

Ken Johnson, The New York Times, July 30, 2004

Christoph Büchel
Swiss Institute
495 Broadway, between Broome and Spring Streets, SoHo
Through Aug. 7

Christoph Büchel, a Swiss artist in his late 30's, has made the Swiss Institute's loft gallery disappear. He has replaced it with a small, messy, one-bedroom apartment, fully equipped with grungy used furniture and domestic supplies, which has been divided into two separate living areas by rough, unpainted concrete block walls seven feet tall. Dividing every space, including the bathroom and the kitchen, the walls create one squarish living area nested within another U-shaped space.

Why the walls have been built, why they had to be so massive and why they don't go all the way to the apartment's low ceiling (you can look over the wall if you stand on a chair) is not explained. Unlike Ilya Kabakov, another creator of fictive living spaces, Mr. Büchel provides no written explanation. Perhaps there was a conflict between the apartment's two roommates, and since neither wanted to move out, they built these walls. Or maybe it was the landlord's idea to take advantage of a scarcity of cheap housing. Maybe the concrete blocks were only a convenient building material.

Working your way through the claustrophobic and labyrinthine spaces of the divided apartment, a task requiring some exertion and, in places, considerable physical flexibility, you search for clues. Both inhabitants are slovenly, but there are differences. One has a drill press and some other tools in his kitchen, a lot of fat white candles on one shelf and a slot of an office with a desktop computer. The other has a television set playing street-level surveillance tapes, lots of empty cigarette boxes and beer cans and, it seems, an interest in guns. Crawl into the fireplace and you discover a curious hideaway: a dark, low-ceilinged room with spent bullet shells all over the floor, bags of sand and some oil barrels.

You may think up a narrative to fit the facts that Mr. Büchel presents, but you may also begin to suspect that there is no narrative — not, that is, a story that the artist meant simply to illustrate. If he did have some such story in mind, he has withheld or obscured it, teasing our desire for a clear explanation.

What it all means is also hard to say. There is a visceral absurdity about the wall, and it is sad how it divides and isolates two people who, we may imagine, might otherwise productively commune and collaborate. Reading in an allegory about international relations (a comment, say, on Israeli-Palestinian relations) may or may not be warranted, but the thought does come to mind. You can also imagine a cinematic thriller about a single person divided into two disassociated personalities — one potentially violent.

Ultimately, however, the main excitement of Mr. Büchel's ingenious construction is the Alice in Wonderland feeling of entering a mysteriously eccentric and possibly nonsensical parallel universe.



Swiss Institute Contemporary Art

38 St Marks Place
New York, NY 10003

+1 (212) 925-2035
info@swissinstitute.net

swissinstitute.net
Free and open to the public