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Porous Membranes: Hospitality, Alterity, and Anthropology in a Berlin District Gallery

Jonas Tinius

Membranes are ambiguous. They divide and connect. The gallery at the centre of this piece has such a membrane, and it is composed of its large, nearly five-metre high window front, covering the 180 square meters of gallery space. These windows allow for the exchange of glances, hushed and cramped, on a rainy November morning, or curious and playful, on warm July evenings. One side faces Müllerstraße, one of the central alleys named after the windmills that used to stand on this still windy and busy road leading from Berlin’s north into its central business artery Friedrichstraße southwards. Bus drivers stop in front of the gallery at the ‘Rathaus Wedding’ stop of the 120, N6, and N20 lines almost every five minutes on a weekday. Doors open, twenty to fifty pairs of eyes glance at sculptures, paintings, installations, videos, photographs; many will not enter the gallery. Curators, assistants, artists, and, sometimes, visitors gaze back. The southern side of the gallery faces Rathausplatz, the Schiller Library, and Simit Evi, a small Turkish-run bakery and café, rescued from disappearance during the recent reconstruction of the square thanks to a neighbourhood initiative. On top of a building, someone has written a message in large letters: angst fressen seele auf (fear eats the soul), the title of a 1974 film by Rainer Werner Fassbinder on social oppression, projections of fear, and the precarious life of a Moroccan guest worker and his elderly working-class German partner.

The gallery is located in the bottom corner of the social services department of the district’s municipal offices – Bezirksamt Mitte, Amt für Soziales. People step off the bus and walk past the gallery, on their way to the district, for forms on care, ageing, shelter, pensions, debt, unemployment. A membrane divides and connects all at once. It is a boundary, a vibrating tissue, a
layer, a skin, a permeable film. Towards the gallery, this membrane is a kind of selective barrier, mechanical barrier, architecture, and curatorial element at the same time. For their exhibition *Circling Around Oneness* (shown between November 2016 and January 2017), the artistic duo Mwangi Hutter blackened out the windows with dark chalk. Soon, traces and carved lines were scratched into this porous boundary: Kids wrote their names; others carved hearts, dates, insults, questions. One reads, “Wedding ist cool”, another, “von wegen!” (‘as if!’). More and more erased lines in the chalk let the light in and allow viewers from the outside to discover the projections of a man and a woman sleeping in separate beds. Some stop, peer in, curious; one of the curators returns the gaze. The membrane becomes more and more porous, opens gaps, and invites, at least for a hasty moment, a look inside.

**Prefigurative curatorial fields**

In June 2016, after several years of studies and research in the UK, I had just moved to Berlin for a post-doctoral research fellowship at the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage (CARMAH). As part of the larger research project to which I belonged – and from which, together
with Margareta von Oswald – this edited volume emerged, we focused on the ways in which museums, curatorial work, and heritage practices act as catalysts of ‘differences’, discriminating and otherwise, such that they not merely reflect as public theorisers, but, to varyingly deliberate degrees, help to constitute. We collectively studied the ways in which ethnographic research into and with exhibition practices can help understand how museums and heritage practices and also contemporary art and curatorial practices are involved in the complex “coordination of difference and identity” (Macdonald 2016: 4) within cities and nations. This concerned most urgently, as we present in the introduction to this volume, the ways in which anthropological museums are steeped in legacies of colonial ordering and knowing, which determine the past and future of objects as they transit through their negotiations as art, artefact, gift, or loot, valued or deaccessioned, stored or restituted. This debate moved across the scales of in-house curatorial discussions in such institutions to nationwide conversations about museums, heritage, and the role of the colonial past for contemporary European societies.

My research looked at how contemporary art institutions and curatorial practice deliberate with but, more interestingly, across such discursive formations. In particular, I attended to artistic and curatorial ways of dealing with alterity and othering, sociality and hospitality, diversity and discrimination in

Fig. 10.3 One part of the video projection, with visitors sitting on the radiators in front of the gallery membrane facing Müllerstraße, during the exhibition Circling Around Oneness (2016) by Mwangi Hutter, Galerie Wedding, © Fernando Gutiérrez Juárez
a city like Berlin. I conducted fieldwork on three galleries in Berlin, including the ifa-gallery of the Institute für Auslandsbeziehungen (Germany’s oldest intermediary organisation for international cultural relations supported by the German Federal Foreign Office); the independent and project-based art space SAVVY Contemporary; and the district gallery of Wedding, or Galerie Wedding – Raum für zeitgenössische Kunst (hereinafter, GW). For my fieldwork, I sought out conversations with curators and contemporary artists who were addressing questions that Margareta von Oswald and I theorise in our introduction as ‘trans-anthropological’, that is, ways of addressing the legacies of anthropology as a discipline and its institutions. These forms of questioning and areas of problematisation that I traced thus included artistic practices addressing museums and forms of classifying European and non-European cultures, as well as practices that themselves took inspiration through methodological queries about fieldwork, or engaged themes that had long been part of the curricula and theoretical canon of different anthropological traditions, such as alterity, migration, hospitality, archives, object histories, and provenance.

While the Humboldt Forum and its creation – as well as its reception by critics and fellow anthropologists inside and outside the institution – served as a backdrop to my studies (see our introduction to this volume, and Zinnenburg and Tinius 2020), I was interested in following the rethinking of themes associated with this large museum and heritage project in the field of contemporary art and “contemporary creation” (Sarr and Savoy 2018: 24). In the light of well-rehearsed anthropological analyses of contemporary curatorial practice and contemporary art as constitutive and reflexive of politically prefigurative social forms (Ssorin-Chaikov 2013, and Sansi 2014; Blanes et al. 2016), I studied how such practices negotiate the thin line that reproduces some of the barriers they seek to break down (Tinius 2020). These included failing to move smoothly between the precarious boundaries between exclusive arts spaces while marshalling a quest for inclusivity, or claiming to be alternative to, while often embodying the hyper-productive model of a creative industry innovation logic (see Reckwitz 1995; Boltanski and Chiapello 2007; Canclini 2014).

**Thresholds and ambivalences**

This chapter speaks to this problematic by highlighting how two curators – and a number of artists with whom they collaborated – grapple with this ambivalent intersection and such membranes between ‘inside work’ in
Berlin’s Galerie Wedding and the ‘outside life’ of the district and its cultural politics that mandates the gallery. I do so by focusing on how its curatorial team struggled to address the very limits and possibilities afforded with the porous membranes of the gallery – the negotiation of a threshold, whose varying porosity encapsulates and is constitutive of the gallery’s ambivalent status in the district. Its large floor-to-ceiling windows, often incorporated into exhibitions, act as literal thresholds between the inside of the gallery and its outside.

The gallery itself is also a threshold as a contemporary art institution. It is situated in a largely migrant and working-class district – more precisely, in the district’s social security office – with a public mandate to engage with this urban social context. And yet, the gallery is clearly articulated by the curatorial duo, and thus tasked by public cultural policymakers who appointed them, to be a contemporary arts space, connected to scenes of artistic production that are “based in Berlin, but not defined by their location”, as the curators put it to me. Their curatorial programmes, called Post-Otherness Wedding (POW) (2015-2017) and Unsustainable Privileges (UP) (2017-2019) speak to this ambivalent process and task, which I unravel in this chapter.

How, then, can a reflexive, hospitable curatorial programme, which addresses the distribution of privileges for German and non-German citizens and challenges essentialisations of difference along race and class lines, offer a productive critique, in spite of being itself, broadly, a privileged white cube marked out from the otherwise different district?

Offering thus a case study of curatorial work on hospitality, alterity, and anthropology – and also, to some extent, of attempts and perhaps failures of doing so – I want to suggest that it is precisely the curatorial grappling with the porosity of the gallery that constituted it. The gallery’s ‘district curating’ became a reflection on its limits, porousness, and the attempts and failures to transgress its thresholds. Over the course of their curatorial engagement with the public mandate, and their own professional networks and approaches to curating, the artistic directors struggled with, and in doing so, constantly redrew the thin line between interrogating, representing, and inadvertently constituting the often reified idea of diversity in a district like Berlin-Wedding.

**Gallery transitions and curatorial reframing**

Up until the start of the new artistic team and the beginning of their curatorial reframing in January 2015, GW had primarily been a for-the-community gallery with district-based artists, focusing on art production without
competitive market values or any embedding in the contemporary art structures, mechanisms, criteria, and fields of the city. By the time I had begun fieldwork, the gallery had already shifted its institutional structure, planned outreach, style, and rhetoric, as well as curatorial-theoretical framing to address this wider field of international contemporary art. The framing was phrased, by the curators, thus as solo shows by “internationally-recognised but Berlin-based artists”. The transition was enacted principally through the hiring of two Berlin-based independent artistic directors, Solvej Helweg Ovesen and Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, who had established connections to international artists and fields in contemporary art production and theorising. Both curators worked closely with the district officer for culture, Ute Mueller-Tischler, who was in charge of publicly-funded artistic and cultural institutions in the city districts of Wedding and Mitte, and who oversaw this structural transformation.

Anthropology and Post-Otherness

The change of curatorial and organisational culture went hand-in-hand with the creation of two successive two-year overarching exhibition frameworks. The first, Post-Otherness Wedding, was conceived on the basis of a collaborative curatorial concept co-authored by Ndikung and my colleague, the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin anthropologist Regina Römhild (see Ndikung and Römhild 2013). The programme sought to take difference (social, cultural, ethnic) as a starting point for thinking about the hospitality, and indeed hostility, of cities and public spaces, rather than articulating such difference, epitomised by migrants and refugees, as a negative foil against a mainstream urban civic society. This was followed by a second curatorial programming phase called Unsustainable Privileges (2017-2019), which investigated how it might be possible to change the ‘unsustainable’ distribution of privileges pertaining to race, class, and gender – if at all.

For this chapter, I draw on fieldwork conducted during the transition of the GW programme from its Post-Otherness Wedding to Unsustainable Privileges between the summer of 2016 through 2019, when the artistic directors shuffled again. During this time, I had become a close observer and participant in the gallery’s jour fixe, during which the curatorial team met with artists included in the programming, usually in the crammed kitchen hidden from view of the gallery visitors, in order to negotiate their planned projects within the often precarious budgets and time frames afforded by the gallery. In fact, some publications emerged from the conversations that spontaneously took
off during such meetings, and which were recorded or transcribed by me. Other notes and deliberations of aspects pertinent to the gallery’s everyday negotiations also resulted in a set of preliminary field notes in the gallery catalogue that I was invited to write (Tinius 2019a). The curators’ invitation of my presence, perspectives, and contributions as co-author, moderator, and colleague, opened the conversations in the gallery to becoming a kind of ‘para-site’ (Marcus 2000) and field of trans-anthropological practice. This situation arose because we understood our conversation as a form of recursive collaboration, in which curatorial and anthropological positions were not subjecting one another to an overarching position, but rather overlapped and corresponded; these aimed instead at understanding, transforming, and generating the contexts within which they operate (see Macdonald and Tinius 2020).

There are further evident connections to anthropology beyond the initial programming inspiration from a text co-authored and published by an anthropologist and a curator, which served as the starting point of the gallery’s transition into a new set of programming focusing centrally on the issues of hospitality and the negotiation of alterity in Berlin. Many layers of the subsequent concept work, the artistic and curatorial research, or the exhibition-making drew on anthropological publications; research assistants to artists employed a variety of qualitative, fieldwork-based approaches to the city – some of which are further discussed below – in ways of thinking about difference, and about collectivity and conviviality that correspond closely with those practised, for instance, at the Department of European Ethnology from which Römhild and I engaged with the gallery team. In that sense, the curatorial work could be described as trans-anthropological, in so far as it engages and grapples with anthropology without itself either rejecting or becoming fully anthropological itself. In what follows, I describe these forms of thought and will argue that they converse with a trans-anthropological form of research across anthropology and curatorial practice, leaving open challenges to both fields, which were left unresolved but opened up ways for further considering the possibility of a recursive anthropological curation. In the following analyses of selected artistic positions in the curatorial programmes, in particular, I will be looking at how the ‘curation’ of a district became a central problem for the gallery team, and how this articulated further the problematic and constitutive issue of the gallery as a porous membrane.
Deep curating

In their published catalogue *POW.UP – Post-Otherness Wedding & Unsustainable Privileges* (Ovesen and Ndikung 2019), the curators reflect on the emergence of their curatorial positioning with the GW. “The curatorial journey”, they write, “has attempted to undo mechanisms of othering as well as to unlearn privileges (Gayatri Spivak) with the language and tools of visual art” (p. 26). Part of this project, in their words, involves using

our own privilege and the possibility of working non-commercially in the communal Galerie Wedding to take the time to play out often-unresolvable conflicts of interest in future models of cohabitation and society building. (ibidem)

Despite their reflexive positioning, the transformation of the gallery remained ambiguous. Nora Sternfeld, in her contribution to this volume, speaks of curating as a form of “making conflicts liveable”. She refers to conflicts between the institutional demands of a creative economy that values innovation and a neoliberal climate in which curators act as agents, on the one hand, of gentrification and, on the other hand, of curatorial projects seeking integration and sustainable conviviality. The two curators were positioned precisely in this pitfall: how were they to reconcile the evident attention-economy of a high-frequency and discursive, if not intellectualised performance exhibition economy with the harsh and precarious realities of a district public that has little to no exposure to the references and infrastructures of this economy?

Ovesen, on behalf of the GW artistic team, proposes thus a particular model of curating, which she expounds in the same introduction to the gallery catalogue as a form of “‘slow’ or ‘deep’ curating” (2019: 26). For her, such a slow or deep curatorial approach at the GW focuses on longevity and relations – “one artist and two curators, along with a gallery team” – extending from this relation also to other discursive partners and ‘thinkers’, over the course of a year or longer. “Deep curating means going wide socially (...) and allowing for discursive conflict while taking time”, Ovesen adds (ibidem).

District curating and the post-migrant Other

The specific task given to the curators by the district gallery’s situatedness and institutional position creates additional complexity. The gallery team
was grappling with this issue, both among the curators and assistants, but also in response to audiences visiting the space, and embraced the location and institutional context of GW as a steady and recurring reference point for each new project. Ovesen, in her statement, continues to reason about the different perspectives from which the district provides for a particular kind of curating.

Ideally, this [deep curating] allows an artistic oeuvre, vision, and an urban situation like that of Wedding to be lit up from within, above, and behind and to be shared among a group of people for a certain amount of time. (Ibidem, p. 27)

Summarising the GW stance on the relation between the local and the cosmopolitan, she states that “[w]e have invited artists from around the world, who live and work in Berlin, to exchange ideas with our audiences, and with us as a team, about how to reach out to each other across our differences” (ibidem). This “reaching out to each other across our differences” is not just a statement about differences across artistic or curatorial positions, but across and in spite of what the curators describe as the problem of homogenised hegemonic ethnic, social, and aesthetic purity that nation-states perform with regards to ‘newcomers’ and ‘migrants’ in Germany (see e.g. Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi 2017). This reference to newcomers across the Global South echoes the initial impulse for the curatorial programming by Ndikung and Römild (2013), wherein they explain that the figure of the ““post-Other” does not just “bear the signs of historical Othering”, but also represents and experiments “with unknown futures beyond it” that unfold “a cosmopolitanised reality of convivial struggles” (Ndikung 2019a: 35). This contribution draws on conversations initiated in the field of performance and theatre in Germany, most notably questions of Germany as a post-migrant society – a society that recognises migration as a starting point of social becoming, not a development thereafter (see Tinius 2016, 2019b). Cognisant, again, of the particular situatedness of the gallery’s curatorial practice, Ndikung also recognises that

[i]n the context of the Berlin district of Wedding, a traditionally working-class area with roughly half of the population made up of immigrants, the concept and figure of the Post-Other seems to be an omnipresent but unrealised concept and figure. (ibidem, p. 36)
As such, the task inevitably remained for the curators to craft programming that would be participatory and, at the same time, aspire to move beyond a mere mirroring or double authentication of the ‘diversity’ of the district by exhibiting that very difference in terms of race, class, and gender postulated by the curators. Additionally, the curators tasked themselves with their phrasing to elaborate a type of conceptual programming that moves beyond binarisms of ‘migrant’ and ‘non-migrant populations’, which Ndikung sets up in his own reflection on the post-Other figure. As Ndikung and Römhild write, “While historically, the colonial Other was integrated into the binary hierarchical relation between ‘metropolis’ and imperial ‘periphery’ across geographical distance, this spatial order of ‘here’ and ‘there’ is collapsing because of the past and present of migrations and mobilities” (2013: 213–214). In this regard, Wedding was a former Western district and thus at odds with the clichéd relation of both ‘migrant’ and the former East of Berlin to working-class areas of Berlin. In the following, I outline how several, but in particular two artists tried to face, and to some degree unearthed, conflicts of this kind, attending in my analysis to the anthropological dimension of their grappling with the presentation and construction of a Wedding district identity.

Fig. 10.4 Exhibition view of Viron Erol Vert’s dreamatory, The Name of Shades of Paranoia, Called Different Forms of Silence (2017) in Galerie Wedding, © Johannes Berger
Dreamatories and hospitality

Artist Viron Erol Vert’s exhibition was entitled *The Name of Shades of Paranoia, Called Different Forms of Silence* (shown at GW from February until April 2017). It was devised particularly for the gallery space and reactivated, in curious ways, the membrane as well as the tension between the inside of the gallery and its outsides, its porosity and thresholds. Upon entering the exhibition, a sleepy atmosphere engulfed visitors; the room set-up comprised twelve beds, white sheets, white wood; beds of different sizes, bunk beds, children’s beds had been donated by district residents, following an open-call by the artist. Vert’s exhibition spread across the entire space of the gallery. Veiled curtains shelter the space from view; the membrane is reactivated to create what he called a ‘dreamatory’ – a dream-laboratory, a social sculpture that invites visitors to sleep in the space during the day and to record their dreams in the notebooks provided by the gallery in lieu of a visitor’s book. The artist invited visitors to narrate their dreams or record them in this way, offering, if they agree, their notes for analysis by *oneirocritics*, who are invited to the gallery space to interpret dreams on a regular basis.

Fig. 10.5 Visitors during the opening of Viron Erol Vert’s dreamatory, *The Name of Shades of Paranoia, Called Different Forms of Silence* (2017) in Galerie Wedding, © Johannes Berger
When I met Vert in his Kreuzberg studio-flat for an interview, he told me

I want to collect these dreams, let people draw on what they’ve experienced – but I fear they might not dare. It’s a tricky and for me very important task to create an environment that allows you to sleep, rest.

The curators elaborated Vert’s thoughts on his dreamatory for envisioning the district and its relation to the gallery in the concept note for the exhibition: “It is also in sleep that our experiences are processed, and information taken on is processed and consolidated in short- to long-term memory. How can we consider sleep and dreaming as spaces and even as acts of/for unconscious political resistance?” (Ndikung 2019b: 188) They hoped that inhabitants of the district, marked by precarity and migration – thus also by the effects of social and psychosomatic forms of othering – would join the dream space. Ndikung even ponders the possibility of considering “taking the time to sleep” as an act of refusal; “especially within a neoliberal economic context of productivity and over-productivity, and within a social context wherein one finds drugs that allow one to go on and on for days without sleep” (ibidem).

For him, the link between Vert’s reflections on dream, sleep, and productivity and the gallery’s social context – its relation to conviviality – become “a political choice” insofar as they offer a way to think about the rejuvenating process of sleep as “a mode of resistance that resuscitates society” (ibidem).

Prior to his exhibition opening, Ovesen and Ndikung had invited Vert to a jour fixe to plan a joint symposium on dreams and consciousness in collaboration with the Association of Neuroesthetics, organised by academic Jörg Fingerhut and curator Elena Agudio. “The beds are meant as an invitation”, Vert began our conversation. “They function as propositions”, the artist continued,

[n]ot just to dream, but also to process: I just had a long conversation with a taxi driver, who told me of sleepless nights, trauma, because he fears for what happens in Turkey. But even here we are not safe: Many are paranoid to speak up. Much of this is invisible to the majority population, but I hear it.

Ndikung picked this up in the conversation during our jour fixe in the kitchenette behind the exhibition space: “These are invisible privileges: Who can rest and who cannot rest at night, who can speak and who cannot speak for themselves?” To what extent can a gallery become a space that speaks “for” others? It cannot, someone says, but we “speak nearby” as Trinh T. Minh-Ha
(1992) put it, for whom this indirect speaking is always “a way of positioning oneself in relation to the world.”

“I don’t want to talk about Germany, or Europe. I want to talk about humanity and to explode national frameworks, not redefine them”, Ndikung adds somewhat disgruntled. “But we have to begin somewhere – with the local, with identification. We have to talk about freedom and competence of speech”, Ovesen responded, “because it is a privilege and resource to speak.” Someone turned on a laptop to show an online advertisement of the German Identitarian movement in Bavaria: “This debate on being rooted is highly charged – who is rooted where?”, the production assistant Kathrin Pohlmann thinks out aloud.

Vert was born in Berlin but with a family background that stretches across Greece, Kurdistan, and Armenia – a series of relations that he has further fictionalised in his exhibitions, including Born in the Purple (2017, Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien Berlin) and the dreamatory invitations in GW. His popular opening of the exhibition attracted a significant amount of visitors as well as the usual suspects from the city’s media and artistic circles, who filled the room and created a lounge club atmosphere. But the inscriptions in the visitor notebook, which he carefully prepared, read, analysed, and reproduced with permission in his catalogue, spoke of different stories – those of the youths, adolescents, and even children whose dreams were recorded, scribbled, or translated into drawings with Turkish, Arabic, and German annotations, suggesting an altogether more porous participation.

**Wedding and the Beast of No Nation**

Vert’s white curtains and beds seeking dream-narratives contrasted, at first sight, with the search for a dark and dirty underbelly of Berlin, as suggested by artist Emeka Ogboh’s project at GW. Ogboh, a sound artist and another long-term collaborator in Ovesen and Ndikung’s ‘deep curatorial network’, frequently passed by the gallery for extended jour fixe, in which he presented a project that moved from oneric to gastronomical queries of hospitality and conviviality. It was entitled Beast of No Nation, B.O.N.N., and shared with the public as part of the Unsustainable Privileges symposium with a book and beer launch in September 2018. His project was structured around the brewing of a beer that responds to the “taste of Wedding” (Ogboh, personal comment) – a notion that gave rise to much discussion among the gallery team, since it presupposed there could be such a thing as a ‘taste’ or ‘character’ of a district. “In fact”, Ogboh added in our first conversation, “that is already the
wrong idea; there is no character of a district, but I want to provoke people into bringing together their senses and their imaginations of place.”

Already in 2015, GW, Vagebund Brewery, and Ogboh produced a dark beer that had explored dimensions of conviviality, the politics of race, and ethnic purity in reference to the German beer-brewing purity law, which was seen as an analogy to the predominantly white nation and continent (see also Tinius 2018). In 2017, the large-scale art fair documenta14, which was curated, among others, by Ndikung, popularised his critical Sufferhead brew, which was a direct outcome from this collaboration.

The project he proposed to GW, Beast of No Nation – a reference to beasts, that is, untidy and rough characters – attempted to think about the trans-national and post-national, about concepts beyond Heimat, through research into the taste and complex ‘character’ of Wedding. Carrie Hampel, Ogboh’s research assistant, had gathered conversations with inhabitants of the district about their ideas on its character, sampling different imaginations of taste to be worked into a craft brew project (see Hampel 2019).

The project conjured up friction, however, forcing the gallery team in the project meetings to stop and think: the ‘character’ of a district cannot be grasped in its essence, because characters are about identity yet also about roles one assumes or is expected to perform. Wedding features as a district

Fig. 10.6 Emeka Ogboh’s ‘Beast of No Nation’ beer bottle, on the railings of the subway station of the district. BEAST OF NO NATION (2018), © Emeka Ogboh
in the imagination of sociologists, artists, and the gallery itself, but it risks becoming a projection screen for characterisations of Berlin’s new diverse and noble savage: working-class, ethnically diverse, rough, untidy.

“On the one hand, we say there’s a strong drinking problem in Wedding, and yet we still do a beer project – that’s ethically ambiguous”, Kathrin Pohlmann, who had been production manager during my fieldwork in the gallery, adds to a conversation we had in the kitchen office during a jour fixe with the artist Ogboh. In a brief exchange between Ndikung and Ovesen during this meeting, it became evident that the curatorial framing of the gallery and its position in Wedding confront the same complexity as the beer project: Does it reveal or assemble, unearth or produce new ideas of what Wedding is?

“I looked for a pub and someone said ‘Go there, and see the Yugoslavians!’ They were all just known as ‘the Yugoslavians’”, Hampel recounted one meeting with interlocutors in the ‘field’ of Wedding. “But how does this represent Wedding?” Ndikung interjected. “It sounds to me like a stereotyped, even racialised, projection of ‘a group of migrants.’” In the end, it became evident that the GW team itself was involved in projections of the district onto it, thus reproducing images of and projections of the district by speaking and working on its representation in artistic projects. When I articulated this critique within the jour fixe with Ogboh, he responded:

![A view of the gallery during Simon Fujiwara’s exhibition Joanne (2018), Galerie Wedding, © Galerie Wedding.](image)
No. It’s not about representation but about provoking a discussion about Germanness, migration, subversion. If it’s a beer, then it definitively cannot adhere to the German purity law (*Reinheitsgebot*). This district is ‘impure’. So the beer cannot be ‘pure’ (*rein*) either.

As Hampel’s research progressed, Pohlmann and others contacted local pubs who might be interested in serving the beer for free as part of the opening of the show by Ogboh. During this process, Hampel and Ogboh dug further into statistics and histories about the demographics, citizenship laws, and policies of inclusion in the district. While the beer ended up creating a small community of pubs and gathered reflections from inhabitants on the district and its inhabitants’ perceptions of it, the most significant convivial performativity of the project took place among the artistic team and staff: Just how a gallery is able or unable to deal with its membranes – windows, publicity, public programming, and audience outreach – and the porousness and contentiousness of these became a subject of the gallery curatorial process.

**Conclusion: Partial curatorial truths and district membranes**

I often think of details about the kitchen office space in GW, in which most of the jour fix meetings took place that synthesised the shows, and the studio visit that inspired them. A few cupboards, a sink, no stove. A large fridge, a door leading to a storage room, a wall with posters. A staircase leading up to an office, assistants and interns typing. Programme direction, press and communication, everything else. In the main space: a make-shift table, a few foldable chairs, and a long heater with a wooden plank doubling as a bench. A classic white cube, one might think.

Yet the porous membrane at the heart of this chapter always breaks my isolated memories about this kitchen space. Milky windows above eye-level obscured my view onto the Rathausplatz of Simit Evi. Some sound outside came inside, however, in waves: construction site noise, alcohol-infused conversations, screaming voices, children, sirens. Inside remained isolated, the smell of used coffee cups, French press, croissants, the scratching of pens and notebooks. Newspaper reviews, and sketches for the next exhibition leaflet were usually stacked in boxes. A small flowerpot from an exhibition about food. The first copies of exhibition catalogues: I remember one of my last days of fieldwork, when a print preview of Viron Erol Vert’s catalogue for his *Dreamatory* show lay on the able (2018).
The kitchen was thus less an office without connections and more of a transit zone, a thinking space, storage, archive, and meeting room, between the desktops and the exhibition space, with a threshold that opened more than it separated. Doors opened frequently; Laika, the gallery dog, would stroll in. A parcel delivery might arrive: the new programme leaflets for an upcoming show. In this space, the curatorial team met, week after week. Tuesday mornings, often well into the afternoon. Jour fixe – a loose term encompassing almost the entire planning of the gallery organism: laptops and Skype calls, budget plans, artist visits, drafting of texts, invitations to programmes, heated discussions, interviews.

Not seldom, ethnographic research, like the exhibition practice and curatorial work I described here, is less conclusive and fuzzier than the eventual results in a show or a publication may suggest. It is porous, ambivalent, and not isolated. This chapter discussed the ever-present negotiation and constitution of the thresholds, the membranes, and the distinctions between the in- and outside of an exhibition space and practice. These, I suggested, constituted the core struggle for the gallery, in addition to the significant ambivalence of the deep curating that the gallery team performed inside, outside, and across the porous membranes of the exhibition space.

And like the overall curatorial grappling, the notes that one first takes as an ethnographer often remain fragments of an incomplete struggle to capture – traces of experiences inside and outside, recorded on the spot, often composed by hand or typed into my phone, sometimes written up hastily after an event, or years later. Fieldnotes are recorded during or after an event or a meeting, and they are thus subject to memory, the unconscious bias of the note taker, and of course contingent on the inter-subjective and affective situations from which they arise. As such, they are palimpsests of lived experiences, covering former memories with new ones, records of collective atmospheres, yet also reflections and analyses of lesser-noted, behind-the-scenes, or seemingly marginal aspects of exhibition-making – fieldnotes as footnotes to a curatorial process. These notes are not objective records for documenting events but a quasi-archive of a collective curatorial practice written not from the desk but on the spot. They aim to translate and also to generate new gaps, new frictions – and to grapple with porosity. As such, my writing of notes during meetings became itself an initiating practice, rather than any passive documentation. Frequently, a conversation in a jour fixe got very heated, and after an hour and a half of immersion, one of the curators would stop, exclaim something like, “Shit, I wish we had recorded that.” More often than not, I was able to smile and tap on my notebook in response, or show the little red bar on the top of my phone that said “Recording”. In
one case, these transcriptions led to a published conversation to accompany an exhibition that was in the process of being prepared during a jour fixe (Ndikung, Ovesen, Rizzi, Tinius 2017).

And yet, similar to the incomplete grappling with the district through the gallery membrane function, in seeking to grasp the working patterns and curatorial ‘culture’ of the GW, I tried to describe, and eventually was forced to recognise, the limitations of the anthropological presence; seeing and noting down always only a fraction of the shows and conversations that took place in the meetings, often leaving ten minutes before an important decision, or arriving just after it had been taken. Meetings often were dismissed and, as elsewhere, conflicts among curators and artists affect working cultures and taint the depth of a curatorial engagement. Yet these are not problems in the negative sense, in my view; rather, they offer a way to think curating across anthropology.

The curatorial challenges with the district of Wedding – its district curating – established by Ndikung and Ovesen as a longer-term engagement, and the ‘slow’ form of curating with a set of artists and thinkers offered no holistic rhetoric. Like anthropological research (see Thornton 1988), it grappled with the construction of partial truths (Clifford 1986), constant imagination, and creation of a district imagination, sometimes veiled and couched in what appears to be a claim to its representation. The curatorial programmes – along with their articulation in solo shows, symposia, and the deliberate inclusion of external observing perspectives, such as mine – all constituted a particular kind of curatorial conviviality that recognised its partiality and porosity. Rather than laying claim to represent the district, though, it opens the gaps and creates new frictions of this kind; as such, the gallery grapples – with no claim to a convincing solution – with the membrane porosity between its inside and the district outside.

District curating in the context of the gallery’s porous membrane (and the gallery as porous membrane), then, became a form of thinking about how curatorial practice manages, and fails, to curate and gather complete, or even near complete, representations about a district. Rather than succumbing to this possibility, the projects – among which I discussed two of several multisensorial projects of this kind (others involving taste, imagery, and materiality to engage with the district) – offered a way to practise and try to grasp the complexity of a gallery with a public mandate in a district, in addition to coming to terms with its rendering in an artistic exhibition context, as well considering its failure to do so. This form of curating across membranes, I contend, is what spaces such as GW afford. It is what they offer by way of their particular situatedness, and the ambivalences that accompany
them – that is, the history and change in an institution that comes to haunt the space, and the challenging public mandate which framed it. Taking time to work with small groups of artists, involving different kinds of reflexive agents, theorists, thinkers, researchers, in a regular format and time frame crafted the porous membrane as a reference point over time. Such deep curating, then, is itself a form of conviviality, conflicted and heterogeneous, precarious and inconclusive, but interrogating and generative.

It offers, furthermore, in my view, a ‘trans-anthropological’ case study as it shows some of the limits but also possible ways of thinking anthropologically otherwise and beyond the confines of disciplinary or institutional anthropology. Diversity and conviviality are articulated and practiced – rendered perceptible and invited to break out in their messiness, rather than be contained in a clean curatorial or anthropological rendering. And these concepts did so across conversations with artists, who challenged anthropology but also enacted a multi-way interlocution. Rather than thinking about an anthropological curator-envy (Sansi 2020), it is precisely the uneven and often inconclusive grappling with each others’ practices and ways of thinking and conceiving between anthropology and curatorial practice – the porosity between them – that can offer ways of getting closer to finding the tools and concepts for understanding the present both seek to grasp.

Notes

1. The image on p. 254 is Figure 10.1 A passerby peeking into the gallery during the exhibition Circling Around Oneness (2016) by Mwangi Hutter, Galerie W edding, © Fernando Gutiérrez Juárez.

2. My research with Galerie Wedding would not have been possible without the trust and support of Solvej Helweg Ovesen, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, Kathrin Pohlmann, Nadia Pilchowski, and Jan Tappe. And it would have been half as fun and intense without the energy, poetry, and shared drinks with all the participating artists, in particular Viron Erol Vert and Emeka Ogboh, whom I highlight in this chapter. All of them read versions of my writings and I am grateful for their comments. Sharon Macdonald encouraged me to do my fieldwork in a manner that inspired and encouraged me. Her anthropological thinking and editorial criticality helped me refine not just this chapter, but all my writing that emerged during my fellowship at CARMAH. Margareta von Oswald was a relentlessly energetic co-editor of this entire book, and she also patiently read many different versions of everything I wrote for this volume. The research that led to this piece was funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation as
part of my postdoctoral research fellowship and the research award for Sharon Macdonald’s Alexander von Humboldt Professorship.

3. Since 2019, Ovesen directs the gallery with curator Nataša Ilić. Together, they devised a two-year programme entitled SoS, or Soft Solidarity, which, as they write, “connects Wedding’s past and present as a workers district”. They offer to focus on the gallery itself, writing that “[a]n art institution that acts in critical correspondence to the local influences of demographic flows, xenophobia, acceleration of life and work experience, disembodiment of relations, neoliberal self-exploitation, and a split Europe, Galerie Wedding – Raum für Zeitgenössische Kunst will engage in a counter program to these life-compromising conditions with the new overarching curatorial concept of Soft Solidarity (SoS).” (see Curatorial Concept, 2019: http://galeriewedding.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/SoS_Konzept_concept_2019_20.pdf, last accessed 20 January 2020).

References


