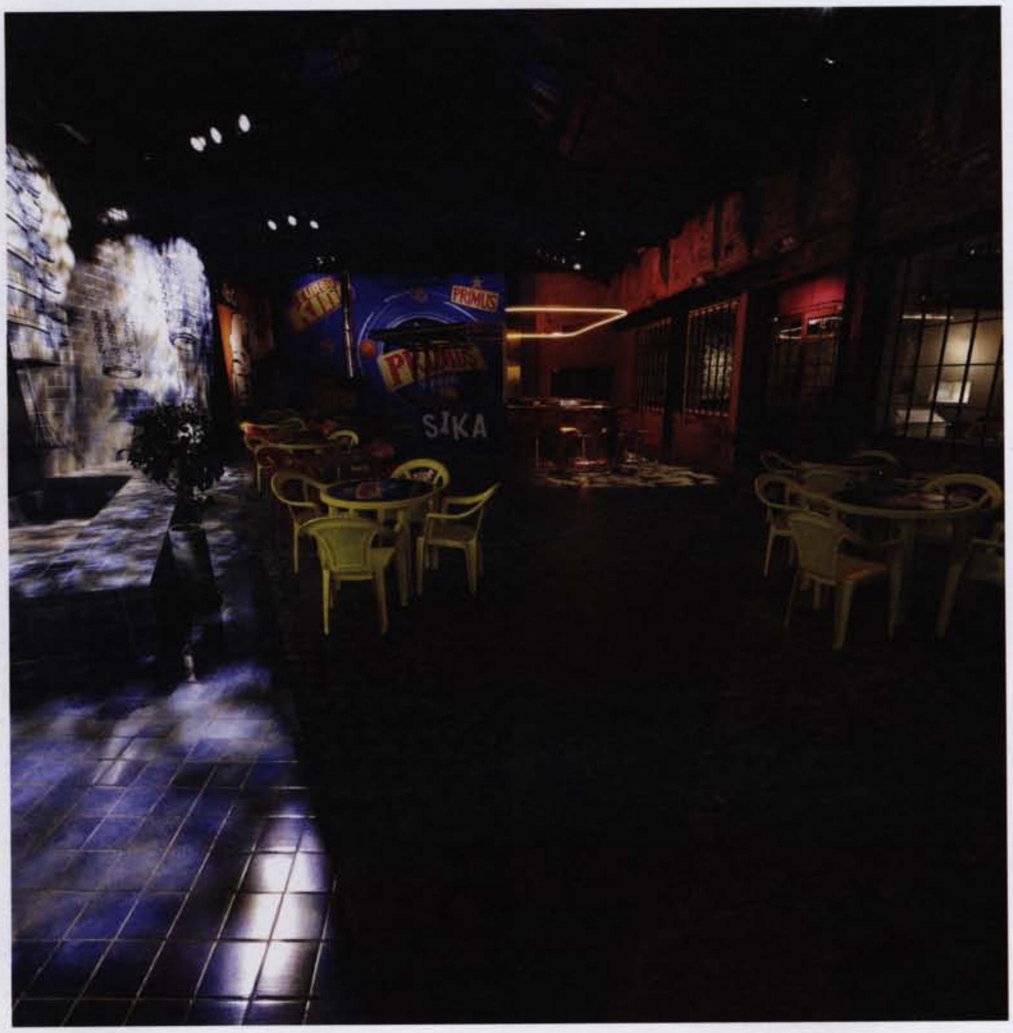
Modern Painters Mars 2009

THE DOUBLE CLUB

77 TORRENS STREET

I visited Carsten Höller's Double Club twice: first to view it as an art installation, and then, in the evening, to experience it as a restaurant, bar, and disco. For, like many of the artist's initiatives, the venue has a dual identity. Intended to be open only for six months, the club is a place where art and life coalesce and Western and Congolese cultures collide. Höller fell in love with Congo when he first visited the capital of the Democratic Republic, Kinshasa, in 2001, and he conceptualized the Double Club as a place where Congolese art, food, and music would enjoy equal billing with their Western counterparts.

The German artist is well known for creating environments in which visitors are invited to lose their inhibitions in immersive experiences. He installed giant slides, for instance, in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. They were a huge success; three million visitors hurtled down. *Test Site* (2006–07) was also a spectator sport; watching artworld sophisticates trying to regain their composure after abandoning themselves to physical sensation and landing in a heap on the floor was very amusing. A night spent at the Guggenheim, in Höller's *Revolving Hotel Room* (installed last fall for the "anyspacewhatever" exhibition), gave access to another kind of liminal space—of sleeping, "perchance to dream." It, too, caught people's imaginations, and it was completely booked.



THIS PAGE: Carsten Höller, *Double Club*, 2008. Installation view, Electrowerkz, London.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Mark Bradford, *Mithra*, 2008. Mixed media, 70 x 20 x 25 ft.

The Double Club is a far riskier undertaking. In a museum context, ordinary objects can acquire a surreal aura, but the club has been set up in the real world where such ventures are unexceptional and where art often becomes little more than decor. The venue is a former Victorian warehouse in a scruffy north London back street. The only sign that a new place has opened in this Dickensian setting is the dark-suited doormen (who are actually very friendly). The central space is a cobbled courtyard with a glazed roof; during the day it feels exposed but, after dark, it is warm and welcoming. The dialogue between African and Western cultures begins here; in one corner is a giant reproduction of a self-portrait by Congolese artist Chéri Samba, a paintbrush between his teeth. Lining the opposite corner are blue tiles painted with the visionary towers of a "Flying City" designed by Russian architect Georgi Krutikow in 1928. Each suggests that culture offers a way forward, but similarities end there.

I doubt if anyone at the red and yellow plastic tables ponders the failure of utopian modernism or the chaos of postcolonial Congo. They are more likely nibbling kebabs from the barbecue while wondering whether to order a Primus or Turbo King beer from the Congolese bar, a wooden shack erected beside eye-catching murals advertising the imported tipples. But since the beers cost £9 a bottle, most people opt for cocktails mixed at the gleaming copper counter of the Western bar, beneath a pink neon sign reading "Two Horses Riders Club."

From here you can see into the restaurant. During the press view, it was filled with journalists curious about the decor and dual-identity menu and politely asking "Is it art?"—to which Höller replied it was up to us to decide. At night, no one seemed to care; some may have noticed the Andy Warhol screenprint, Alighiero Boetti embroidery, and Samba painting on the walls, but I doubt if they considered the implications of their having been hung side by side. They were too busy tucking in to familiar favorites like shrimps, burgers, and roast partridge, or sampling Congolese delicacies like goat stew served in large leaves, salted fish topped with onion marmalade, and smoked fish with manioc. The exotic dishes are delicious and, costing a fraction of their Western counterparts, easily win the day. Enter the disco, and you are assaulted by a wall of sound; if you are lucky, the pulsating rhythms of Congolese rumba rock vibrate through your bones and propel you onto the dance floor beneath giant glitter balls and a red LED palm tree; if you are unlucky, your tinnitus is exacerbated by a blast of Western house music.

With its good food and relaxed atmosphere, the Double Club is a great night out. As an artwork, however, it is problematic. Whereas *Test Site* and *Revolving Hotel Room* enabled you temporarily to lose yourself (in sliding or dreaming), the club functions in the opposite direction. To view it as an art installation requires thought and reflection—in other words, refusal of the opportunity of getting out of it through traditional means such as eating, drinking, and dancing. Höller was born and brought up in Belgium; this reminds me that, when it was a Belgian colony, the Congo was subjected to a legendary degree of cruelty and plunder. The artist returns to the country every year, but for the rest of us, he argues, Congo is little more than an idea, a dream still tainted by association with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—a prejudice that he seeks to redress.

The main problem for the Double Club, though, is bad timing. A vicious war is raging in eastern Congo; Höller points out that Kinshasa is 3,000 miles from the fighting and hopes the club will help us see beyond the disastrous headlines. I think this is fundamentally wrong; as you tuck in to goat stew, it seems obscene to ignore the carnage in Goma and forget the thousands sheltering under plastic sheets with little to eat, let alone an expertly prepared meal such as this. The one redeeming factor is that any profits go to City of Joy, a charity for Congolese genocidal rape victims. **—SARAH KENT**

Modern Painters Mars 2009

PROSPECT.1

NEW ORLEANS

THEANYSPACEWHATEVER

SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

THE ART OF PARTICIPATION

SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

As election euphoria momentarily halted the growing hysteria around the financial meltdown, three shows opened across the US that proposed an alternative modus operandi for art and exhibitions in the midst of a deflated art market. Each posited art as a socially engaged practice rather than an object of desire, marking a return to the prevalent ideals of the early 1990s.

For "theanyspacewhatever" at the Guggenheim in New York, Nancy Spector selected ten artists closely identified with critic Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics (as mapped out in his 1998 book) to collaborate on an exhibition that reflected what Spector calls the "postrepresentational" art of the '90s. In New Orleans, the newly inaugurated biennial "Prospect.1" involved 81 artists in a city-wide exhibition responding to the post-Katrina social and geographic landscape, riffing off the community-oriented social practice that curator Mary Jane Jacob championed in her 1993–94 public art project in Chicago. Meanwhile, in California, "The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now" at SF MoMA charted the evolution of audiences being implicated in the completion of an artwork, acknowledging experiments in broadcast media, Web 2.0, and performance, as much as sculpture and installation.

While none of these exhibitions prioritized work actually made in the '90s, all strongly reflected the legacy of postglobal, late-capitalist cultural thinking that emerged during that decade. At the same time the exhibitions revealed a professional conflict as to what exactly constitutes relational and social art. In 1995 Benjamin Buchloh wrote that the 20-year distance from the heyday of Conceptual art both enabled and "obliged" a consideration of the work in a broader context. He went on to say that to historicize practices it is important to clarify the conflicting positions and examine motivations behind diverse strategies. While we are now similarly distanced from '90s modes of production, the three exhibitions in question reveal only tentative stages of clarification.

With Liam Gillick, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Angela Bulloch as three of the 10 participants, "theanyspacewhatever" played out as if the audience were being made privy to a reunion between friends. Rather than showing pivotal works from the '90s, the exhibition presented new pieces that remixed the signifiers of each artist's practice. Bourriaud's text posits that relational art is about prompting congenial public interaction, and the show duly reflected this notion; works accumulated around the appropriately "in-between" space of the spiral rotunda. By including a lounge for watching documentaries of the artists and friends, and a revolving hotel suite available for nightly rental, the exhibition was a CliffsNotes to conviviality, creating a retrospective of artists' concepts rather than of key works.

"Prospect.1" flew in international artists including Robin Rhode and Cao Fei to make temporary interventions in New Orleans's landscape (the show also utilized the city's museums and cultural centers). Proving the downsides to the frequent-flier artmaking circuit, many of the commissions did not directly engage with local issues, as epitomized by Leandro Erlich's purely formal gesture: a paned window fixed precariously atop a ladder, placed where a house once stood in the Lower 9th Ward. The social responsibility of art was clearly not an imperative, and the emphasis on cultural tourism as a form of regeneration left the biennial appearing cosmetic, although there were some exceptions, such as Nedko Solakov's epic narrative relating recent floods in Bulgaria to Katrina. Ultimately it was the incidental experiences of discovering New Orleans while hunting for the work that proved most stimulating, with the proximity of local initiatives presented alongside the biennial projects lending the impression that the event did have potential for long-term resonance in the city.

"The Art of Participation" refused any fixed definition of what constitutes participation in art, instead offering a multitude of approaches such as online projects, reenactments, and video documentation from an unlikely grouping of artists including John Cage, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Andy Warhol, and Matthias Gommel. Avoiding spectacle, the exhibition wrestled with the problem of how to make the galleries appear active while balancing historic documentation with "live" works. The show was most interesting when considered as a legacy of the institutional critique that emerged in the '90s (but this time initiated by the curator, not an artist) with the process of getting people to engage with the works and each other as the primary goal, challenging the traditional museum priorities in historicizing movements and artworks.

While each exhibition asserted that art as a form of social engagement has currency, they also all left open-ended conclusions as to why. To return to Buchloh, currently the only "clarification" of social or relational practices is that such art is propositional in nature, and the "broader context" is just the increasing range of audiences that museums and public places afford. Nonetheless, the curatorial strategies—a retrospective of concepts, an anthropological biennial, and a survey as institutional critique—suggest that as the institutionalization of '90s modes of production develops, the processes of display are taking precedence over the determination of key artworks in canonizing a nebulous movement. **—KATE FOWLE**