The memory of tragedy is mixed with the thought of a new phase; this, basically, is the premise of the Berlin show. The city itself is an emblem: of the tragic past to be overcome, and of an ambiguous, double, divided present. Barbara Bloom chose two museum locations to reflect precisely on the theme of the double, a reality that pertains both to nature and to cultural elaboration. In the Museum für Naturkunde, in the East, the artist simply opened the showcases containing butterflies, replacing the exhibits with small photographs of German architecture, folded in half to form wings and attached with pins, the way insects are mounted. The butterflies themselves had been moved to tables or desks at the center of the space. In the Gipsformerei, the studio of the state museums in the West that is responsible for manufacturing plaster casts, she exhibited pairs of new casts made from old ones. On two other walls, images of famous Siamese and birth twins were displayed above shelves of open books—natural histories of butterflies or studies on twins—prompting the viewer to infer relationships of meaning between the different exhibits. The double signifies symmetry, and for our culture, it has become an object of esthetic perception. Yet, as Primo Levi says in an essay, butterflies existed millions of years before man, and the symmetrical designs of their wings have nothing to do with our sense of order. In mythology, the double is often the origin of conflict and implies disaster; in nature, the complex psychology of twins finds a disquieting counterpart in the Siamese twin, which brings to mind monstrosity. Symmetry may be a basic rule of architecture, but power seizes upon this rational language for its own ends, as documented by the Nazis’ buildings, which are as mournful as they are orderly.

This profound ambiguity, which Bloom studies with an almost scientific objectivity, finds its principal representation in Berlin, double city, unified but still divided. In an installation by Horn, Raum des verwundeten Affen (Room of the wounded monkey), the shadowy room of an isolated house at the border between the two sectors was filled with signs that allude to this not-yet-accomplished unification: two metronomes beat out two different tempos, electric discharges were emitted from copper wires running overhead, there were traces of coal dust on the floor and a piece of old-fashioned rusting machinery—the wounded monkey. Nearby, outside, along the wall that still separates the Gropius-Bau from the former Prussian parliament, Raffael Rheinsberg arranged 100 enormous cabledrums—50 from the West, 50 from the East—an impressive alignment of structures that, intended to facilitate communication, here formed a barrier: this “joint venture,” a notion the artist always addresses in his work, has been imagined but has yet to occur.

Original article: https://www.artforum.com/print/199009/doppel-jeopardy-33973