

Berlin Retreat for Jewish Artists Report

Over March 27-30, 2017, Asylum Arts and ELES as part of its new project for Jewish artists DAGESH: KunstLAB ELES, held the inaugural Berlin Retreat for Jewish Artists at Schloss Gollwitz. The four-day retreat brought together 29 multi-disciplinary Jewish emerging artists based in



Berlin and elsewhere in Germany. We had an intensive and thought-provoking experience, learning from local and international professionals, respected German artists, and from each other. There were a range of outside speakers to present talks and open up conversations, and the guests included author and journalist Michael Wuliger, cantor and musician Jalda Rebling, and artist Daniel Meier-Reimer. They brought up important questions about the impact of history on German-Jewish

culture, ways of creating new artistic practices, and situated the artists within a larger context of German life. Other topics discussed in workshops included an exploration of the concept of Jewish art throughout modernity, and how artists can create opportunities to advance their careers in an international context and spread the German-Jewish voice. The artists themselves taught a number of sessions including those titled: Character Development through Physical Theater, Simple Circus, Improvisation for Non-Musicians, (Un)knotting Identities, and Jews for Germans or German Jews?



The group of participants was extremely diverse, and pulled together artists from different national and religious backgrounds. We had artists who had emigrated from Israel, England, the former USSR, and Hungary, as well as artists who had been born in Germany. They had a



range of Jewish identities, and various affiliations with the Jewish Community or alternative organizations. The retreat was an important opportunity for the participants to learn from each other's stories, and begin to understand the complexities of the contemporary Jewish community in Berlin. Many of the participants commented that they were unfamiliar with the experience of other people, as one participant originally from Israel shared, "I loved the mixture of

German-Jewish and Israeli participants. It was such a rich tapestry of identities, and was highly educating for me. I enjoyed learning what others are thinking, and I was absolutely amazed by everyone's ability to let go and give themselves up for this experience. I'm very grateful to be given such rare opportunity."

We created space for the artists to set their own topics for discussion, and many conversations circled around the complexity of Jewish identities and the intersection with artistic identities. In our evaluation, many people commented that this was an important part of their participation, and quite rare in their everyday lives. As one participant shared, "I came back with a lots of questions towards my own Jewish/ German identity and its role in the cultural landscape in Germany!" And another, "It completely opened my mind towards me being Jewish, opened my eyes on the perception of German culture in relation to Jewish artists and really opened my heart. I realized how important this part of my identity was without ever before having the possibility to talk about it in a group. For me it is a transformative experience."



One of our goals was to empower artists to explore how they can work in innovative ways to build an integrated artist community and facilitate a nuanced conversation about Berlin's unique culture and Jewish identity. We are very pleased to see that in the short time since the retreat ended, artists have taken the initiative to organize an artist seder as well as a follow-up meeting to continue building the community. Many artists have shared with us that it was a very emotional process, and

they developed deep connections in a short amount of time. In the words of one participant, "I have had very strong feelings during the retreat and some moments of enlightenment, things

are still resonating and searching for their way out or to be expressed, others are already clear to me. I made such strong relationships that feel intuitive and honest from the very first moment and I really hope I can stay with them for a long time.”

Several of our speakers mentioned the unusual nature of this project, and the importance of fostering a next generation of artists to build Jewish life and culture. As one artist reflected, “I have the feeling that because of the nature and the history of Germany this was literally an historic event when it comes to Jews in Germany and I hope its magnitude will grow. I am wondering if there was anything like it in the context of Berlin since the war.”

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All pictures by Tilman Vogler