

INTERVIEW – Imke Elliesen-Kliefoth

In 2009, by relocating to the impressive main hall of the former Tempelhof Airport, the Preview Berlin set a courageous exclamation point - along with an almost subversive questionmark. When entering this space, so striking in and of itself, sensory impression and conventional perception collided for a moment: a fair without walls? Why? And: how much can be taken away from the fair format until it mutates into something else, e.g. an exhibition?

Passing through the space with this question in mind, something else immediately became apparent: art was not the only thing being liberated here—so too was communication. The issue remains as to what the fair format can currently be, and given the processual flexibility of the whole, there are naturally many answers to this question. How mutable can an art fair be without losing its actual character? Under what conditions is it created, and what should actually take place there?

A discussion with the three Preview Berlin directors, Kristian Jarmuschek, Ralf Schmitt and Rüdiger Lange, in locations which are characteristic for each.

***Kristian Jarmuschek** is standing in the Hamburger Bahnhof, discussing art in a knowledgeable, yet enthusiastic manner. This location always represents a challenge for him; at the same time, it provided momentum for his career as gallerist and curator. Asked about his motivation to be so widely active in the formidable Berlin art scene, with its innumerable galleries, he replies:*

"I wanted to create exhibitions and show art which was relevant to me as an art historian and which was not being shown in the 1990s. Commercial considerations didn't play an important role here. I want to convey art and I know how to use my talents — this has nothing to do with false vanity. Art is my passion! At the same time, part of the magic of the art field is that I can make a living doing things that come almost natural to me."

***Ralf Schmitt** is on the way to visit the collector couple, Helga & Hartmut Rausch, in the old Russian casino in Neuruppin. He glances out the window of the regional train, quickly correcting the impression that the amount of work involved in organising the fair would prevent any further commitments:*

"As fair partners we do not see our role in merely creating a fair for the rest of our lives. The fair is mainly organised in an office. In the Preview team, I see myself as an artist and put a lot of conceptual work into the fair. What strongly interests me is coming up with a suitable. The work involved in finding a format is part of my artistic practice, similar to my participatory projects 'Förderkoje®', 'MyVisit.to', and the teamwork involved in 'Ultra Art Fair'."

***Rüdiger Lange** is sitting in the mezzanine, a former coachman's room above his gallery in the Jägerstrasse. The gallerist and curator, whose roots extend back to the Kreuzberg scene of the 1980s, consciously chose this location to set up shop. Until recently, it was considered "invisible", but his appearance here has set a transformation in motion:*

"One motivation in my work is to actively design things and bring in my own ideas— without relying on permission to join in. For me, organising an art fair represents a module of this. Working as a gallerist or curator, it is important to actively network within the art scene, allowing the formulation of social capital. Those who are active have influence and have the

opportunity to make collaborations possible. In the art world, there's nothing worse than being dependent on those controlling the power structure over the commercialization of art."

All three are interested in creating not only a forum for young and innovative upcoming artists and projects, but also an opportunity for those artists to earn money.

Lange In our selection, we don't want to favour or promote certain terms or approaches. We are much more concerned with identifying artistic movements, regardless of the philosophy behind them. It is important to be a seismograph for what is currently happening in the art scene. You need to have the vision to select those works that you feel haven't been seen before, or have only rarely been seen. But you also need to be able to accommodate the spirit of the time, which enables the commercial part to work.

Jarmuschek Our motivation was to produce the Preview Berlin for young galleries, as we saw a major need in Berlin to show the project spaces, the showrooms, the artist-run galleries. This is where a new generation has gathered.

Lange Additionally, over the past few years, the art market has boomed as a whole—which means that people were also curious about art that wasn't being broadly discussed in the media, about emerging art. It meant that there was a readiness on the part of collectors to invest money in this area. Today, it has become increasingly apparent that the economic situation no longer allows unrestricted buying to take place.

This situation is growing in Berlin, never known for its strong turnover anyway. Despite, or perhaps because of its high concentration of galleries, the sales of Berlin gallery owners are only half that of other German gallerists.

Jarmuschek Many Berlin fairs have been forced to reduce the number of exhibitors, as the galleries which these fairs want to present internationally are not applying. The problem with Berlin is that many gallerists would like to exhibit here, but galleries cannot effectively or successfully do this given the production factors of an art fair.

In the context of Berlin's economic situation, the claim of being a platform for emerging art poses a dilemma. How can the balancing act between idealism and the current production factors of a trade fair lead to a satisfactory outcome for everyone involved? Is this something that is even possible in an art fair format?

Schmitt If you seriously want to work with a format such as the Preview Berlin, you also have to ask what a "preview" is—why are we interested in this advance view? We have tried to claim the term "emerging", so the Preview Berlin is a platform for young galleries and project spaces. Now the "fair" format has been placed at our disposal. Is the format of an art fair even appropriate? In professionalising the fair, everything has also become more expensive. The crux of the matter is this: a professional fair means that many no longer have the money to rent booths. This is a downward spiral that one can only break by saying "I am going to do something else." You need to generate a format that costs much less, but still enables everything to happen.

Lange The alternative is to develop formats which allow all the protagonists in this fair system—artists, intermediaries, gallery owners, museum directors, heads of institutions, art enthusiasts and collectors—to come together. A situation needs to be created in which everyone involved can discuss or voice their favour for a work of art.

Schmitt I am interested in developing time-based concepts and special support periods. This is not only about the relationship between space and time, but also designing and living a time-space constellation. Transforming the fair format can include many different parameters. Our deliberations need to encompass the fact that "emerging" not only refers to artists,

galleries and projects, but also to production. And transformation pertains not only to aspects such as “now we’ll make the booth 3.5 meters high”, but also to production factors. It encompasses parameters such as time and space, but also what the protagonists—critics, collectors, curators, visitors, artists and gallerists—consider their roles to be. Who will play what role, what needs to be taken into consideration and what can be changed? I also find this artistically interesting, because all of the sudden you are working with parameters or pigments, such as trust. I use pigment here in the sense of an adhesive agent. If you want to transform something, then you also have to gain trust, the trust of all those who have previously been involved.

If one challenges the art fair format, one quickly ends up between two opposing poles; the old conflict between art-as-art and art-as-commodity. Once the bubble of commercialization bursts, a discussion about the substance of art moves into focus—and the fact that only a small number of art buyers face an army of artists—the oft-cited “artist underclass”.

Lange It irritates me that artistic positions are only evaluated based on their art market success. My approach emphasises form and content above other factors. Naturally, I am also delighted with feedback from a commercial standpoint, but this is not all-important to me. And it quickly became apparent that this virtual escalation of art, as it occurred over the past few years, never followed up in Berlin. It is clear that this escalation is only an invention — and personally speaking, I have a very different idea of what the term invention means in art.

Jarmuschek I believe that the art market faces the same problems that can currently be observed in all art forms involving the use of creative effort, i.e. in terms of copyrights or sales opportunities. This is all the more valid in art, since being an artist is currently in vogue. This means that there are more artists today and in the end, the myth that one works as an artist and then is sensationally successful no longer holds true. Although you might be a relatively successful artist, you still could have the income level of a cashier. Drawing an analogy to music, every musician knows the difference between professional performance and “domestic” music—music-making in the home. There is no concept of “domestic art” in the fine arts, but I’d like to say to many people involved in the art trade: perhaps “domestic pictures” would be better! As a gallerist, I know the bitter reality lurking behind the decision to become an artist and the desire to make a living from one’s art. The question that arises: should you have a job to pay for life and do art on the side, or should you become an artist and have a job on the side?

Apart from the current orientation on potential artistic success, were there and are there other reasons for artistic activity?

Lange Examining this question from my personal history, what was most important in Berlin at the time was revitalising the wasteland and vacant spaces. Back then, things weren’t so commercial and people were more on equal terms with one another. What was important was filling those blank spaces with artistic activity, which ultimately led to this boom, the global myth of Berlin. At the time, people certainly talked about creative exploitation, but for me this thought was more playful, for what was really important was self-realisation, gaining a strong personal image and demonstrating what kind of influence one could have. In the long run, this was considered cultural capital. Then the boom took over, an unbelievable commercialisation of the art market. A market in which many people within the system—both artists and gallery owners—became very rich. Even so, there have always been people who believe in the notion of art and who don’t want to foster a commercialised approach.

Schmitt In Emilia Galotti, Lessing had the court painter Conti answer the prince’s question “What does art do?” saying: “Prince, art craves after bread.” In the 90s, I made a piece with

the engraving “Kunst kommt von Gönner” (Art comes from indulgence) on a bread knife. I believe that things result from what you do. There is a feeling that either you have to do this now or not. This mindset doesn’t exclude the question of reassessing conditions. After all, as regards this discussion on the artist underclass, you could naturally say: I won’t do this any longer, I’m not making enough money with this project—this is a legitimate response.

In times of declining state budgets for culture, many feel that the solution is to combine a profession and calling under the catchword “self-exploitation”. If a job isn’t enough to live on, then it will have to be three.

Schmitt We are always faced with a balancing act between our work for the Preview Berlin and our other activities, it’s simply a question of time. I am frequently asked how the Preview Berlin can be compatible with my work as an artist. Even with the Preview project, I take the view that we must not exploit ourselves in any way. This is imperative. Otherwise the situation could only lead to an actual or imaginary burnout. You can’t always say, do this on a low budget, do this without funding, just be happy that you have your foot in the door.

Jarmuschek I’ve also been asked this. It is sometimes viewed with amusement that in addition to my gallerist activities, I am involved in other ventures — but no one can live on air and oil painting! The answer to the question of why I do all these different things is actually obvious: if I were to make enough money from one exhibition a year and didn’t have to pursue other activities, then I would still do other things, but this would involve travel to look at art.

It is difficult to find a general answer to the basic question of what drives someone to work in the creative industry under conditions of predatory capitalism, because the reasons are far too individual. Even if the catchphrase of creative self-exploitation in its negative connotation is clearly inadequate, there are other aspects:

Lange There are people who aren’t only oriented on the financial aspects, on the monetary side; people who do not make decisions for economic reasons alone. These people exist, they work, but perhaps they aren’t as visible these days as they were ten years ago. In this context, I think that instead of exploitation you could refer to opening a countermodel — allowing you to extend your own operating radius through activity; you then have more breathing space, can participate actively and thereby enjoy a larger autonomy in relation to established structures.

Jarmuschek, Lange and Schmitt react to the current situation by developing innovative ideas and new formats. Perhaps not much more than a certain pragmatism, enthusiasm and openmindedness is required to move the focus of art from the commercial to form and content.

Jarmuschek This year’s edition of the Preview Berlin runs in conjunction with our perspective on 2011, when we will radically change our concept. We will no longer hold an art fair. We want to create a platform that functions without this massive use of funds, yet still fulfils the accumulative tasks of an art fair while playfully transforming these into another system.

Imke Elliesen-Kliefoth

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