

## GALLERIES

## At Goethe-Institut, the world's 'non-places'

BY JESSICA DAWSON

Berlin-based photographer Anne Lass shoots a whole lot of not much. Like "Seinfeld" for the street photography set, she transforms nothing into something.

But unlike "Seinfeld," Lass's pictures can be hard to love. The 12-image series at the Goethe-Institut arrived via German arts organization C/O Berlin's annual "Talents" exhibition, a competitive program for young artists. But Lass's pictures are flat-footed and a little strange. One has a woman reading in an anonymous concrete plaza. Another finds a man stretched out on a carpet of lawn.

Which city? Which park? Lass leaves identifying details out. She wants her locations — cities in America, Australia and Europe — to stand in for all of the world's "non-places," which is what she and other artists and theorists call the transitory, shared and often-insignificant rest stops of our daily lives.

Lass's approach to these non-places is to mirror their effects, effectively making non-pictures with non-people and turning banality into an ally. (As I said, not easy stuff to love.) For my part, I was eager to peg Lass's pictures as another photo essay on urban isolation. In an e-mail, I asked her about just that.

But what I got from my conversations with Lass over e-mail and by phone from Berlin was something quite different. She asked that I look again at the subjects of her pictures. They aren't friendless, she said, they're just in their own heads. Yes, they may occupy alien environments. But they're not alienated.

I did look again, and I think maybe I see what she means. Or maybe I don't. It's just this kind of ambiguity that Lass is going for.

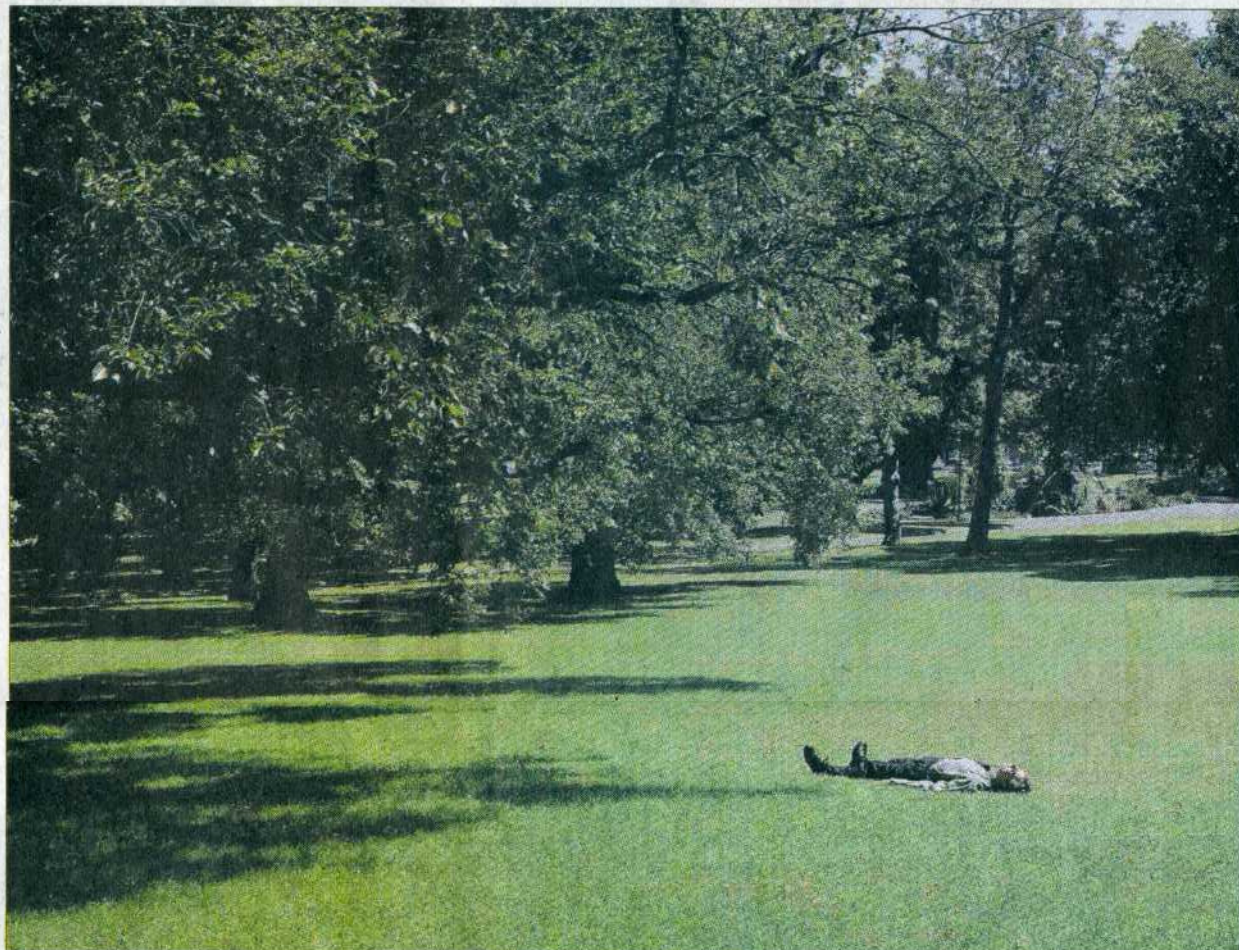
Here is an abbreviated transcript of our exchange:

**You titled your current exhibition "In Our Time." What does it mean?**

I'm interested in showing something about contemporary life, so I wanted to have some reference to a time span, but for me it was more to evoke the idea of a fairy tale. Something that happened "once upon a time" in our time. That's how I see the pictures. They are small stories that are so surreal that people wonder, is it true, or is it not true, like a fairy tale.

**It's rare to find a person alone in a major public park, especially on a bright summer day. But you found just such a scene in Melbourne, where a man stretches out on a cool green lawn. Do you ask your subjects to pose?**

I find the images by chance, and I never ask people to pose or change the situation for me. I let the situations come to me. But I like to move in certain surroundings where I have a good chance of finding them. Some periods



UNPOSED: A man stretches out on a cool green lawn in "Untitled, Melbourne, 2005."

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ANNE LASS

I find many amazing situations and sometimes nothing exciting happens for weeks — but I guess that is what life is about, too.

**Many of your subjects don't acknowledge the camera — some have their backs to us and many stand or sit isolated. Is this a metaphor for how we act when we're in public?**

I often have the feeling that humans in larger urban cities seem disoriented and displaced. Yet I think that the people in my images are not really lonely. They are mostly just taking a break to contemplate for a moment. The situation becomes the moment before people start moving or interacting again — they are awaiting something.

**How do you think the architecture of our cities — the concrete buildings and sidewalks and plazas — affects the people living in them? I thought the picture of the woman reading in Detroit was particularly moving.**

The image of the woman reading gives one a weird feeling. One connects reading with a cozy and intimate action, and she is placed in a real non-place where I personally would find it hard to concentrate.

In the United States, where I resided for some years, I often had the feeling that the cities were not really made for humans — the proportions of buildings, streets and even refriger-



ALONE: A woman reads in a concrete plaza in "Untitled, Detroit, 2006."

ators made one feel very small.

The idea of the non-place is something I often found in parts of the United States. With newer or contemporary architecture, I often had trouble distinguishing what the buildings were for, whether it was a church or a high school or a mall. They don't have any history, and they have no reference to anything. That's something I look for in my work. I try not to have

something in the image that's too obvious, that marks it as a certain place.

**Why not?**

This work is about contemporary living space in general. The images are about how people are distanced and estranged from the space they are in.

**Does technology change how we relate to each other or our living**

**Attention artists:**

Jessica Dawson is hitting the studios to uncover Washington talent.

It's all part of Real Art D.C., the Washington Post's exciting new platform for contemporary art in the Washington region. There's also a related competition open to all area artists.

What is Real Art D.C.? An online virtual gallery of works by local artists that will allow Post readers to discover and connect with Washington's newest talents. Artists themselves will post their own work — and so will dealers and teachers on their behalf — and anyone can click through and see the spectrum of local creativity.

Here's how it works: Upload images at [www.washingtonpost.com/real-art-dc](http://www.washingtonpost.com/real-art-dc). Next month our Galleries columnist will begin sifting through the uploads to Real Art D.C. and picking 10 artists from the virtual gallery to spotlight in a new online feature.

Throughout the spring and summer, she will choose a new artist-finalist every few weeks and visit the artist's studio, reporting about what she finds on the Real Art D.C. site. The 10th finalist will be selected sometime after Sept. 30, the last day of submissions to Real Art D.C.

Once the top 10 are chosen, we'll open up voting so that washingtonpost.com users can choose the finalist they like best. The winning artist will be profiled in our pages (and, of course, online).

Artists, surprise us. Challenge us. Corcoran, MICA and VCU students — show us your work. (And self-taught talent, too!)

See you in the studio!

**spaces? Many people are now checking their iPhone or mobile device in order to escape where they are. Yet I notice that you have not photographed anyone in that situation.**

I feel that it would almost be too obvious a situation with two people talking on the phone next to each other, though personally I find it very annoying. I think the situations I photograph are never really this obvious, which also makes it more difficult to put them in a box. They might raise even more questions. This openness and non-linear storytelling is what I'm interested in.

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**"IN OUR TIME:  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANNE LASS"**

at the Goethe-Institut,  
812 Seventh St. NW, to May 28.  
Hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday to  
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