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Interview with Christian Siekmeier, EXILE Projects, Berlin

Exile Projects opened in October of 2008 with a double exhibition of Al Baltrop's iconic photographs of the west piers in downtown Manhattan and a show centered on the legendary underground sex zine *Straight to Hell*. Through the year, the two-level project space has hosted an eclectic exhibition program in which international artists and curators, many of them selected through an open application process, are offered a chance to experience "exile" hand in month-long creative residencies.

This summer saw EXILE hosting three ambitious "Summer Camp" sessions -- group shows curated by three different curators and featuring artists from around the world. EXILE director Christian Siekmeier -- himself an accomplished -- was kind enough to answer my questions via e-mail from a small Greek island, where he is currently earning his well-deserved R&R.

Travis Jeppesen: *The concept behind Exile is quite specific. Can you talk about the concept a bit...*

Christian Siekmeier: First of all, I prefer to use the word *Ausstellungsraum* over *Gallery* and *Organizer* over *Gallerist* or even *Art Dealer*. I also refer to an artwork with the German word *Arbeit* over *Werk*. I hope the greater neutrality of these terms helps me to maintain a greater awareness of the risks and downfalls of the accessibility and distribution of art. The concept behind Exile is to aim to return art and the way it is shown to the hype, the excess and the art-stardom toward something more sincere, more modest and, so I hope, also more honest.

Exile is interested in an artist's biography and understands art as a collaborative and inter-informative effort of creative producers from a great variety of backgrounds and generations. Exile aims to take the liberty to show projects that due to their quiet, difficult or uncommercial nature have been overlooked, neglected, marginalized or even forgotten. Exile believes that to fully understand artistic practice it is of great importance to see art as a collaborative, inter-generational and overarching practice embedded in socio-economics, gender, and origin as much as in aesthetic conceptual issues.

As an example, Exile produced the first comprehensive solo presentations by African-American photographer Al Burtrop (1948-2004) or the minimalist artist Kazuko Miyamoto (born 1942). Both of their positions, one could argue, might have been partially overlooked due to their biography but are of great artistic importance. Even worse, both of their estates are at risk of disappearing due to lack of funding and commercial interest, a great problem of contemporary art to focus solely on a few art stars that represent a certain scene instead of fully researching an artistic scene comprehensively.

In November, with the 20th anniversary of the fall of the wall, Exile will show a video installation *Berlin On/Off Wall* by film-maker Wieland Speck from 1978 that again has never before been shown. Speck is not an artist who you will find represented at any other gallery or even art fair, even though his performance/protest against the Berlin wall is of great importance not only artistically but also socio-politically. As one of the only spaces Exile is participating in the upcoming Jack Smith festival, showing photographs of a performance by performance pioneer Jack Smith and photographer and artist Gwenn Thomas in 1974. In many ways one could argue that Smith laid the ground rules for artists such as John Warhol, who calls him the "only artist I would ever copy". Smith, however, never reached nearly as much popular recognition, partially because his work is rather complex and his artistic modes not geared towards production, publicity and fame.

TJ: ...and also tell us why you decided to open up the gallery.

CS: Exile in a way is the consequence of 6 years living in NY and growing increasingly distant, frustrated and annoyed by the NY artworld. I have a certain passion in the arts beyond the quick \$, beyond the fast hype, beyond the development of art-stars and beyond evaluating an artist's work according to auction records. A particularly disillusioning factor for me was when a lot of the Williamsburg/Brooklyn galleries moved out of their neighborhood to Chelsea as soon as their budgets allowed. I always assumed that the aim of opening an art space in Williamsburg was not just for cheaper rent but rather to consciously build an antidote to Chelsea: to collectively create something that opposes (or at least modifies) Chelsea's practices. Now some of the galleries that left Williamsburg for Chelsea had to close, some moved into much smaller spaces. Williamsburg itself is only a shadow of what it used to be. This greatly disappointed me.

TJ: Your website encourages artists to submit applications for residency. How many applications do you typically receive in a month? What is the selection process like?

CS: I sincerely encourage artists to apply, although I would request the artist to research Exile's program and previous exhibitions. Furthermore, it is important that the application is personalized and not sent to multiple galleries at once. I would like to know not just generally what kind of work an artist does, but why he/she thinks his/her work specifically fits into the program, what interests the artist in Exile, what made the artist choose Exile and what his/her work adds and has to offer to a space like Exile.

The amount of applications I receive varies strongly on the kind of show currently on view or what kind of publicity is out. As I am doing myself, artists have to be patient with a response. I do not respond to every application and if I don't think it's a match then I usually reply immediately. I have, however, stopped responding to non-personalized, broad and unspecific proposals. Generally though I have to admit that an open submission is a delicate issue. I really encourage artists to apply if they feel their work fits into Exile's agenda.

During the summer months I organized a project called *SummerCamp* which ran in July and August this year in 3 different two-week-long shows. Here, some of the artists came from previous applications, others came specifically through an open call I placed on the Exile website as well as on Facebook. I specifically wanted to keep the summer months as an open forum, as a more accessible place for artists to create, interact, exhibit. Out of about 130 serious applications I selected about 20 artists from 4 continents. The resulting projects were of course characteristically more eclectic than a thoroughly curated show. Though I believe that their spontaneity and eclectic quality made them also unique and interesting.

TJ: What makes Berlin such a special place for opening a gallery? Could you see the Exile Project working in some other city?

CS: There is, at least until now, a certain creative environment in Berlin that makes it unique. The mix of economic conditions and a large art scene makes it ideal to open an art space. I am especially excited about the multiplicity of spaces in existence. It is important, however, to remember that this fertile ground is fragile and needs to be nourished. Of course Berlin will change, Berlin thrives on change, but projects like MediaSpree or the insane development currently happening in northern Neukölln (also called Kreuzkölln these days where commercial rents are higher than in parts of established areas of West Berlin such as Wilmersdorf) will make it harder and harder for Berlin to maintain its status. To Berlin likes to invest all its interest and energies into large-scale projects it should be remembered that it is the multiplicity and diversity of Berlin's creative scene that makes the city interesting.

Exile has per its name no real stable home. It is a fluctuant space that can (and will if conditions change) move to anywhere else in the world if the necessary conditions are more fertile.

TJ: Any future plans you'd like to discuss?

CS: There are some very ambitious as Exile goes into its second year. Though all of them are kept under the veil for now.



Travis Jeppesen is the author of *Victims*, *Wolf at the Door*, and *Poems I Wrote While Watching TV*. His latest book, *Disorientations: Art on the Margins of the "Contemporary"*, collects the art criticism he wrote for various small magazines when he was bouncing between Prague and Berlin for the last eight years. He is now settled in Berlin – mostly.

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