



THOMAS ELLER, FOTO NADINE DINTER

Artist studios often hide behind nameless doorbells. Thus, judging by its doorbell panel, the refurbished factory building in the Lobeckstraße in Berlin-Kreuzberg is a very creative place.

Since 2004 you have been leading double life: first, as founding editor of the on line art magazine *artnet.com* and as an artist, and now as artist and co-director of the *Temporäre Kunsthalle Berlin*. Has this ever caused you any problems? How do you unite these two professions?

Thomas Eller: "I was very surprised – and also quite flattered – when Hans Neuendorf, CEO of *artnet* asked me to bring *artnet* to Germany in 2004. Until then I had been a full-time artist. I took on the challenge, because I felt that the art world had changed so much and I needed to take a different approach. Although, at first it seemed contradictory to make art and to appear as its critic, I quickly learned to strictly separate my two functions."

So, one day you wore a suit, the next a paint-stained overall?

Eller: "Yes, kind of... I either appeared as Mr. *artnet* or Thomas Eller. Of course some people knew me from both functions, but when I was in one role I stuck to it rigorously – it's a question of

credibility. With my new position as co-director of the *Kunsthalle*, it's becoming even more difficult..."

Since you could technically organize a solo-exhibition of your own works?

Eller: "...on the level of time management, I mean. Even though I am the artistic director, I need to convince the other people involved in making those kind of decisions – an entire advisory board of museum directors and the *Kunsthalle's* co-director."

A day only has twenty-four hours. How do you work two full-time jobs?

Eller: "Well, I cannot just simply switch off my artistic side. It accompanies me everywhere and always. Art is a way for me to communicate and deal with certain experiences. For example, the work 'THE incident (crash)', 2008 is inspired by an accident I had, when I scaped a guardrail at 200km/h on the motorway to Hamburg. The work took nearly a year to complete. I worked on it after work and on weekends."

What does it represent? The moment of your impact?

Eller: "Yes, but more generally it investigates how human perception works. We experience and get to know objects by moving around them, by over-layering moments of sense impressions, both visual and tactile."

Interview with Thomas Eller, *Temporäre Kunsthalle Berlin*

'I THINK BERLIN NEEDS MORE ACTION'

Nameless doorbells often bear surprises. A man wearing a suit-jacket and jeans opens the heavy door while mumbling something into his iphone. This is Thomas Eller, who in 2004, at the youthful age of forty, was asked to position the online magazine 'artnet' on the German art scene. 'artnet' is now firmly established and Eller, taking on a new challenge, has accepted the position of artistic director of the *Temporäre Kunsthalle Berlin*. But Eller himself is also an artist. His spacious, well-organised studio includes a library and a small exhibition space – just in case a potential buyer decides to pay an unexpected visit.

David Ulrichs

In moments of extreme stress, our sense perception is heightened...

Eller: "As my car scraped along the guardrail, my gaze clearly focused on a little twig. It seemed to stand still, while the rest of my field of vision was a blur. It somehow gave me stability. In order to capture this moment in a work, I decided to let the viewer become the twig. Before this work, she becomes the non-moving object – the rest is a blur."

So how did your collaboration with the *Kunsthalle* begin? Were you unhappy at *artnet*?

Eller: "I am satisfied with what I had accomplished at *artnet* Germany; I had positioned the German magazine and re-organized the operations of *artnet* Germany. I set up a sales team within the Chinese art market and initiated a partnership with Art Basel. It all started last April. Gérard Goodrow had just left the Art Cologne; the board was looking for a successor and invited me to an interview. I accepted the invitation, but finally realized I was not the right person for the job. At the same time the *Temporäre Kunsthalle Berlin* was being realized and as editor-in-chief of *artnet*, I was watching the events unfold with a critical eye. One thing led to another and I became the artistic director..."

In your professional life you seem restless...

Eller: "Not restless, just curious! I had a great time at *artnet*, but I felt that after five years I had reached a level that would permit me to expand my horizon. Early in my artistic career, I saw myself as a man of potentialities. My work at *artnet* or the *Kunsthalle* is an opportunity to influence the way we relate to reality via art."

So five years at *artnet* and now one and a half years at the *Kunsthalle*? What next?

Eller: "Well, actually I am hoping to stay 5-10 years at the *Kunsthalle*."

But the *Kunsthalle* will be demolished in 18 months, or are there other plans? It does look rather provisional.

Eller: "Architecturally it is a temporary structure, but the idea behind it is flexible, rather than short-term. I cannot imagine that the team will just disintegrate afterwards, but who knows..."

I imagine that your job description at the *Kunsthalle* is quite different from what you were dealing with at *artnet*.

Eller: "Yes. With *artnet*, when I was not in the office in Berlin, I spent a lot of time in New York and Asia. I had very good relations with national and international commercial galleries. Now I also travel a lot; but much more within Berlin, visiting studios, institutions and making new contacts across the city. Since Berlin is one of the biggest production sites of contemporary art, I have to focus a lot of my attention locally."

So, you were not hired to internationalize the *Kunsthalle*?

Eller: "That's an interesting question. When I was living in New York for almost eight years it seemed that the city was an abbreviation of the whole art world. Everybody inevitably showed up there at one point. Now, Berlin has this quality: Berlin = international. My job at *Kunsthalle* is to make this tangible."

What attracted you to the *Kunsthalle*?

Eller: "It is a great project, in a great city. I see Berlin very similar to New York of the 1990s. With the *Kunsthalle*, we want to redefine Berlin – at least within the art scene. At first it was meant to give the city a space to show the artists that live in Berlin. While there may be a shortage of art spaces, the *Kunsthalle* should not simply be a large exhibition space: like in New York or London, there will never be enough museums for all artists living in Berlin. Like the city itself, the *Kunsthalle* is a place of exchange of ideas, visions and creativity. It already functions like a giant transformer: artists come to Berlin for inspiration, to make works or simply because other artists live here. Some stay a few years, some only a few nights."

...for artists the opinions of other artists is always very important;

sometimes even more important than the opinion of the gallerist or collector. Some artists pushed their gallery to move to Berlin because here they feel among their peers.

Eller: "It is part of my mission to make Berlin as a place of interchange more visible. While it is necessary for Berlin to promote itself a lot more than it does, it needs to remain aware of the fact that it is not the only centre in the art world. Berlin needs to achieve the delicate balance between healthy self-centredness and cosmopolitanism! It is my role to stimulate a lively discourse on this topic."

But does Berlin really need another place for conferences, talks, lectures and meetings? Is it necessary to add another venue to the already impossible list?

Eller: "Well, I think Berlin needs more action, but it needs to be reflected action. In fact, I really want to get back to the origin of the *Kunsthalle* as a place where unexpected exhibitions can take place, with a political aftertaste."

So you want to evoke a kind of grand narrative with big ideas; didn't meta-narratives disappear during postmodernism?

Eller: "There used to be many different narratives that dominated discussions relating to art in the past. But now the entire art scene has differentiated itself a lot: every artist has his niche, and every niche has its market. There used to be a real fight for certain ideologies. Now everyone has become disinterested, with everyone doing their own thing."

I agree. Artists today very seldom argue about ideas, they argue about what group they belong, into which niche they fit, but not about what it all means. Still, I think it would be misleading to start a search for a definition of art.

Eller: "I'm not interested in anything normative, but I want to heat up the discussion – to openly discuss the spinelessness of the contemporary art scene."

www.kunsthalle-berlin.com

ERICH WEISS IN BERLIN

In the gallery cluster at Kochstr. 60, Galerie Klara Wallner is showing new works by Eric Weiss. A series of film-stills on the wall investigates the visual language of one of Audrey Hepburn's most suspense-filled performances; her role as Susy in the 1967-film 'Wait Until Dark'. In it she plays a young blind woman, who through meticulous counting of her steps creates a mental map of the house in which she lives to find her way around. From the sound of footfall and her references to the number of steps, Eric Weiss has drafted this mental map, effectively allowing the viewer to look inside the mind of Susy Hendrix.

On the opposite wall, short pieces of text are framed and hung beside photographic images. The short texts are

reminiscent of haikus, but are none and the images make suggestive statements that are false. A woman's arm poetically stretches along a park bench. We only see part of her shoulder, her neck and her outstretched arm. Between her fingers she holds a plastic spoon that tries to be a smokeless cigarette. All the poetry is lost and we are left with the image of a melting spoon. Beside her the unforgettable eyes of Ines Sastre, the face of Lancôme stare at the viewer. Weiss pretends her to be a vampire and the writing in the frame beside her image plays accomplice.

In Weiss' surreal world little is what it seems – everything is something else. As we step back to get an overall view of the series we step into the writing on



ERICH WEISS "AS A VAMPIRE PREYING ON EYES" 2009, LIGHT-RESISTANT INKJET PRINTS, DIPTYCH EACH 30 X 40CM, 300

the floor. It reads: "All Tomorrow's Parties" and is made of glitter dust. Just then the friendly gallerist hands me an invitation to the after-show

party somewhere in East-Berlin. Spooky. The writing refers to the song by The Velvet Underground & Nico, the brain-child of Andy Warhol, whose

Oxidation Paintings (1977-78) were also made on the floor.

Although he was born in Waregem, Erich Weiss is not a well known artist in Belgium. With his latest project – a small tome gathering together contributions from artists ranging from Peter Saville to Wim Delvoye entitled 'This is the Way We See it – A Tribute to E.L.T. Mesens' – it is evident that his work is influenced by the darker figures of early Belgian Surrealism. Ironically, this book is the result of an artist residency he has been awarded in Belgium.

David ULRICHS

Until March 21, Klara Wallner Galerie, Rudi-Dutschke-Strasse 26, 10969 Berlin. www.klarawallner.de