reSource Chat with Gregor Hotz, ausland

ausland is an independent cultural initiative for contemporary music and arts in Berlin. ausland thrives in a corruptive climate of collateral coincidences, collective complications, and chaotic creativity. During the past 10 years, ausland mutated and mushroomed in several climatic changes of Berlin's cultural jungle and continuously offered a frame for artistic relationships and proto cooperations.

r: Can you describe us how you and your partners came up with the idea of ausland? What needs and questions did you want to answer when creating a space?

G: Well, the background was clearly the upcoming gentrification of Prenzlauer Berg, especially this area around Helmholzplatz [...]. For us there was one place which was important, the Anorak club in Dunckerstraße. It was a typically Berlin squatter-style backyard cultural space, opened by a guy living in Dunckerstraße 14/15. [...] It was quite a rough squat in those days.

r: Which time was that?

G: Well, I don't know when they started; I arrived in Berlin only at the end of '93, beginning of '94. They squatted it earlier, I guess just like everybody around. When the wall came down, everywhere was squatted. In the mid 90s, they were still living there, until '98. Then this house was renovated as well. [...] Anyway, there was the Anorak, there was a place in Schliemannstraße 40 [...]. And [...] Labor Sonor started in 2002 [...] in Auguststraße. So for a while, places that were dedicated to improvised music – I'm talking about a scene of improvised music now – there was no space anymore, out of a sudden. [...] The [...] places vanished, [...] because of this transformation of this city, and I was living here in this house, as a member of the house community [...]. I was a regular guest at Anorak, I helped them at the bar, etc. I was still a musician in those days, and I told Konrad, well, you know, you see the room downstairs is free in Lychener

Straße 60, don't you think we could try to save the room [for] the long term. [...] Then we asked around, and it went quite quickly. We were a group of let's say roughly 10 people, [...]50 % women, 50 % men. We started to put ourselves together, to write some texts, and we started to look for money. [...] The first name we chose was Stroop actually, which means sirup in Dutch, and a little while later Nicolas father told us that in Danzig in Poland, there was a [Nazi] called Stroop, a German fascist, so we realised we had to find a different name. Then after many discussions, we came up with the name ausland. We were still very much more artists in those days, the people who made ausland. We wanted to have a room for ourselves, where we could work, and we wanted to have a room where we could present things. There weren't so many questions in those days; we were completely convinced that it was the right thing what we were doing, although it was a huge amount of money. After a while it became clear that we needed something like 50.000 Euros to do sound installations. For us – we were ten years younger and nobody had money really – [...] [we were asking ourselves] do we really want to do this. But we were convinced that it was good to do this, because we knew that it would be a longterm solution. It was clear that we wouldn't do this for just five years. The first contract we had with the people from the house was for 12 years [...]. [...] You know the whole house is [off] the market, it has made this typical Berliner "Selbsthilfe" construction in the 90s. And [among] the people who live in the association which owns the house, there is no private ownership of any kind [...]. We rent the room from the[m]

[...], but if things [went] completely crazy, [they] [...] could try to throw us out [...]. In terms of law, it's their house.

r: So [do] you pay rent [...]?

G: Well, we don't pay rent. That's one of the main reasons why ausland [...] still exist[s]. When we decided to do this [...], we had a very clear understand[ing] between the two parties, ausland and the house, [...] that the rent would never be a normal market rent [...]. It would always have to be [...] subsidised by the [owners]. When we opened ausland in December 2002, we had something like 20.000 Euros debts. 10.000 Euros debts were [for] the house. It was very clear to them that they couldn't ask for rent. One of the reasons to do ausland here was clearly the financial situation. We knew that it was a lot of money to make it legal, with the sound installations, the ventilation, all this kind of stuff, but once this was done, it was clear that it wouldn't be easy to find a cheaper place than ausland, because of our relationship with the [owners].

r: What's the name of the association of the house?

G: Data Domizil. [...]

r: Is it a 'Verein'?

G: It's a typical 'Hausverein'. The people [...] met at university, most of them [are] West-Germans [...]. They came to Berlin in 1990/'91, many of them [...] architects. [...] They said, we have to look for a house, because we know there is this 'Senatsgeld für Selbsthilfe', we want to apply for a funding like this. [...] They found this house, some of them were living around here, in the district, in

squatted flats, [...] but they didn't put a flag outside that it was squatted. [...]

r: [And these buildings were empty], because [...] people [just] left?

G: Yeah. [...] In East-Berlin it was not like every flat was used, they had more space than they needed in a way. [...] They talked to the Senate and they came into this programme with the 'Selbsthilfe', and then it started officially in '92. [...] I came in '95, I came to Berlin a little bit earlier, but for one year I lived in a flat which I found. And then I met one of the guys who lived here and played in a band down there in the cellar. I started to play music with them and that's how I came to the house. [...] I lived here until the end of '99.

r: So the same people still live here?

G: Now a lot has changed. Currently there are only two people left which I know from these days. [...] But all the others went away. I must say I lost contact to most of the people.

r: But they still own the place?

G: [...] When you move out of the house, if you don't pay rent here, you're automatically excluded from the association. [...] I was living here for almost five years, and did renovations, because when we build the house, we didn't pay rent [...], but we had to do a certain amount of hours every week on the construction site. [...] I see it as an investment [...] I gave to the house. And when I left, I left it. I didn't take anything with me, in a material sense. For me it was just a time where I could learn about group dynamics, because it was new for me, too. I come from a Swiss middle class family, three kids,

each kid has its own room, from a very young age on [...]. I came to Berlin, and it was the first time [...] I was living in such a big community [with] 25 people. For me it was a process of learning, and that's why I enjoyed the time and I went out early enough to not be too frustrated. [...]

r: So, why the name ausland?

G: Well, it was Felix who found the name. Felix is the guy who writes our newsletter, which is very funny if you understand German. Some people hate it as well, [but] these people have no sense of humour.

r: Today in Berlin there is a huge discussion about the 'tourists' and the way such a category is changing the social scene. The members of ausland are actually 'Ausländer' (foreigners). What did it mean to be foreigners for you in that time?

G: [...] It is a name which evokes easily many associations, for example by saying, 'Ich gehe ins Ausland' ('I am going abroad'), we refer to the idea of leaving the well-known place, which surrounds us for the exploration of unknown horizons. It is also a funny joke, which allows musicians to be outside of their home for two weeks instead for one night only. At the same time, when people go abroad, they have specific expectations, which might be fulfilled or not. There is always the idea of discovering something new, and this new encounter might be positive or not, we might like it or not. It is a name that until now represents the place well, we recognise ourselves in that. So there is a connection between a name of a place which 'stays' for long, and the fact that we choose a place able to survive for long. The 'tourism problem' in Berlin is the mirror of a gentrification process, but also the mirror of the fact that Berlin is still very provincial, and people are attached to their own territories. We think that tourists are potentially a resource for the city, and we do not fear diversity, but at the same time we also do not attract that kind of topology of people. Our group is very distinct: people come here because they know the place for a long time, maybe also coming for very far away countries. Usually we have our crowd for many years, even if the public now is changing, because many

people moved to other areas, like Neukölln for example, and for them to come here becomes more complicated. At the same time, the offer increased and in the last years there are more places making this kind of music programme, even if we can still count them, because the programme is specialised. People come to us for listening to specific music, not really for going to a party or drinking, they usually stay for the length of the concert, and then they leave. This also creates a financial problematic, but at the same time we would not like to overcrowd events, since there is just not enough space.

r: We read on your website that ausland is a 'space for music, art and theory'. Could you tell us more about which artistic contents you aimed to develop at ausland when you created it, and how it developed during the years?

G: The core programme is very eclectic and hybrid; it is very difficult to define it in a specific way, even if we come from that scene that was usually named Echtzeit. It is related to experimental, minimalist, noise and 'Improvised Music'. The programme is very diverse, and we combine performances, concerts, improvisations and lectures. The fact that we do not only make music makes us difficult to collocate into a specific scene, especially in terms of fund sustainability.

r: We read that 'The ausländers think that the organisational structure of ausland is a pragmatic solution to the utopia idea of an artist-run venue'. ausländers do not get paid, and ausland is a non-commercial organisation. Do you think the model of 'autonomous zones' is still sustainable today?

G: We do not pay rent, and the place is self-sustained. We have two employees paid by the government, all the rest is volunteers who all have a side job, and we never thought of ausland as becoming a business or a commercial space. Often we create other activities in collaboration with other venues, so that we are able to transfer the funds into here. Otherwise, we usually get money from the Hauptstadt Kultur Fonds. If a project is

financed, everybody involved is paid. Now we are part of the group Projektraum, and at the same time of the Koalition der Freien Szene. We are trying to make our voice heard by getting in contact with other realities, and reclaiming especially for spaces in the city.

r: Do you feel connected to other cultural spaces or institutions in Berlin? How do you see the importance of a network that politically and artistically independent spaces can join?

G: The network is important for trying to avoid Berlin becoming a city like many others, preserving the possibility of living cheaply, and having spaces free for creating art and culture. Another problem is also to fight for possibility of respecting the cultural life of independent spaces. [...] I think that a very important thing in Berlin is to preserve the freedom of using places for artistic activities, and also that a place like ausland (which is rooted into the history of the grassroots communities of Berlin) can still be the normality. In the past, we already tried to create a network between people working within the Echtzeitmusik scene, and the result was a website (http://www.echtzeitmusik.de/index.php).

r: In which ways can the reSource for transmedial culture, and the transmediale festival in general, contribute in forming a more critical and collaborative status for the arts scene in Berlin and its translocal relations?

G: The first important thing is to be able to understand why we are doing a network. I believe that entering into a network is always a good thing, but what is the purpose? The focus should be narrowed down, and people should be put into the possibility of sharing resources, or maybe collaborate for specific projects. There should be clear motivations for being part of a network, and also a common direction. A useful approach could be to be able to make a 'lobby' for reaching political objectives, to make our needs more concrete and respected. But first of all, in the creation of a network, it is important to reflect why we do that, and what we can actually be able to achieve in very pragmatic terms.

r: Would you like to give us 'a statement' on your vision of the cultural production scene of Berlin – and what might be done to improve it – which we could use next time during our collective meeting to introduce your perspective?

G: In my opinion, the conditions of production are still quite ok – we have to pay attention to the real estate market development. It's important to keep enough cheap space – if this is given, all the rest follows automatically, if the artists have something to say. Berlin is big enough to make it possible for artists to move around – there are always some areas which remain cheap – but we shouldn't allow the government to push us more and more to the outer areas. I like the diversity and relative openness of the production scene in Berlin, and hope this will not change through tougher economic frames.

r: Would you also like to tell us a 'question / issue' to bring to the other participants of the open discussion in August?

G: How can we improve the political lobby-work? That's the crucial point. Is the coalition of the free scene or the initiative Haben und Brauchen the right way to go, or would many people feel uncomfortable about joining them? If yes, why? How can we get a grip on the politicians who decide about cultural budgets and make them understand what is actually going on in Berlin, besides Staatsoper and music board? How can we improve the structure of cultural funding, adapt it to more up-to-date formats and activities?

r: In which ways can the reSource for transmedial culture, and the transmediale festival in general, contribute to forming a more critical and collaborative status for the arts scene in Berlin and its translocal relations? What do you think we could offer to generate a useful platform of networking and art – not just economically speaking?

G: One thing which might improve the interconnectedness of the free scene is an Internet-based platform, at the same time professional, artistic high profile and open to newcomers, which could function similar to echtzeitmusik.de. Cultural initiatives could present

themselves. echtzeitmusik.de is
a very simple calendar,
where anybody can announce
concerts. If you imagine a
setting like this, but
much broader (different arts,
not just music), with many other
possibilities for
networking... I think this
could help. You could link a
independent, truly
uncommercial city magazine to
this website, representing the
cultural activities
of the free scene in Berlin.