

reSource Chat with Florian Wüst, Haben und Brauchen

Haben und Brauchen is an open platform for discussion and action. It advocates for the recognition and preservation of a self-organised artistic practice which has grown out of the specific historical conditions and free spaces in Berlin.

r: Could you tell us about the history and the background of Haben und Brauchen (“To Have and To Need”) and also how the initiative started?

F: There wasn't the idea of an initiative in the first place. It simply started with a public discussion about the planned Leistungsschau Junger Kunst aus Berlin (“Achievement Show of Young Berlin Art”) at Salon Populaire in December 2010. The Leistungsschau, later called based in Berlin, was a project initiated by Klaus Wowereit, cultural senator and mayor of Berlin. [...] It related to the debate about a new Berlin Kunsthalle. There were lots of critical points and open questions about the project. We could not see how a temporary exhibition spectacle serves as a sustainable investment into the future of the Berlin art scene. For us, it represented another example of a city marketing that utilises artists and their work. Thus, Ellen Blumenstein and I organised an open discussion entitled Haben und Brauchen. This set the name. The evening was quite successful, packed with people. [...] The general manager of Kulturprojekte GmbH, Moritz van Dülmen, and two of the young curators in charge couldn't explain to us what really made sense about their project. After the event, they set out to involve existing art institutions, like n.b.k. or Berlinische Galerie, as partners, and it was clear that they would eventually change the title, Leistungsschau, which was obviously very stupid, reminiscent of a cattle show or something like that. But this didn't prevent us from going ahead. We decided to write an open letter in order to make our criticism and protest public. With the help of another open discussion among more than one hundred people about the contents of the letter in mid January 2011, at basso, we finalised the text and collected over 200 first signatories.

r: What did you write in the open letter? What were the main points?

F: The letter gave a brief factual summary of what was known about the Leistungsschau at this time, followed by a number of statements and demands that addressed the critical points of the project, like its obscure concept and structure, its disproportionate budget in comparison to what many chronically under-financed art institutions and the independent scene get, as well as the general deficiencies of cultural politics in Berlin that ignores the changing living and working conditions of artists. But we also called for a dialogue between politics, arts administration and cultural producers.

r: What do you think was the problem of this Kunsthalle project?

F: It had to be questioned whether Berlin needs a new Kunsthalle. You could state that there is already one or even more, like, for instance, KW. Provide them with proper funding first, then you can see and analyse whether there's really something missing in Berlin regarding the institutional production and presentation of contemporary art.

r: This was at the end of 2010?

F: Yes, it started then, but the open letter came out on 25 January 2011. We kept organising public discussions about different topics, and a year later we published the Haben und Brauchen Manifesto. Our intention was from the beginning to go beyond the protest against a temporary project which was rather easy to criticise, and address the structural problems of the existing arts funding policy, the relationship of artists and institutions, the transformation of the city on all kinds of levels, etc. [...] The manifesto, resulting from

a collective writing process, covers a variety of issues that are not only relevant to the arts: our notion of labour, how much art belongs to the commons or the tradition of collective and communal housing in Berlin in opposition to the idea of an investor's city.

r: For your first Haben und Brauchen events, how did you invite people? Did you have a mailing list?

F: Most of the events took place at Salon Populaire, so we used the Salon's newsletter as well as our personal mailing lists. We abstained from a classical panel of speakers, experts discussing in front of an audience, with a few minutes of Q&A at the end. We wanted something non-hierarchical, [...] to give everybody in the space the equal opportunity to speak, just introduced and moderated by Ellen and me, or others of Haben und Brauchen. That's why the announcements always featured two dozen names of those who had confirmed to be present.

r: Did you only include people from contemporary art? Or did you change those you invited? Because Berlin is a pretty hybrid city: there are places that don't define themselves as art venues, but they are still producing art.

F: Haben und Brauchen emerges from the contemporary art field. No question about it. There had been a lack of new voices and activities concerned with cultural politics from that area for a while. Artists are individualists, obviously. In theatre, this is quite different; they have a different structure [...] Of course, there is bbk Berlin, the association that represents and services artists, with a huge number of members. They've always been active in politics, and they achieved a lot throughout the years. They really support Haben und Brauchen. But bbk does only reach a certain number and type of artists

in Berlin. I don't mean this negatively. It only shows why it is crucial that others, independent groups of artists, curators, etc., take action, too. But back to your question: yes, with our public events we definitely tried to go beyond the art scene and, for instance, connect to architects and urban activists, [...] to the very vibrant discourse around urban politics and city development. These debates might be more important for us than those within cultural politics. Contemporary art practice depends largely on the city and what conditions it provides, on the accessibility of spaces, on affordable studios, and the rent policy in general.

r: In which way do you manage to influence politics? You have done many events, you published two open letters in the meantime, but what is the feedback you are getting from there?

F: Two meetings with representatives of the Kultursenat, the Berlin arts administration, resulted from our first open letter in 2011. [...] As agreed at these meetings, we put together a concept for the development of a so called 'Kunstplan' which in our opinion needs to evolve from a profound investigation and understanding of artistic practices and their relationship to the city. From there then you can start working on future-oriented tools for new projects, funding models, and political frameworks. This paper went straight into the drawer. Instead, they offered us to organise discussions or workshops at based in Berlin which we refused. That was the end of direct talks. But what's important to understand, and we needed some time ourselves to understand it: Haben und Brauchen is not a lobbying group [...], not like, for instance, the Netzwerk freier Projekträume und -initiativen or the Koalition der Freien Szene. We don't have a mandate to represent anybody.

You could count those people who signed our open letters. But they simply expressed sharing our position and supporting the specific statements and claims we make. Not more and not less.

r: How many people are Haben und Brauchen then?

F: The core of Haben und Brauchen is maybe 10 to 20 people. So far, we employed some kind of rotation. This worked quite well. [...] Two people organise an event, the next two take care of a public workshop, like the summit prior to the K2 thing last fall, then another four sit down and write an open letter, like we did earlier this year. The number of currently active members? I can tell after the next meeting. It varies quite a bit.

r: You mentioned that you refrain from lobbying or from what is understood as an activity that tries to make sure that politicians learn about specific interests and act upon them. But doesn't Haben und Brauchen represent a political voice for artists? How does that fit together?

F: Yes, Haben und Brauchen is recognised as a political voice of cultural producers in the field of contemporary art. We aim to establish a consciousness of what distinguishes the forms of artistic production that have unfolded in Berlin during recent decades and how these forms can be preserved and further developed. [...] But to achieve this, we have to be clear about what we really want. One crucial question is definitely how to deal with the politicians and functionaries in charge. At the same time we must do research and foster discussions that don't serve only as networking platforms, but produce discourse and knowledge. We have to work on content. As well for those groups and initiatives that do invest in real political activity.

r: What do you mean by discourse and knowledge production?

F: Take our manifesto. There we not only bring forward our ideas and claims for a different cultural and urban policy, but relate them to a deeper knowledge of the history of Berlin as well as to a broader discussion about where we stand after decades of the

commodification of life and culture. We have to critically examine what artistic practice means, what it requires and provides, and we need to defend it against being a model for the new economy of creativity that functions to deregulate labour above all else.

r: Do you think you were able to be part of a process of change, or do you see that the situation of the Berlin art scene is just the same, two or three years ago and now?

F: I assume that Haben und Brauchen gave some kind of incentive. In 2011, it was really time for something to happen, a great fatigue with Wowereit's ignorance towards artists and independent producers surfaced, while more and more people realised or experienced themselves the decrease of work and living standards in Berlin. [...] We may have also inspired the foundation of the Koalition der Freien Szene ("Independent Scene Coalition"). I don't know whether such an informal association of independent practitioners, initiatives and institutions across the fields of theatre, dance, music, literature, and visual arts ever existed before in Berlin. It makes me feel quite optimistic. At the same time, real and lasting change is very hard to achieve, just look at the current debate and struggle about how to use the revenues of a future Berlin city tax.

r: The Koalition der Freien Szene claims 50% of that money for the independent scene.

F: Berlin's international reputation doesn't drive on big museums. When most tourists say that they come to the city for culture, then this has a lot to do with the image of the city created by the independent scene, by small art institutions and project spaces. That's why there are claims for a fair back flow of money into the arts. Haben und Brauchen, however, rejects to reduce the relevance of art to a merely economic question, but understands the production of art first of all as an activity intrinsic to society. Against this background, we want to think and talk about public funding. In order to differentiate our position towards the city tax and to advocate for a new, qualified cultural policy in Berlin, we published the second open letter to Klaus Wowereit. This,

of course, was meant in full support of the Koalition's campaign.

r: In which direction are you heading with Haben und Brauchen?

F: Personally, I would like to go further into what I described before: the production of knowledge and discourse. Together with Ines Schaber, I plan to make a series of radio shows and conversations with protagonists and experts from various fields for reboot.fm that revolve around the issues Haben und Brauchen has been addressing. [...] Others may have different ideas. It was always important for us to be an open platform from which all kinds of activities emerge.

r: How did Berlin change over the last two decades? And how do you see the city in the near future? Will it remain the place to be for international artists?

F: The transformation of the city, how certain neighbourhoods become more expensive and commercialised, homogenised you could say, is faster and more radical today than ten or fifteen years ago. Those who can't afford it are kicked out. Or they leave deliberately to other places. People have to take action, if they understand the importance of artists living and working in Berlin.

r: I would say there are still more people coming, especially artists.

F: Yes, Berlin is still well-known as the number one place for contemporary art production. But this isn't for granted. Just imagine Berlin not a little, but a lot more expensive, including neighbourhoods like Moabit or Wedding. Suddenly it won't work anymore. The main question, however, is in what kind of city you want to live. Let's say Berlin, due to its specific history, generally allows more for a heterogeneous and diverse social structure than other places. Now you can say that this is something from the past, something that perpetuates 'retro milieus' celebrating alternative lifestyles, non-conformism and poverty. Economic success is the measure of things. Real estate values and rents have to rise. What this produces, you can visit in many corners of Mitte or Prenzlauer Berg. But you can also see it differently. You

can see Berlin as a model for the future that does not fully subscribe to the capitalist idea of efficiency and centralisation of wealth. Because this makes for a more humane world.

r: Let me tell you what we are trying to do at transmediale. [...] We are part of a big arts festival, so we have other problems, too, but by creating reSource, we thought that transmediale should say something about the political developments in the city. Also because we have this big event in February, and then everything disappears. My idea was to get more connected with the rest of the city, to see in which way we can offer opportunities, of course not economically speaking. Although transmediale has more money than many other institutions and spaces, but still as a festival we are struggling with money. We know that we have the main funds until 2016, and afterwards we don't know. What do you feel would be useful?

F: That's indeed the question: Keep quiet and still loose the funding one day, or speak up. transmediale is a worldwide renowned festival. That's a position of power, to say it bluntly. Yes, you could make use of it and take a political standpoint in the city. Why is transmediale not represented in the Rat für die Künste ("Berlin Council for the Arts"), for instance? Not least in order to give media culture a voice within this round of established institutions.

r: Besides institutional presence, what do you think we can offer in terms of networking?

F: I don't know whether it's always about networking. What do you do when everybody got connected, has heard each other's presentation?

r: Diana once said, we do networking, but for what?

F: Exactly. The 'why' and 'what' are often pretty vague. [...] But luckily, what you created with reSource, goes beyond the bringing together of people. Those interviews, for instance, represent an important work of memory and a collection of experiences on which new strategies can be built.