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# ARTS OF THE

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# IS NOT NEGOTIABLE

## *Interview with Övül Ö. Durmusoglu & Joanna Warsza*

*“Die Balkone - Life, Art, Pandemic, and Proximity in Windows & Balconies” occurred on April 12-13, 2020 in Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin. The initiative, curated by Joanna Warsza and Övül Ö. Durmusoglu, asks about the relationship between art and public space during and after the Corona Crisis.*



*Markus Miessen and Lena Mahr*

Imagine yourself sitting in the park looking around the 19th-century German facades, talking about the urgency we are going through and the political history of balconies around the world. What comes to your mind?

Uncertainty might plague any headspace left for observations, but that is exactly what brought **Övül Ö. Durmusoglu** to think about the role balconies play in cities like Berlin and

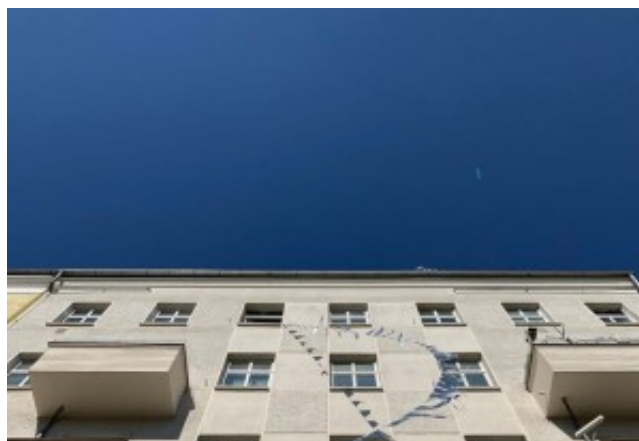
### María Inés Plaza Lazo

likes to develop curatorial and communication strategies for others, individuals and institutions. She grew up in Guayaquil, Ecuador, lives and works between the streets of Berlin and the world.



balconies play in cities like Berlin and Istanbul. In Italy, balconies became spaces of reassurance that social life could still exist, even in times of crisis. As Övül and **Joanna Warsza**, both independent curators active in the academic and public realms, were sitting in Volkspark Friedrichshain in late March, they decided to address an invitation to artists to exhibit signs of life and art from the balconies and windows of Prenzlauer Berg. They reached out to artists' friends, who invited other artists' friends, as well as strangers and neighbours who have lived here since the 1980s.

In the COVID-19 debate in Germany, artists and curators haven't been considered 'system relevant', perhaps for good reasons. Art workers and workers in general are creating a new political awareness, turning towards a new order that might seem like a projection for now. Wondering where this initiative could lead the art system and what could replace the entertainment logics leading to compliant applause, AWC started this email ping-pong on the different pieces creating the entire puzzle of Die Balkone.







*Waving at You by Matylda Krzykowski*

What remains open is the relation between body language and public space, that is, when our physical presence becomes the center of the hunt for Die Balkone: Bodies are dearly missed here, as the exhibition celebrates absence as a variable of surprise and not only a mass of joggers. Maybe jogging is the new dancing, though. Die Balkone may not have necessarily influenced how we move through Berlin, in the high-concept of choreography to the literal pedestrian, but rather insists upon grasping for what has been taken for granted, to research the potentiality of our bodies coming together, to meeting by accident. Forget the city as a stage and look out for the people who are actually standing in it.



“Die Balkone” seemed to blur the line between artworks and the details of daily life. Why, then, were only artists friends of the initiators invited to participate, and not every neighbor?

**JW:** The project departs from where we live and work, and what our tools and language are, and that is, in the first place, art. Art is a way of thinking about the world, a way of building bonds and relations and creating ontological meaning. The project also came from a need to overcome the isolation and the moment in which we found ourselves at the beginning of this quarantine. It was a way of building a non-digital community by becoming neighbours. Prenzlauer Berg is not only playgrounds and restaurants but has a rich political history of resistance, artists squats, and today many international cultural workers live here, although perhaps a bit disconnected. This was time to ask about what it means to be a Berliner, a neighbour and part of a community while having the privilege of staying home.

**ÖÖD:** Our original inquiry was never about drawing lines between who is an artist and who is not or who is successful and who is an amateur. It is more about having an honest take on the artists’ community in which we live in, which also has its problems. So we bit off what we could chew, so

so we sit on what we could chew, so to speak, and watched how our neighbours responded to our chewing action. It was a bottom-up action of our peers and our community that in just two weeks brought to light a moment of collective loss and not an edition of Skulptur Projekte Munster, which takes place every ten years. Hopefully with the wide resonance of this project, we will be able to develop future editions, where we can expand our conversations from the ground we stand on.



*Viewers watch an animation by Matthias Daenschel*

“Die Balkone” had four imperatives - Life, Art, Pandemic & Proximity - which became the context from which the invited artists created their work. How were these people approached and invited to participate?

**ÖOD:** The lockdown we go through demands us to observe and reconnect with our localities, to truly come together when we lack the opportunity for physical encounters. Among the invited artists, curators and writers are veterans who have been here for twenty or thirty years, some even

before the fall of the Wall. What our initiative also asked was actually to look at our vocabulary of production and exhibition making, the language we speak in our work. As two independent curators, we decided to take action in just two weeks to respond to the urgency of what we are going through. To think of 'commissioning artworks' is not the right vocabulary in this sense. First, we didn't have a budget for commissions and second, we didn't want to commission anyone but rather to start a conversation beyond our smart devices.

We asked for connecting gestures, smoke signals to tell each other: "I am here, I am alive" and to communicate beyond what is dictated by emergency policies. The community surrounding this project grew very quickly and up until the last day we were adding new points to our map. It grew quite organically. Some of these gestures can be part of artworks in the future, some of them are part of existing research and some others will never be repeated. In total this was a stirring, joyful exercise where we were playmates. What we tend to forget in the professional world is this joy and sense of making and communicating. Sometimes it is just that simple and powerful. Each unique voice had its own tone in this unusual choir of people who normally wouldn't be 'curated' in the same exhibition together.



*Pandemic Poems by Martin Frese and Eva Scharrer*

“Die Balkone” seems to result in a rather standard way of showing artworks art production, instead of being a platform of solidarity or a means of redistribution.

**ÖÖD:** The problem is maybe how we are used to seeing and evaluating art. From the inside, this initiative has brought people closer together than many other contemporary art events. Neighbours reached out to each other, various communities intermingled and solely by the fact that an equally in/visible and open public frame was activated, it challenged the GPS coordinates in our hands and in our heads. When you walked around you didn't know who did which artwork as precise addresses and names were not provided.







*The Swing by Antje Stahl and Felix-Emeric Tota*

**JW:** In general, there are currently different forms of performing solidarity such as shopping for the elderly, community advising or hosting zoom meetings. Those are wonderful initiatives. Our attempt was to test art capacities in these peculiar times, when many of us are grieving. Very often in curatorial statements we read about art's role to recontextualise the status quo and we felt like that time was now. The invited artists, curators and writers didn't seek our curatorial approval of their projects as they would have in a more standard setting, and we were in no means the symbolic gate keepers of the content. Everybody was producing what they felt like at the moment, on the threshold of life and art, private and public, in their windows and on their balconies- be it a swing hanging from the door, an action of spring cleaning by throwing unnecessary stuff out the window, or reading poems through an intercom. Artists Lina Majdalanie and Rabih Mroué not only did invite all of the

actually did invite all of the neighbours in their house to partake, activating their windows and balconies as the whole building spoke.



*Evening projection in Bergstrasse by Pauline Doutreluingne and Lee Duk Hee*

The newspapers and online magazines announcing and reporting on the project made good use of the name dropping to make the project sound more appealing. Yet the artworks were shown anonymously, so no one could have known which artwork was created by which artist. How can the gap between the solidarity driven force of Die Balkone and the celebrity-loop in which people seem to still be trapped be closed, despite the lock-down?

**ÖÖD:** This is a time for habit-changing experiments in our field. As Bruno Latour asks, “What are some suspended activities that you would like to see not coming back?” An important responsibility is also on the side of art criticism and contemporary

side of art criticism and contemporary art press to challenge the general media's ways of approaching contemporary art. It is sort of a chain reaction that needs to start from somewhere.

**JW:** Speaking from the place you live in about its idiosyncrasies, histories and futures in that moment of time. It might be also important to realise that life will not 'return to normal' in May, June, or August of this year. We need to learn how to deal with it, and how to rethink our relations and interdependencies in this state of exception and beyond it as citizens and cultural workers.



RESET. A piece by Yael Bartana and Saskia Wendland was performed for the beginning and the end of the project.

Is this one of the things you can only

is this one of the things you can only experience in a city like Berlin, in a Kiez like Prenzlauer Berg?

**JW:** We actually received questions for possible sister editions from India, Ghana, Indonesia, France and Poland. You are a neighbour, always and everywhere, and should always be thinking of how to live better, together. Perhaps Berlin has more artists per square meter than many other cities, but so far actually very few institutions have taken advantage of it, and there have not been many initiatives for artistic community building where both local and international peers are involved. Speaking of Prenzlauer Berg, the quarter was a crucial site of East German counter-culture and resistance. In terms of confinement and forging the public sphere from within the private (under other circumstances that can not be compared), it was here that a non-intimidated or uncensored art and life frequently happened in someone's kitchen rather than out in the open.



*RESET. A piece by Yael Bartana and Saskia Wendland was performed for the beginning and the end of the*



*project.*

After the fall of the Wall, it became an anarchist and squatted part of the town, where many artists resettled, resulting in a famous baby boom and now, sadly, is going through a heavy gentrification process. Curator and architect, Olaf Grawert, addressed those issues with his intervention. Actually we are about to zoom into the district even more and interview many of the participants, such as Andrea Pichl, who since 1982 was part of the squatting scene, paving ways for the community to thrive; Jan Peter Hammer who studied in Weissensee and against all odds decided to settle here; Ulf Aminde or Hannah Hurtzig from West German art scene who came in the early 90s; Saskia Wendland or Olaf Nicolai, who grew up in East Germany; and finally lots of internationals who chose Berlin as their home, such as the two of us, who represent the two biggest minority communities in Germany- the Turks and the Poles. There are also some amazing coincidences, for example writer Tom McCarthy and artist Eva Stenram coincidentally live in the same building where Franz Kafka used to sojourn.





*Eva Stenram and Tom McCarthy Corvus, 2020*

**ÖÖD:** A sister night action was just initiated this week by Kreuzberg based artist and videographer Ali Demirel, who projected films on a prominent window at the corner of Naunynstrasse and Mariannenstrasse. The first night featured Elena Vogman and Clemens von Wedemeyer's "Actors of Profane History" (2017) and the second night showed Ahmet Ögüt's new video "No Poem Loves Its Poet" (2020). Demirel plans to show different works by artists' with whom he is in conversation in the coming weeks, on Fridays and Saturdays.

You've been invited to curate "Die Balkone" in cities like Paris. How will this work, if the lock-down comes to an end next Wednesday? Will it remain a non-profit, zero-budget program?

**ÖÖD:** and **JW:** No, we are not invited as curators to the sister projects of "Die Balkone". We don't think we should follow a Biennale model where we fly around the world and implement it in various contexts. Those places, their local curators and communities will know the best way to make their own editions. We are only conversation partners because of our firsthand experience. Each sister

our individual experience. Each sister project would function according to her needs. What can be realised in Berlin cannot necessarily be realised in the same way in Paris, a city which has a different urban structure and different relations in the artistic community, as well as a more strict and painful experience of quarantine. But maybe Prenzlauer Berg neighbouring district Moabit would like to welcome us?



*Lina Majdalanie and Rabih Mroué with their neighbours.*

Does the nature of “Die Balkone” question the nature of the curatorial and artistic labour?

**ÖÖD:** De facto, it does. The driving force behind “Die Balkone” is perhaps one of the most well-known questions of all time: How does art respond to our time? What put us into motion was breaking away from the helplessness we feel, which has been intensified by the media: Postponed exhibitions and events, fired museum educators, collapsing budgets and the

feeling that whatever we do we can only do in the digital, without asking who profits from it, and staying home as a privilege of course. In the meantime when we lock ourselves in, some governments are making dangerous decisions to consolidate their power in a way that may change the course of the future after Covid-19. “To kick the door of radical possibility open”, words from Naomi Klein which I heard in a Zoom gathering touched me deeply. “The time is now”, as she puts it.



*RAPUNZEL by Christina Dimitriadis*

To be able to translate such a call in our field meant challenging exhibition/project making structures and codes of working. We were working on the ground, starting from what we know best, to realize a response ora gesture with limited time, with no budget, no



time, with no budget, no commissioning at all, no funders, no opening, no spectacle, no fly in and out, no view and preview, no VIP, no champagne, no market in the sense that we usually see in the professional contemporary art world. The common concern we all had with the participants has been more substantial than the 'normal' codes of conduct. We all wanted to share something with someone else and reach out to others who we may not know in order to try and overcome the distress some of us might be in.

**JW:** We are absolutely against working for free and any form of exploitation, but if there is a need for engagement, there are these rare situations where one can do something just because it feels right, where the economic aspect does not play a role. And of course, it would be even better if under normal conditions there was more fairness and equal pay in a very hierarchised art world. "Die Balkone" proved to us that art CAN BE in fact a way of creating freedom within confinement, a way of shaping relations and narrations, creating intimacy, overcoming fear, and a way of creating moments of publicness together. I like to ask what is in fact public in public art? Maybe it's the rare capacity of creating a moment of togetherness and hope despite social isolation while also thinking of leaving nobody behind.

So, in the end, what reaffirms the purpose of showing art as art on balconies and in windows?

**ÖÖD:** This is a discussion we need to continue as what takes place in public space is becoming more charged after the lock down and quarantine period. When the 4th Berlin Biennial in 2006 decided to use the old Jewish Girls School on Auguststrasse, we were all mesmerized. Now it is a building of galleries and expensive cafes and restaurants. We know very well that the current problems of Prenzlauer Berg are part of the same discussion as many neighbourhoods of Berlin. If “Die Balkone” continues here, in the way we imagine and hope for, we will continue to build on such crucial questions.

**JW:** In their political history, balconies have both been terraces of openness and hope, as well as platforms for authoritarianism and supremacy, signs both of privilege and of democratisation. They are the thresholds from which we encounter the world from the domestic: safe and sound for some, but not for others. They are emergency exits. Now in April 2020 for the participants of the project and for us, they ‘bridged us’ as artists, writers and curators, but first and foremost as neighbours, when physical and bodily presence has become more important than ever.





Ulf Aminde on Max Lingner Strasse 17

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**Joanna Warsza** is Program Director of CuratorLab at Konstfack University of Arts in Stockholm. As an independent curator and editor, she is interested in how art functions politically and socially outside the white cube. She was the Artistic Director of Public Art Munich 2018, curator of the Georgian Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale and associate curator of the 7th Berlin Biennale, among other projects. In Spring 2020, together with Övül Ö. Durmusoglu she co-initiated “Die Balkone. Life, art, pandemic and proximity” in windows and balconies of Prenzlauer Berg in Berlin, where they both live.





*Curators of Die Balkone, Övül Ö. Durmusoglu  
and Joanna Warsza, Photo by Jan St. Werner*

**Övül Ö. Durmusoglu** is mentor and program co-leader at the Graduate School of the University of the Arts in Berlin and a visiting professor for Art and Discourse at the Hochschule für Bildende Kunst Braunschweig. In the past, Övül was curator for Steirischer Herbst festival in Graz; curator/director for YAMA public screen in Istanbul; artistic director for the Sofia Contemporary 2013 ‘Near, Closer, Together: Exercises for a Common Ground’. She curated the programs of the 10th, 13th and 14th Istanbul Biennials; coordinated and organized different programs and events at Maybe Education and Public Programs for dOCUMENTA (13). With her writing Övül contributes to different publications, online platforms and magazines such as Texte zur Kunst and Frieze. Recently, she co-initiated "Die Balkone: Life, Art, Pandemic and Proximity" together with Joanna Warsza in the windows and balconies of Berlin's Prenzlauerberg where they both live.



More images of Die Balkone can be  
viewed [here](#)