

Cruise Ship Tropical Islands

Becket Flannery

Tropical Islands, a resort built inside a massive hangar in the former GDR, is a Las Vegas-style simulation of the South Seas, complete with Balinese village; it is something like the inverse of a cruise ship, or perhaps its logical extension: a completely fabricated environment that, instead of bringing you to exotic climes, purports to bring them to you: the Cruise Ship Tropical Islands, permanently docked in Brandenburg. From the exterior, the gray oblong dome looks like a beached whale; but from inside the ever lukewarm dome, if you squint slightly and lower your visor, you might be able to obscure the metal girders that arch over the billboard horizon printed on the outer wall.

Begun by a Malaysian developer who dreamed of an inland island resort for sun-starved Germans, Tropical Islands was built in a large domed structure originally constructed as a zeppelin factory. The factory itself was built after the fall of the Soviet Union on the site of a former Russian military airport. The abandoned barracks of the Russian soldiers that still lingered near Tropical Islands seemed more exotic than the thatch huts inside it, like the remains of a lost civilization. How quickly we can forget; how strange that something within our lifetime has become as remote as the statues of Easter Island.

It hardly takes any effort to imagine the place as a ruin, a hundred years (or fifty?) from now, its rainforest vegetation breaking holes in the dome's shell, thriving in the gradually warming climate. Or maybe it will be the last ecosystem going, in a line of enclosed ecologies like the Biosphere 2 in Arizona and the Mars Desert Research Station. With billionaires planning large estates in remote parts of the globe in anticipation of society's collapse, Tropical Islands has the right mix of artificial ecosystem and recreation to be the model for these luxury bunkers.

In the onboard cinema and on the deck of our cruise ship, we have the artists of *Learning from Tropical Islands: Flamingo in Aspic*. As participants in the class "Art in Contemporary Context" at Kunsthochschule Kassel, they engaged in a series of presentations, workshops, and screenings provoked by Tropical Islands and other examples of artificial nature. These were led by artists Mario Pfeifer and Josefin Arnell, scholar Nathalie Voßkamp, and curators Sara Giannini and Yvette Mutumba. With Guest-Professor Pauline Curnier Jardin at the helm, the class navigated a series of films including "Hinterland" by Marie Voigner, which explores the history of Tropical Islands, as well as Apichatpong Weerasethakul's "Tropical Malady" and Ulrich Seidl's "Paradise."

Culminating in an expedition taken to the resort, the works presented here grew out of a direct engagement with Tropical Islands. In Sebastian Ebbing's work, actual sand from the ersatz beach is used to glaze the surface of ceramic tiles reminiscent of undeveloped Polaroid photos, combining the touristic photograph with the souvenir plate. Marlon Middeke began his work by polling his social media network to decide what object to buy as a souvenir. Removing the elaborate shell from its "native" context in the gift shop (the shell itself having been imported from Indonesia), Middeke pushes the transformation of this material even further.

Some artists picked up on the site as simulacrum to construct their own models and geographies. In "DAS PARADIES IST BONBONROSA," Johannes Apelt uses montage to connect Tropical Islands to, among others, the site of Masada in Israel and a guided meditation. In the work of Rebecca Adam, an antique-looking table displays a miniature bedroom, suggesting a private space; a vitrine over the model references the enclosed dome of the resort, without

which the tropical plants inside would quickly die. For Arhun Aksakal, the model is not so much physical as theoretical. Using the trip to Tropical Islands to observe his fellow artists, his project examines the relationship between leisure and artistic production. Departing from Joseph Kosuth's "One and Three Chairs" (1965), Aksakal asks us to examine how cultural coding and language inscribe "exotic" flora and fauna.

Exoticism is built into the entire semiotics of *Tropical Islands*. In Kerstin Rupprecht's video work, the pineapple, often given as a gift, begins to figure the aggression of (possibly uninvited) guests. The colonial construct of "the exotic erotic" is countered by a kind of "bored tropics" of the actual site, its still air and stifling atmosphere. It's hard to imagine anyone wanting to "go native" in this artificial environment, but Alice Hagenbruch and Darius Grimm subvert the colonial cliché to invent "the Wild One from Tropical Islands." Beginning in an Easter-themed German shopping mall, we see an animatronic display of rabbit anthropologists digging up the (cunicular) heads of Easter Island. Somewhere between survivalist and mall rat, our wild one ends up being a protagonist as hybrid as the place itself. In another twist on tropical delirium, Hase & Zinser's sculpture suggests a palm tree/totem pole of office appliances built by a lunatic bureaucrat. This "tree of knowledge" locates the tropical fantasy in the materiality of the information worker. Julia Stolba explores the real legacy of colonialism in an ongoing correspondence with her high school exchange counterpart from the island of Réunion, an overseas department of France.

Tropical Islands may fall short of fantasy, but in Josefin Arnell and Pauline Curnier Jardin's video, it shines in all its trashy sequined glory. Mermaids use the infrastructure of the park as a kind of gymnasium for the half-human and half-piscine, suggesting fantasies well beyond the touristic imagination. Hermetically sealed, the touristic "exotic" seems only able to extend, repeat, and compound its own tropical kitsch into a mash-up of references. A video work by Chris Lachmund links this semiotic excess to the mutations and deformities of inbred pigeons, which seem to linger awkwardly in the resort, not conforming to the tropical theme. Like these pigeons, the history of the site never quite disappears behind its new façade, reminding us that Tropical Islands is symptomatic of the shift from Communism to neoliberalism, from utopian projects to heterotopian sites.

So welcome aboard, dear passengers, onto the Cruise Ship Tropical Islands: a utopian idea with a profit motive. Welcome aboard, esteemed guests, to the Cruise Ship Tropical Islands: the remains of paradise at the end of history. Welcome aboard, you lucky survivors, onto the Cruise Ship Tropical Islands: your shelter in the post-apocalyptic storm! I will be your guide and hospitality ambassador. Does everybody have a caipirinha?