

ICWA LETTERS

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Jill Winder is a Donors' Fellow of the Institute studying post-reunification Germany through the work and attitudes of its artists.

The A-Train to Kreuzberg

By Jill Winder

JUNE, 2006

BERLIN—Imagine you're the owner of a small but successful gallery in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn and are looking to expand. Chelsea, across the river on Manhattan's West Side, is the obvious destination. If you're based in Los Angeles and want to open an off-site branch, people would probably send you to Chelsea as well. But a satellite space in Germany? That would probably be the last thing to cross your mind... unless you were Joe Amrhein, owner of Pierogi gallery in Brooklyn, or Javier Peres, owner of Peres Projects in Los Angeles. Both have recently opened locations of their galleries in Leipzig and Berlin-Kreuzberg.

In the last few years, Berlin's cutting-edge reputation and the success of Leipzig-School painters have brought major international collectors to Berlin and Leipzig in droves, giving a welcome boost to the art trade. On the local level, a new generation of serious young art collectors is emerging, and the market for art may benefit if Germany's sluggish economy continues to show signs of recovery. Everyone seems to want a piece of the action—for however long it lasts. While some German dealers worry that "Berlin hype" and "Leipzig-School hype" are bound soon to fade, two gallery owners from the US have set up shop in unusual locations, one banking on Leipzig's growing reputation as contemporary art's next "hot" location, the other boldly forgoing the requisite Mitte address to open up his gallery in a surprising neighborhood—mine.

Pierogi, Brooklyn/Leipzig

When artist Joe Amrhein opened Pierogi in Williamsburg in 1994, most people thought he was crazy. At the time, Williamsburg was an inexpensive, working-class, out-of-the-way part of Brooklyn. Now, of course, it's the unofficial cap-



Pierogi's new gallery in the Spinnerei complex in Leipzig. Photo: Pierogi.



People mill around at the opening of Pierogi's branch in Leipzig on April 29. Low rent and utility costs, practically free compared to New York prices, allow galleries to rent large industrial spaces at prices they can afford.

ital of the metro area's hipster nation, full of galleries, boutiques and bars, and Pierogi is one of Williamsburg's most successful and well-known galleries. The predictable next step for a Williamsburg gallery looking to move up would be to take the A-Train to Chelsea. But Amrhein, no stranger to trail-blazing, decided on something much more radical. On April 29th, Pierogi opened a new space in Leipzig's Spinnerei cultural complex, home to painter Neo Rauch's studio and gallery EIGEN + Art.

The success of Pierogi in Williamsburg solidified

Amrhein's street credibility and proved his talent for picking up-and-coming locations, so people in the art world take note when he makes a proclamation like "Leipzig is the Williamsburg of Germany." Besides the adventure of opening a branch in a different country and gaining access to new clients, Amrhein sees his decision as a shrewd financial move. Rents in Chelsea are so high that relocation is often not an option for small, experimental galleries that enjoy taking risks and showing unknown artists' work. While expanding in Germany might sound like financial suicide, the numbers tell a different story: A square foot of gallery space

The luxury of square-footage—the new Pierogi gallery in Leipzig has plenty of space for viewing art and mingling.



in Chelsea starts at about \$75 a month; in Leipzig Amrhein is paying just 40 cents per square foot for comparable real estate.

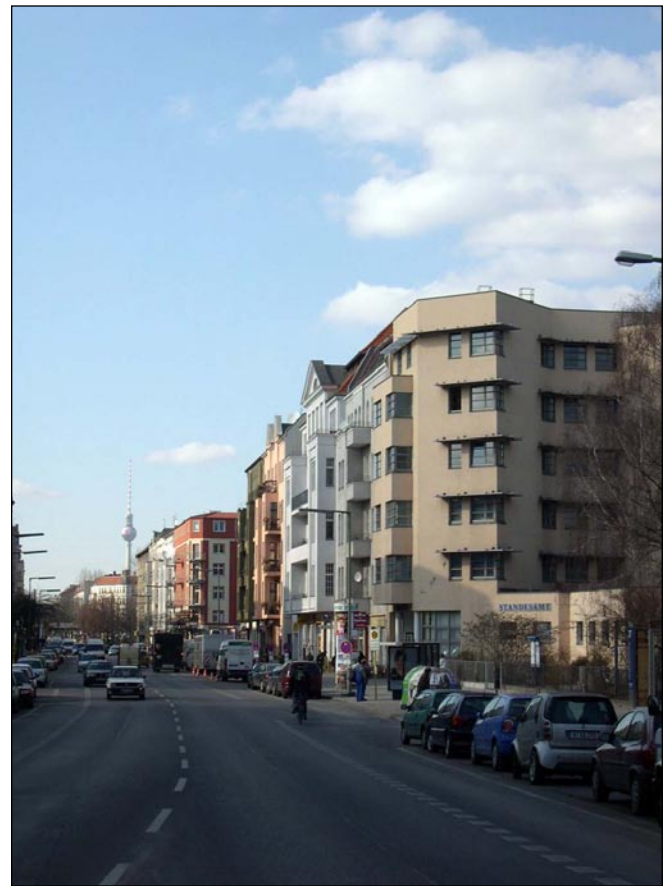
Peres Projects, Los Angeles/Berlin-Kreuzberg

Amrhein is following in the footsteps of Javier Peres, owner of Peres Projects in Los Angeles, who opened the gallery's new space in Berlin-Kreuzberg, the neighborhood I call home, last fall. If Berlin is an unlikely destination for a Los Angeles gallery, Kreuzberg is even less likely because nearly all important contemporary art galleries in the city are located in Berlin-Mitte. So it was doubly risky for Peres to choose Schlesische Straße, a gritty street in Kreuzberg situated along the Spree River canal.

Before 1989, this part of Kreuzberg was West Berlin's Far East; the Berlin Wall ran just across the Spree River, separating the West from the eastern district of Friedrichshain and the monumental Socialist boulevard, Stalinallee (now Karl-Marx-Allee). The neighborhood, full of a surprising mix of artsy types and Turkish families, has become slowly gentrified, and in the course of the last three years, I've watched as the area around Schlesische Straße transformed from an unremarkable part of town to a hip drag where artists hang out at local bars and young fashion designers open boutiques. It's now the kind of place where you can find trendy bars, clothing boutiques, upscale wine shops and Turkish delis selling pomegranates, dates and macaroons all on the same street.

With the addition of Peres Projects, Schlesische Straße is on the contemporary art map as well.

I got to sit down with Javier Peres in late March,



The view toward Mitte from Schlesische Straße in Kreuzberg. Peres Projects is helping put the street on Berlin's art map.

when he jetted from Los Angeles to Berlin for a weekend to attend the opening of the fourth Berlin Biennale and oversee the installation and opening of a new show in his gallery. I wanted to know why he'd chosen such a surprising place for the gallery's second branch, what brought him to Berlin in the first place and if he was worried about the financial risks of keeping the gallery afloat. In the course of our meeting, one thing became clear very quickly: Javier Peres loves to take risks.

When I arrived at the gallery at the appointed time, it was bustling with activity. Staff members busily installed the work of young Dutch artist Amie Dicke, pieces of which were strewn across the large, white-cube space, and telephones were ringing off the hook. Peres, a small man dressed in all-black and buzzing with energy, greeted me warmly, apologizing that he didn't have much time because he was scheduled for television and radio interviews later in the day—in addition to, in his words, "a full work and party schedule."

Peres ushered me in to his "office"—a large, bright space nearly as big as the exhibition rooms in the gallery, with white walls and dark floors. The room was basically empty save for some parts of the Amie Dicke installation that were temporarily in one corner. Windows along one wall were draped in thick black curtains, works by some of the artists he represents hung on the walls, and



This graffiti-covered storefront is home to a fashion design atelier and boutique, called Schnitzelshop, where hand-painted t-shirts cost up to 100 Euros (\$125).

Peres himself sat down behind a shiny black desk. A lot of the artwork Peres shows has a very dark quality—a combination of gothic style, sex, violence, drugs, rock and devil-may-care. The office décor fit in perfectly. So did Peres, as it turned out.

Peres talks a mile a minute and seems to be in perpetual motion, a man who loves having a million things to do. He's a flamboyant character who dispensed with professional restraint in our conversation, which was peppered with rants against all things German, unsolicited details about Berlin's drug-market and gay scene, and a good many profanities. Born in Spain and educated in Belgium, Peres comes from a distinguished family of diplomats. He inherited a love of art from his parents and grandparents, who are all committed art collectors. Peres got a law degree from the university in Antwerp and quickly worked his way up till he became partner in a law firm where he oversaw four offices in various countries. He also started collecting art. A self-professed workaholic, Peres soon lost his passion for law, and despite the financial security and prestige of his job, decided to make a radical change. "It just happened from one day to

the next," he told me. "I woke up and thought, I can be some fat, rich jerk with a great art collection, or I can do something I really love. I'm still young, I thought. So I quit and opened a gallery."

Peres Project's first location was in San Francisco, but the city's "provincial collectors and art audience" disappointed Peres. After seven months, he decided to relocate. The place Peres chose for the gallery's next lo-



The industrial complex on the Spree River where Peres Projects is located.



This obscure brick structure on a lot filled with industrial buildings is the unlikely home of Peres Project's Berlin outpost.

cation seemed absurd at the time—Chung King Road in the China Town section of Los Angeles. When Peres Projects opened in 2003, it was one of the first galleries in the area. Now Chinatown is full of successful contemporary galleries. Yet it didn't take long until Peres, by now running a very successful gallery with a reputation for being edgy and full of attitude, started looking for his next challenge.

Emboldened by the success of his Chung King Road location, and "sick to death" of all the hype about Mitte, Peres decided to open his gallery in the neighborhood he liked to hang out in during frequent (non-business) trips to Berlin. "I just love Kreuzberg," Peres explained. "I was seeing someone for a while, and he lives just around the corner. So when I was in Berlin, this became the place where I went drinking, dancing and the like. It's got a great feel that is more real than Mitte, which is just bursting at the seams with a poser art crowd." Peres was looking for a location that would give him more space to experiment and he considered cities in Spain and Belgium before settling on Berlin. The low costs of rent and the city's vast stock of large, industrial spaces made the move practical.

Although Peres represents only one artist living in Berlin (the Dan-

ish artist Kirstine Roepstorff), he saw the Kreuzberg location as an opportunity to give his LA artists more visibility in Europe, as well as to be in contact with the thriving community of artists in the city. Peres is not the first person to point out similarities between attitudes and aesthetics in Berlin and Los Angeles, and when I asked him if there would be any change in his exhibition program in Berlin, he said there was no need. "I just wanted more space to play with and to provide my artists with a new setting. I haven't altered my approach or what I exhibit at all. It's a win-win situation because we increase the visibility of the gallery and expand what we are able to do. I can't afford this kind of space in LA, so it's a great solution."

Many gallery owners in Berlin complain about the lack of contemporary art collectors in the city, and on this point Peres agrees. "There is no way I could break even if I relied on the local market." But because of the current strength of the international art market, and his success in promoting popular artists (one of Peres Projects' best-known artists is Matt Greene) and business relationships with prominent European collections such as the Deste Foundation and the Falckenberg collection, Peres wasn't too concerned about the costs of a second branch. "If I sell paintings for \$40,000, it doesn't take much to recoup the costs of renovating and running the Berlin space," he explained.



Javier Peres holding court at the Berlin branch of his gallery, Peres Projects

Peres hinted that he broke even for the first year with sales from only two exhibitions. He also mentioned that the Kreuzberg location has come with hidden benefits: "I have very wealthy collectors who may come to Berlin in a private plane and have only an hour in the city. To get to Mitte from Tempelhof (the airport in Kreuzberg where most private planes land) is too difficult, but they can be at my gallery in ten minutes. That has definitely helped my sales."

Peres's experience hasn't been all rosy. Astonished at the complexities of opening a business, he hired a lawyer to deal with the layers of German bureaucracy required to register the company, get permits for gallery renovation and cross all the "t's". He has "absolutely no interest" in learning German and his love of Berlin does not readily translate to its people or the country as a whole. Dealing with his landlord has been "a continual nightmare." People who own buildings in the area are quickly realizing that Schlesische Straße is fast becoming a popular address, and prices are rising because of it.



Installation view of young Dutch artist Amie Dicke's work in her solo show, "Private Property" at Peres Projects this spring. Dicke makes sculptures from various materials including paint, fur, furniture and plaster. She is also known for works on paper that use found images from magazines and popular culture. Photo: Peres Projects



Another installation view of Amie Dicke's work in Peres Project's generous gallery space in Kreuzberg. Photo: Peres Projects

Peres would have loved to buy the building that houses the gallery, but the owner refused to sell and has agreed only to a yearly rental, despite the money Peres invested in renovations.

It will be interesting to see how the branches of Pierogi and Peres Projects in Germany fare. Can the gallery owners break even, and if not, will they feel that their foothold in trendy locations and exposure in Europe make up for any losses? Will the great reputations of the Leipzig and Berlin art scenes continue to lure collectors from far and wide in search of the next star artist? Or will the material and immaterial benefits of the gallery locations be overshadowed by the mundane complexities of running a gallery in a foreign country? My hunch is that the galleries will do well enough, and if the hype about Leipzig and Berlin continues, Pierogi and Peres Projects will solidify their reputation as trendsetters. In the cut-throat contemporary-art business, these galleries will either close their doors or be remembered as the first in a wave of US-based (And British? And Latin-American? And Asian?) galleries that try their luck in Germany. □

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Current Fellows and their Activities

Richard D. Connerney (January 2005 - 2007) • INDIA

A lecturer in Philosophy, Asian Religions and Philosophy at Rutgers, Iona College and the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Rick Connerney is spending two years as a Phillips Talbot Fellow studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture and politics in India, once described by former U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith as "a functioning anarchy." Rick has a B.A. and an M.A. in religion from Wheaton College and the University of Hawaii, respectively.

Kay Dilday (October 2005-2007) • FRANCE/MOROCCO

An editor for the *New York Times'* Op-Ed page for the past five years, Kay holds an M.A. in Comparative International Politics and Theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the *Universiteit van Amsterdam* in the Netherlands and the *Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne*. She has traveled in and written from Haiti and began her journalistic life as city-council reporter for Somerville This Week, in Somerville, MA.

Cristina Merrill (June 2004-2006) • ROMANIA

Born in Bucharest, Cristina moved from Romania to the United States with her mother and father when she was 14. Learning English (but retaining her Romanian), she majored in American History at Harvard College and there became captain of the women's tennis team. She received a Master's degree in Journalism from New York University in 1994, worked for several U.S. publications from *Adweek* to the *New York Times*, and is spending two years in Romania watching it emerge from the darkness of the Ceausescu regime into the presumed light of membership in the European Union and NATO.

Nicholas Schmidle (October 2005-2007) • PAKISTAN

Nicholas is a freelance writer interested in the intersection of culture, religion and politics in Asia. He is spending two years in Pakistan writing on issues of ethnic, sectarian, and national identity. Previously, he has reported from Central Asia and Iran, and his work has been published in the *Washington Post*, the *Weekly Standard*, *Foreign Policy*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and others. Nick received an M.A. in International Affairs - Regional Studies from American University in December 2005. He lives with his wife, Rikki.

Andrew J. Tabler (February 2005 - 2007) • SYRIA/LEBANON

Andrew has lived, studied and worked in the Middle East since a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Fellowship enabled him to begin Arabic-language studies and work toward a Master's degree at the American University in Cairo in 1994. Following the Master's, he held editorships with the *Middle East Times* and *Cairo Times* before moving to Turkey, Lebanon and Syria and working as a Senior Editor with the Oxford Business Group and a correspondent for the Economist Intelligence Unit. His two-year ICWA fellowship bases him in Beirut and Damascus, where he will report on Lebanese affairs and Syrian reform.

Jill Winder (July 2004 - 2006) • GERMANY

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

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