Overview
Dialogues interviews Lotta Schäfer, Head of Residency Program at ZK/U - Center for Art and Urbanistics in Berlin. In this interview we discuss the role ZK/U plays in activating change in the city of Berlin through multiple initiatives such as Haus der Statistik and how its residency program has been serving as a bridge between international artists and local actors to stimulate new conversations and rethink the urban landscape.
I would like to open our conversation by asking you why and how the idea of ZK/U was born, based on the experience of the KUNSTrePUBLIK art collective.

At the time KUNSTrePUBLIK worked in a place called Skulpturenpark [skulpturenpark.org], which was the former death strip of the Berlin wall. It was basically wasteland. They had been doing public art projects for around seven years there and they had to move a lot of times their production space. At some point they got tired of not having a fixed space to work from, so they started looking for a more long-term solution. Coincidentally, around 2010, the district of Mitte in Berlin launched a call asking for proposals concerning an alternative use of this building, the former freight station in Moabit. They applied with a concept that is now at the core of the Center for Art and Urbanistics. I believe today artists from KUNSTrePUBLIK are the only ones working here who don’t really have a studio space in this building! Of course, they are still based here but they do work in public spaces so it really depends a lot on the kind of project they need to work on.

On your website you define the ZK/U residency program as process-based. How have you been learning to support your resident’s research process in the last years?

We dediced to adopt four research threads – namely Self-empowerment, Resetting, Bridging and Re-thinking – as it is really helpful to bring people together around specific topics. The current themes materialize what we were really doing at one point and tried to frame. We work on so many things and on so many different levels that for our collaborators it is often difficult to grasp what we are actually doing and how it is all connected. For instance, as part of the open call of our residency program, we ask applicants to respond to these themes so that there is a lot of common research that people can connect to. By doing so, our resident artists work on different topics but are interested in similar areas of research. This makes it much easier for them to collaborate even though they just met.

We also do a lot of research ourselves and we have ongoing projects and outputs that our residents can engage with. During the selection process we really focus more on the body of work of each applicant and not on the specific proposal in order to be sure that once they come here they actually know how to do the research themselves and to ask for support. I have come to notice that the more we offer, the less is being used. For this reason, we let them figure out what they need and we ask how we can then help them either by connecting to the right people or suggesting them where to go and what to visit.

Last Summer we started something which I think is also very important for this process-oriented program – our self-publication. We ask one resident per month to become its editor and to present what they did, in order on the one hand to get a better insight into the process, and on the other hand to give residents that come afterwards the chance to use these resources. I think one issue of this process-oriented model here at ZK/U is that I am one of the few stable team members and I am the one of the few that knows what everybody did. However, residents that come have basically no idea about how many artists have already worked for example on the Berlin Wall and that it could be interesting to find a new angle on this topic. The publication will help with directing them and see whether there are any research gaps.
Moreover, we have a quite close-knit program so every week we have the Monday dinners where artists, team members and also selected guests share a meal. It really helps with supporting their work and also bringing them together. We do events, such as OPENHAUS — a monthly public format where the general public can enter the space and engage with the residents and their ongoing projects. This OPENHAUS format is quite special in the sense that it shows how we are not necessarily interested in the final outcome, but rather in the process. For this reason, we really encourage artists to share their research with the audience and engage with them. I think the OPENHAUS events are a really important collective moment of production that can bring the artists closer together and also connect them easily with our audience.

As one of the stable members here, have you noticed in your experience any recurring challenges for artists coming to Berlin for the first time to do research? Berlin has been experiencing a big hype in the last two decades and I guess many come here with specific expectations.

I think one important aspect that is important to clarify is that our focus on the phenomenon of the city is not only circumscribed to Berlin, so not everyone has to work on it specifically. We are also really interested in the discourses artists can bring from their own cities. One of reasons why we started a residency program is to give artists a different kind of access to the city – as you mentioned, expectations are one thing and then you see how large the city is, you have only two or three months to explore it and you are not going to know the city entirely nor getting an idea of the variety of discourses going on. To address this issue, we foster an initiative called the Fact Finding Committee to bring all discourses happening in the city to the residents. By doing so, we foster on the one hand exchange, while on the other we try to point them to other institutions with interesting programming. We really want to give them a chance to get to know the different art scenes and understand that Berlin is not just one thing.

How does their relationship to the city change over a period of time? ZK/U itself is a large complex and Berlin even more and you really need to stay in town minimum two months. We prefer at least three months because it takes that much to really get to know the city and in a way we have become also very much a hub for people that decided to stay in the city forever or long-term. I think what is really important to stress is that it is hard to generalize about these residents because they all come from really different contexts – some come from rural areas so the city itself is really overwhelming, others come for the first time in Europe, so that is overwhelming too.

In terms of the strongest influence that the city has, I think about this huge amount of cultural production that is going on. That is really inspiring to a lot of people in terms of discourses. For those who are new to the European context, I think it is also the way practices are structured. In that sense, I believe the rethinking process of their own practices is a fundamental part of their experience here.

Your residents come from all over the world and have a variety of different backgrounds. How do you preserve diversity through the application process?
When we go through the applications we often try to forget about the way applicants write and we really try to think about the topic they are really interested in. We also try to watch out that people who come from the global South get the chance to explore their research elsewhere. Especially when thinking about the global South, we are trying to foster relationships with artists through institutional partnerships because if artists apply through the open call it means that they have to look for funding on their own. We see let’s say how artists from Egypt, Nigeria, India do try to apply, but this is a very new way of presenting themselves and that is why taking part to the residency program is very important – to learn from the others and get support. On the other hand, what Western artists are lacking is crafting. For example, in places like Italy artists get a very traditional arts education and so they don’t need to outsource production. There is mutual support in that sense.

I would like to briefly go back to ZK/U activities more in general. The focus on the city and the discourses around it have remained at its core over the years. What kind of relationship is there between you as an institution and the city of Berlin?

When starting out with ZK/U, the first relationships were established with the local district. We have a 40-year lease for this building and that is a fundamental part of our agreement with them. We also have to take care of the public park that surrounds the building. I can say therefore that there is a relationship just by being here basically. We are also very much involved in local initiatives for the civil society. Berlin is organized federally and within the district level of Moabit one of the Directors and I are part of something which is called the Quartiersrat. We try to create agency for the neighborhood and then we pass that on to the district authorities. We have been active for four or five years and we have developed a very close relationship with the district management authorities. Recently, they accepted to fund an extension of the ZK/U. Works will begin in December.

On a more conceptual level, we believe in co-production with the city, which means developing collaborations between the local government and society actors. For this reason we are part of an initiative called Haus der Statistik – a civil society initiative of which we are founding members. Recently, through its action, we were able to convince the city authorities not just to buy a building but to develop it by adopting a collaborative decision process where people could actually engage.

What is ZK/U role in the city’s cultural and artistic scene? One example is the partnership that you created with Savvy Contemporary in order to start up an international residency program between artists from Berlin and those living and working in Lagos, Nigeria.

ZK/U is a very complex organization, so our role changes all the time depending on the single project. We have local partners but of course we also have international partners. Speaking locally, we are part of different coalitions, mostly networks such as local art initiatives for the city and for the rights of civil society. For example, as previously mentioned, we work within the framework of Haus der Statistik, and then within the arts field as you mentioned with Savvy Contemporary, in collaboration with Galerie Wedding.
On a larger scale, this last year we hosted the 10th Berlin Biennale. Over the last three years, we have been trying to support other Berlin-based artists and project-spaces through our programming. With the project Ständige Vertretung! we gave artists from here the opportunity to work with us within the residency program for two months, while they were getting paid and had a working space available. We also try to support local initiatives that focus on specific topics which are relevant to us and that match our periodical research themes.

We are only ten people working here so we also need to manage our resources. Maybe one more addition to this question is that we perceive ourselves as a hybrid institution. Just to give you an example, in the containers that lay in front on the building you can see five bee hives, which are run independently by other organizations.

**What are your plans for the future?**

As to the residency, I think I can identify two different elements. One has something to do more with sustainability, which means that we also need to strengthen our partner network with the focus on the content of specific residencies so that we actually co-produce projects together. The other element is definitely our international activities. We are fostering relations and partnerships with different places because we believe it is essential for everyone to have the possibility to come here and, due to the lack of national funding in some areas of the world, we believe it is important to create links in that direction. For example, we are doing so for a residency in Bangalore, India.

Other than that, I think the other aspect which I would like to improve is really creating a strong archive. We have now over 300 residents who have been here in the past seven years and so much knowledge have been produced and shared. I think that is still one element that I would love to strengthen because I think it would benefit our residents and also ZK/U and its partners.

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