

Berlin's New Society for the Visual Arts

Maeve Connolly

In July 2011, shortly after relocating to Berlin, I visited a controversial exhibition staged at various venues around the city. *Based in Berlin* featured the work of 80 contemporary artists from all over the world, selected for the show in part because they were living and working in Berlin. The origins of this exhibition lay in a competitive showcase that had been proposed in 2010 by the office of the Mayor Klaus Wowereit and was intended for presentation within a purpose-built temporary gallery or Kunsthalle. The planned showcase-style project was, however, opposed by numerous Berlin-based arts practitioners. Toward the end of 2010, a group of artists, curators and cultural workers gathered to discuss problems of cultural policy in Berlin. Working under the title 'Haben und Brauchen' ('To Have and To Need'), they formulated an open letter detailing the problems with the proposed exhibition, addressing it to the Mayor in January 2011.

The letter questioned the 'neoliberal rhetoric of efficiency and performance' implied by a showcase-style project, especially one restricted to 'young' artists, and also criticised the decision to dedicate a sizeable portion of the budget for culture to a 'one-off exhibition spectacle' that, because of its short-term nature 'primarily serves the election campaign interests of its initiator'.¹ The exhibition of Berlin-based artists went ahead, but not quite as planned. Instead of being presented in a newly-constructed space, the works were exhibited at five pre-existing venues, including four art institutions supported by the city or state; Berlinische Galerie Museum of Modern Art, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Hamburger Bahnhof Museum for Contemporary Art, and Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (n.b.k.). A former studio complex located in Monbijoupark in the Mitte district served as the primary venue, reiterating the original focus on Berlin as a centre for international artistic production.

Long after the exhibition had ended, however, the Haben und Brauchen group continued to meet. In January 2012, following a succession of gatherings held at various art spaces, a manifesto was published. It highlights the 'special historical situation in Berlin', which helped to create 'special working and living conditions'.² Specifically, in the absence of housing market pressures typically found in major European cities, rents for studios, apartments and galleries remained relatively low for many years, enabling self-organized art practice to flourish in Berlin. In recent years, however, production and living costs in the city have increased dramatically but cultural workers still struggle economically, often earning most of their income from activities outside Berlin. A year after the publication of the manifesto, Haben und Brauchen launched a new public campaign calling for a tourism-related 'arts tax'³ that could benefit practitioners and help to sustain the city as a centre of art production. While it is still too soon to know if this campaign will succeed, the debates surrounding *based in Berlin* offer a useful vantage point from which to consider the changing cultural economy of contemporary art in the city and the specific role played by artists and curators as active and critical agents within this economy.

Significantly, those associated with Haben und Brauchen are not seeking to establish a new institution. Nonetheless, their critique of cultural policy calls to mind an earlier campaign, also led by artists, curators and cultural workers, which resulted in the formation (in the late 1960s) of Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst (NGBK), translated as 'New Society for the Visual Arts'. NGBK was the outcome of an 'action group' formed by several members of Deutsche Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst (Berliner Kunstverein). This Kunstverein had been established in 1965, as 'an instrument for executing the art policies of the Berlin government'⁴, with a distinctly undemocratic form that precluded the majority of its members from having any involvement in programming. In 1969, NGBK was founded as a radical alternative and its non-hierarchical organisational structure continues to differentiate it today from every other German Kunstverein,⁵ primarily because its programme is entirely produced by its members rather than its professional staff. At present, NGBK has over 850 members, drawn from professions that include 'cultural workers, scientists, political activists, architects, artists, art theoreticians, sociologists, media studies experts, students'⁶ and membership is open to all. Annual fees are low (currently €25 for students, artists and unemployed people, and €50 for those in regular employment), and

the organisation is funded by a recurrent grant from the German Lottery Foundation (Stiftung Deutsche Klassenlotterie Berlin), ensuring its financial stability.

In order to participate in the programming process, NGBK members must form a project group with at least five contributors and publicly pitch their exhibition or event proposal (typically in German) at NGBK membership meetings. This is a highly competitive process, with results decided by a secret ballot. The successful project groups are assigned a slot in the programme and given a project budget, which can be used to cover the expenses of group members as well as other costs associated with research and production. Project groups also draw upon the professional expertise of the NGBK staff, which includes a managing director, project coordinator and public relations officer. Although professional knowledge of the arts is not a prerequisite for memberships, many of the project groups include artists and curators with significant expertise in researching and making exhibitions. In addition, while some project groups are formed solely to enable the production of a single exhibition, others work on a much more long-term basis and at least one grouping – RealismusStudio – has been in existence for several decades, albeit with changing personnel.

Clearly, there are professional benefits associated with involvement in the programme of the NGBK, perhaps especially within the German cultural context, where affiliations with publicly-funded or non-profit institutions tend to be highly valued both culturally and socially. Over the past few decades, numerous NGBK members have been appointed to prominent positions at other art institutions and organisations, partly on the basis of reputations built through their voluntary involvement in project groups. At the same time, the NGBK's non-hierarchical organisational structure, emphasising collaborative authorship and democratic processes of decision-making, ensures that the organisation does not function as a mechanism for professional self-promotion. The NGBK also specifically asserts its independence from 'commercial interests', a significant claim at a time when private galleries routinely contribute to the production and publication costs of publicly-funded institutions.

Even though there is no overarching curatorial agenda, certain concerns tend to recur in the programme, including 'gender issues, issues of fascism and national socialism, participatory models in contemporary art, new forms of art education, future models of work and working structures, positions against racism and for freedom of movement within our society.'⁷ In practice, many of the exhibitions are thematic- or issue-based group shows, accompanied by discursive events. Solo shows are less common, but have formed an important part of the programme, and recent examples include a major exhibition in 2012 focusing on the work of Alfredo Jaar, initiated by the RealismusStudio project group and realised in partnership with several other institutions.⁸ The structure of NGBK seems to exemplify the social and political radicalism that continues to attract artists (and tourists) to the city. At the same time, however, it differs in several important respects from newer institutions that have contributed to the establishment of the city's reputation as a centre of international art production, such as KW Institute for Contemporary Art.

Established in the early 1990s by Klaus Biesenbach and a number of other art practitioners, KW (Kunstwerke) has organised the Berlin Biennale since its inception in 1998 and has worked with many high profile international artists.⁹ Its exhibitions are integral to the itineraries of professional networking events such as the annual Berlin Gallery Weekend, and it also publicises its programme internationally through e-flux mailouts. NGBK project groups also regularly work with well-established artists but, perhaps because its promotional strategies and budgets vary from one project to the next, it does not share KW's high international profile. I would argue, however, that in recent years NGBK has proved to be more effective than KW in engaging with Berlin's complex and increasingly fraught cultural economy. This engagement is articulated both through NGBK's programme and its complex organisational structure, which is responsive to the changing economic and social conditions of artistic practice.¹⁰

In terms of the programme, several recent shows have focused on labour, including *A Burnt Out Case?*, which explored self-exploitation and overwork (September-October 2012), and *Irregular – Economies of Deviation* (April – June 2013). The latter exhibition explored the constant demand for exceptional or virtuoso performance within a post-Fordist economy, in which all workers are expected to demonstrate creativity and flexibility. One consequence of this demand is that novel, innovative and so 'irregular'

performances are both pervasive and expected to stand out from the norm. This show included works such as Klara Hobza's *Diving Through Europe, 2010-2035*, a patently absurd project in which the artist traces an unbroken route from the North Sea to the Black Sea, initiating a 'virtuoso diving odyssey' with training assistance from an elite soldier and frogman, documented with video and captioned photographs. It also featured a much older video work, *Indoctrination* (1987) by Harun Farocki, documenting a seminar on rhetoric, body language and gesture attended by a group of male German executives, several of whom struggled to perform these (now commonplace) modes of 'immaterial labour'.

Other exhibitions, such as *Spaceship Yugoslavia – The Suspension of Time* (September – October 2011), *Urban Cultures of Global Prayers* (November 2011 – January 2012), and *Desertmed* (October – December 2012), are more explicitly concerned with issues of cultural, political and social identity relating to place, and framed as research projects. *Desertmed*, for example, drew attention to the existence of approximately 300 uninhabited islands in the Mediterranean Sea. As evidenced by these examples, many NGBK shows are not specifically concerned with the theme of labour. Nonetheless, the gallery routinely functions as a site of collaborative artistic inquiry and experimentation. In the case of *La Zona* (April – June 2012), for example, the first part of the gallery space was empty and visitors walked through a 'passage' to reach an area that was covered from floor to ceiling with a grid of black lines, materialising an exploration of 'zones' of contamination, decontamination, exploitation, and protection. This exhibition took Andrei Tarkovsky's 1979 film *Stalker*, adapted from the novel *Roadside Picnic* (1971) by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky and structured around a journey into a forbidden zone, as the starting point from which to question notions of progress and enlightenment associated with scientific exploration. It also focused on the 'zone' as a motif in media coverage and memorials relating to disasters and revolutions, through works such as Ralf Homann's performance *Radio Picnic (Berlin Version)* (2012), which incorporated references to illegal radio, social activism and shamanistic ritual.

It is only a state of mind (March – April 2013), presented by the RealismusStudio project group, also articulated a concern with experimentation and the unknowable, but adopted a more conventional mode of presentation, treating the gallery as a white cube. This show drew together works by artists from many different generations, including Joachim Koester, Ofri Laprid, Matt Mullican, João Maria Gusmão & Pedro Paiva, Susan MacWilliam, Lea Porsager and Rosemarie Trockel, and also included a photograph of the performer Marie Louise 'Loie' Fuller (1862-1928) and a selection of books from the library of Swedish artist and mystic Hilma af Klint (1862-1944). This show emphasised formal and thematic correspondences between art objects and practices developed within disparate contexts, adopting a relatively traditional approach to exhibition-making rather than asserting a self-consciously curatorial position. This understatement of the curation is a feature of several NGBK shows and it often serves to situate artistic practice within the broader context of cultural production, drawing attention to interconnections between artistic inquiry and various forms of philosophical, scientific and spiritual thought.

Although its non-hierarchical aspect has been carefully preserved since the late 1960s, the structure of NGBK is not fixed. Instead the organisation's practices remain open to question by members, through the formation of committees and project groups. Consequently, NGBK has been able to engage, though its structure as well as its programme, with the increasingly precarious condition of artistic practice. This situation prompted a revision in the organisation's rules around 2010, enabling all of those contributing to the programme (as project group member or artist engaged in an exhibition) to be paid a fee. So NGBK has – in its own way – sought to address some of the same issues of precarious employment raised in the Haben und Brauchen campaign. While I have highlighted the differences between NGBK and KW there are indications that Kunstwerke is beginning to publicly acknowledge the difficulties posed by the under-resourcing of artistic production in a city where the majority of tourists cite culture as their reason for visiting.

Ellen Blumenstein, who joined KW as its new head curator in 2013, actually initiated the first public discussion of Haben und Brauchen in December 2010, together with Florian Wüst. Her first exhibition at KW, entitled *Relaunch* (May 2013), invited visitors to view a building largely devoid of artworks, with the

walls bearing only a series of 'teasers' by the artist Nedko Solakov, alluding to elements of the programme that are yet to come, assuming that resources are made available. For those familiar with the debates unfolding around arts funding in Berlin, *Relaunch* may be viewed as a welcome acknowledgement that the current cultural economy cannot be sustained without additional resources. It is equally possible, however, that recent arrivals to the city (whether as tourists or prospective residents) were utterly confounded by their first visit to KW – encountering an almost-empty building rather than a centre of highly visible artistic production. As a consequence of its high international profile, KW will undoubtedly continue to occupy a significant position within Berlin's contemporary art scene. But the opportunities for critical discourse and collaborative production offered by organisations such as Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst/New Society for the Visual Arts, may ultimately prove to be equally important, particularly for those artists and curators that seek to engage on a long-term basis with the city's complex cultural economy.

Notes

1. The full text of the open letter 'To Have and To Need – An open letter in response to the planned "Achievement Show of Young Berlin Art"', addressed to Klaus Wowereit on January 25, 2011 is available at <http://www.habenundbrauchen.de>. For an overview of these issues see Jörg Heiser, 'Words & Deeds', *Frieze* 144, December 2011, <http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/words-deeds/>. See also Antje Stahl's review of 'based in Berlin', *Frieze* d/e Issue 2, Autumn 2011, <http://frieze-magazin.de/archiv/kritik/based-in-berlin/?lang=en>.
2. For details on the campaign see <http://www.habenundbrauchen.de/en>.
3. An open letter outlining this campaign was published in *Die Tageszeitung* newspaper (popularly known as *Die Taz*) on April 20, 2013. For details and a link to the online petition see www.habenundbrauchen.kuenstler-petition.de.
4. Irene Below, 'Berlin's democratic-model Kunstverein [...] a left-wing bastion like the Schaubühne in the world of theatre' – 'How Everything Began', *NGBK: 40 Years (Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst/New Society for Visual Arts)*, Berlin: Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst e. v., 2009, 22. My discussion is also informed by an interview with NGBK staff member Benita Piechaczek, conducted on May 8, 2013.
5. NGBK is a member of the Working Group of German Art Societies. For a discussion of the Kunstverein system see Inga Oppenhausen, 'Off to the Provinces! Art Associations far from the Metropolises', *Kunst Magazin*, March 4, 2013, <http://www.kunst-magazin.de/en/off-to-the-provinces-art-associations-far-from-the-metropolises/>. Thanks to Maya Schweizer for this reference.
6. This information is drawn from the NGBK website (accessed May 2013). See 'NGBK – the grassroots principle', http://ngbk.de/development/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=36&Itemid=322&lang=en.
7. 'NGBK – the grassroots principle', http://ngbk.de/development/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=36&Itemid=322&lang=en.
8. The exhibition *Alfredo Jaar, The way it is: An Aesthetics of Resistance*, also took place at Berlinische Galerie and Alte Nationalgalerie. For exhibition dates and details see http://ngbk.de/development/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=242&lang=en.
9. For an overview of the history of KW Institute for Contemporary Art see the KW website (accessed May 2013) <http://www.kw-berlin.de/en/institution/profile/history>.
10. The NGBK programme is archived online at http://ngbk.de/development/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=223&Itemid=323&lang=en.

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Into the Light

Crawford Art Gallery, Cork

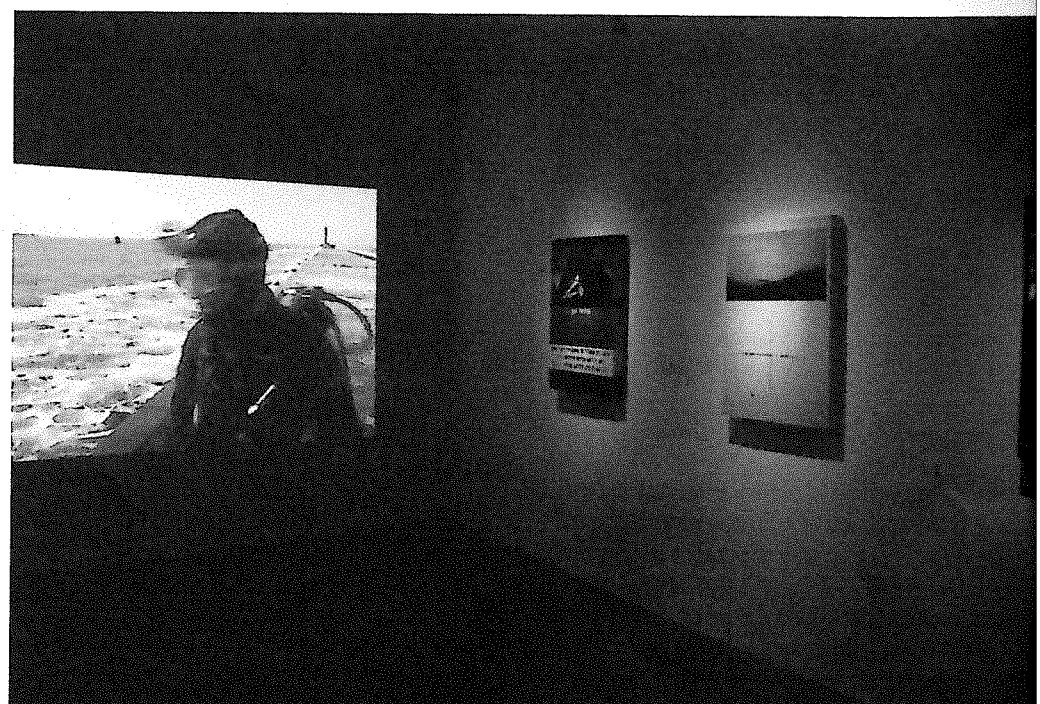
Julie Daunt

Entering this exhibition, the viewer was met with a large flag billowing majestically in the slipstream of a motion-sensor fan. This was Mark Clare's *The Horns of Phaedrus* (2012), the design of which strongly resembles the paintings of the pioneer abstract Piet Mondrian. Although the accompanying harp cited the starting point for this piece as a line from Robert Maynard Pirsig's novel *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, the flag's initial effect was to put our minds to ideas of revolution and change. According to Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Richard Jenkins, a flag can evoke feelings of pride, progress and optimism, yet it can also conjure up memories of a bygone regime. Clare's evocation of Mondrian signalled changes in the way art is constructed and valued today, while still remembering the radical moments that have shaped contemporary aesthetics. The undulating flag loomed over the visitor's head, its title suggesting two related but perhaps opposing concerns in Irish contemporary art: on the one hand to create a progressive and innovative art form, and on the other to remember and pay dues to the important epochs of art history.

Into the Light was a national exhibition which celebrated sixty years of The Arts Council of Ireland. Four of Ireland's leading institutions – the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin, Limerick City Art Gallery, The Museum in Sligo and the Crawford Art Gallery – were asked to select works from the Arts Council's collection with the intention of mounting their own exhibition, which, according to the exhibition catalogue, was also to be sympathetic towards the institution's existing framework and ethos. With this in mind, it is interesting to see that all the works that were on display in the Crawford Art Gallery were produced during the 21st century, with some commissioned specifically for the exhibition. The exhibition included nearly 100 works from some of Ireland's leading artists.

Despite the illuminating title, the Crawford's rendition of *Into the Light* had the original work's title of *Legacy Systems (Residuum Unknown)* as a term inspired by outdated and outmoded computer technologies. This title would have signalled a conversation with contemporary artists whose works explore residual legacies or memories, as well as the work's relationship with time and obsolescence. For me, the Crawford should have kept this title, as it articulated the exhibition's key concerns of memory better than the more arbitrary title supplied by the Arts Council.

Indeed, an exploration of memory was evident in many works featured in this exhibition. The memory of media was presented in works such as Niall O'Malley's video installation, *Talbot St. Vignette* (2005) which consists of a painted scene onto which recorded video footage was projected. Here, the traditional medium of painting meets the modern digital image, and when the video fades out, we witness the memory of the old methods of scenic representation persisting. The memory of the family home and national identity was also evident in *Bed and Breakfast* (2005) by Cork-based artist Stephen Brandes. Here Brandes meticulously drew three houses, each deteriorating



Klara Hobza's *Diving Through Europe, 2010-2035*, video, photographs. Installation at 'Irregular – Economies of Deviation' (April – June 2013), Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, Berlin. Photographer: Nihad Nino Pusija.