

Handelsblatt

GLOBAL

FRIDAY, APRIL 14, 2017



SOFT POWER

The Artists on the Roof . . . of the Foreign Ministry

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In the beating heart of German diplomacy, an artist-in-residency program speaks volumes about the country's shift in national identity.

On a recent spring evening, some 50 artists, diplomats and journalists oohed and aahed as they walked around an art studio on the rooftop of Germany's foreign ministry in the heart of Berlin. They sipped wine and took pictures of the panoramic landscape, which at sundown was awash in an orange glow. The atmosphere would have felt like a gallery opening with a spectacular view - except that attending required showing photo ID, registering 24 hours in advance and passing through a metal detector.

In fact, the viewing was part of a program created by the foreign ministry called "AArtists in Residence" - the

only one of its kind in the world. In cooperation with the Galleries Association of Berlin, the ministry invites foreign artists, or German artists with foreign connections, to spend three months at a turn in that studio on the roof, free to create. The symbolism is subtle but profound. Why? Location, location, location. For even in Berlin, a city dense with landmarks to historical triumphs and even bigger disasters, there are few locations with as much loaded potential as the federal foreign ministry.

Since 1998, the foreign office - or "Auswärtiges Amt", abbreviated AA - has been housed in an imposing fascist building in what used to be

East Berlin. Much of the edifice was built in 1934 to be the central bank of the Third Reich. In fact its architect, Heinrich Wolff, was personally tapped to design the building by Adolf Hitler himself. After World War II, the structure became home to the Politburo of the East German communist party. Today's foreign ministry is the building's first democratic institution.

Watching diplomats and artists mingle on the rooftop, you get a sense of how Germany wants to present its national identity today: as quintessentially cosmopolitan rather than nationalist; and as appreciative

of art as a vehicle for democratic self-expression.

Inside the studio space, exposed walls and steel rods jutting out from the concrete ceiling recall the gutted ruins of a former squat more than a key government institution in Europe's most powerful country. A table in the back displays a brochure of the program. In it, Frank Walter Steinmeier, who as foreign minister helped kick off the program last year, opens with a quote from renowned German novelist Heinrich Böll: "Art is anarchy." Mr. Steinmeier, who has since moved on to become Germany's president, explains how diplomacy, despite seeming the opposite of anarchy, benefits from the emancipated perspectives of artists.

Andreas Görgen, a sort of culture guru of the foreign ministry, sees this diplomatic appropriation of art as part of Germany's political evolution. Informally but fashionably dressed in a red corduroy suit and designer glasses, the 50-year-old administrator pokes his head inside the studio during a recent artist talk and seems pleased that the room is too packed for him to find a seat. The German press has dubbed Mr Görgen a "ministerial provocateur" for organizing cultural events such as this to promote ethnic pluralism as the identity of a new Germany.

“Art is anarchy.”

HEINRICH BÖLL
AS QUOTED BY GERMAN PRESIDENT
FRANK-WALTER STEINMEIER IN THE
"AARTIST IN RESIDENCY" CATALOG



Not your grandfather's diplomacy: Henrik Strömberg (middle) discussing his work with critic Christiane Meixner (right). Photo: Anemone Vostell, lvbg Source: LVBG

“Since 2014 in the foreign ministry, we have been shifting away from the cultural policy of the 80s and 90s, when government or state institutions were thought to focus primarily on national representation,” Mr. Görgen explained. Instead, multiculturalism is the new direction. In the words of the brochure: “Art and culture can no longer be viewed in purely national terms in today's globalized world as the artificial division between domestic and international has disappeared in the sphere of art. Germany has become a country of immigration, open to the world and increasingly cutting edge.”

This is a stunning departure from tradition. As recently as the spring of 2015, conservative politicians in Germany still intoned the implausible mantra that Germany was *not* “a country of immigration” - despite some 40 years of immigration that prove the opposite. Some 20 percent of the people living in Germany to-

day are foreign or have an immigrant background.

For Mr Görgen, it has long been clear that this de facto open society also implies an open culture. “As Willi Brandt once said, ‘Foreign policy is too important to leave to the government,’” he explains. Paraphrasing the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, Mr Görgen adds that society is a space of communication: “So what we try to do is say culture and artworks can give us another view of the world that diplomats or civil servants or the press perhaps can't give.”

In the crowded rooftop studio, visitors sit in folding chairs and on wicker couches listening to Swedish artist-in-residence Henrik Strömberg

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ANDREAS GÖRGEN
DIRECTOR GENERAL FOR CULTURE
AND COMMUNICATION AT THE FEDERAL
FOREIGN OFFICE

explain his work. With a mix of photography and sculpture, Mr Strömberg uses found objects - old trophies, stones, leaves - to create what resemble archaeological finds (see below). He spends his time in the studio, which he can access until 10 P.M. daily, surrounded by ghostly images and charred trophies.

Politically, Mr Strömberg is not pushing the envelope as far as previous artists in the program have done. One investigated Germany's rapacious colonization of Cameroon. Another made installations that investigate the propaganda of the Egyptian government. Given that the setting implies a diplomatic blessing, the ministry is brave in being so accepting. Mr Strömberg certainly feels no whiff of censorship: "I think here they are open to anything that can be done, practically speaking."

Standing in the studio's hallway after the talk, he explains the genesis of a framed image of what looks like an ancient, totemic sculpture (see below). The object pictured actually consists of two rocks that protesters had picked up at a Berlin May day demonstration to hurl at police. After they decided instead put them down, Strömberg grabbed the stones and gave them a very different meaning.

Germany has also experienced a fundamental shift in its trajectory, hav-



Left: "Vertical Violence" by Henrik Strömberg, current artist-in-residence at the German Foreign Ministry, was created using stones picked up by protesters during Mayday protests in Berlin. Right: "Times New Roman", deconstructed trophies, shown at Grundemark Nilsson gallery in Stockholm 2016. Source: image

ing confronted its history as no other country has. It has also taken in more refugees during the current migrant crisis than anywhere else in Europe. As a result, it has earned the world's respect. Today its economy is booming, and Angela Merkel is being heralded by the New York Times as the "Liberal West's Last Defender". In that sense, especially when it comes to soft power, the country resembles the wise, reformed alcoholic of Europe: widely esteemed for having learned from its past and constantly aware of the potential for a relapse.

Prior to the discussion, I overhear a ministry employee insisting that he could never imagine North Korea's foreign ministry hosting an art residency. I can - but the art would look very different.

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