

On Making Zurich a Home for Art and Artists

An Interview with Esther Eppstein

by Agustina Struengmann

The conversation with Esther Eppstein took place on 10 February 2016 in the crowded and cozy Cafe Zähringer and lasted for nearly two hours. There was a lot to talk about. Esther Eppstein has spent the last twenty years managing message salon, an independently artist-run space for experimental art practices and ideas. This makes her a key art figure in Zurich; her contribution was recognized in 2014 with the advancement award by the Canton of Zurich (Förderpreis des Kantons Zürich) for interdisciplinary art mediation. For her, “the Zurich art scene needs artists from abroad, inspiration, rejuvenation, insight, criticism and networking”. Eppstein is a tireless networker, always looking for what the city needs, and her flexible platform allows her to adapt accordingly.

The message salon’s latest format, also the focus in this interview, was the “message salon embassy”, an artist-run artist residency in Zurich that was active from May to September 2015 and welcomed four Israeli artists from Tel Aviv and Haifa.

Agustina Struengmann: What was the main goal of the message salon embassy artist-run residency?

Esther Eppstein: message salon has existed for 20 years, and has been moving from place to place, always as an art space for happenings, artists’ meetings, experimentation, and social events. After Perla-Mode I felt I needed a change, a transformation of the project. Maybe because I felt a little bit tired of running an art space again, and also because I felt that after twenty years the art scene and the meaning of off-spaces in Zurich had changed. In 2014, I took some time off and went to Israel for almost one year to rethink the format and to come up with new ideas. It was then I thought this would be something I would like to spread or share with people from Tel Aviv.

I wanted to create a more personal space for exchange, for encounters, for connecting or even for

magic, for that something that happens between people, instead of just providing entertainment. I felt that the whole art scene in Zurich became a bit like entertainment, where galleries look like museums and museums try to look like off-spaces. In my view, art is becoming more and more attached to the market, with young artists thinking that success is when a gallery picks them after their diploma show. I want to step out from this and generate something else. I started to invite artists from Tel Aviv for a residency in Zurich and the good thing was that I had the chance to have a perfect space for the residency. It was important to me refer to it as an “artist-run residency”. In this way it differed from an institution. I see it as part of my artistic practice.

message salon embassy is not about producing artworks, but instead about spending time, meeting people, and gathering ideas. Artists sometimes exhibited their work, but this wasn’t the final goal and spirit of the residency. Instead, it was more about connecting them and generating an artist network. For example, when I showed Israeli artists here in Zurich, people at the beginning were maybe critical about Israel, and now they want to go there. It is really about that, connecting people and connecting artists.

I think immaterial things are becoming more and more important today. In the context of social media and an overheated and overrated art market, friendship and spending time together become more necessary, and also the intimacy, and having real conversations with people.

AS: How was the artist selection process?

EE: It was in similar to how I did it with message salon. Since it is my space, it is connected with friends, and therefore very personal. I started with the people I met when I was in Israel who I felt would be interested in coming to Zurich. I wanted to make a program with variety: one artist was a

painter, one was a sculptor, one doing more musical projects and installations, and one was doing more research and curating. It was also important to create something that stays after they leave, because sometimes it was not possible to do an exhibition. We created a zine with each artist. This was something the artist could keep and take back to Israel.

AS: For how long did each artist stay?

EE: For around one month, sometimes shorter. Each artist came separately, because I was taking care of them and connecting them, thinking what kind of person would this artist want to meet, what shows should we go to, which curators should he/she meet. The program was different for each case.

AS: And somehow connect them to the local scene?

EE: Yes, since I know the city very well. This opportunity to connect artists is what I think is missing in most residency programs. They normally send them, they arrive, nobody takes care of them, they don't go out much, they don't make connections, and they are most of the time isolated. I really wanted to make something happen, because when people meet people, they become friends and something starts to grow. A lot of these other residencies sometimes don't bring any result at all.

AS: What is the future of the embassy: i.e. are you interested in furthering the exchange and sending Swiss artists to Tel Aviv?

EE: I started with Israel because of my background and because I have friends in Israel. The original idea of the message salon embassy was to send Swiss artists to Israel but this was even more difficult in terms of receiving financial support, and also because I don't know the Tel Aviv scene as well as the Zurich scene, where I know the people and how to get the audience.

I thought it was good to first test it in Zurich and then evaluate doing it somewhere else. Now that I am more experienced, I can see how I could spread it and do a bigger project. My aim is to expand this format of residencies. It is important to bring people from abroad to Zurich, but how far can I compromise it? That is always the question (this in terms of money and support). At the moment I am working on a possible collaboration with a hotel in Zurich for an artist residency program in 2017, but this time bringing artists from different nationalities. It will be

different from the message salon embassy because it will have to adjust to the interests and ideas of the hotel.

AS: What is your motivation for organizing these residencies?

EE: The motivation is the same as with the message salon: to bring people together in the context of art. In the case of the message salon embassy it is especially to bring artists together and connect them with friends and people in Zurich, because I also think that we as artists should connect more together so we are not so dependent on institutions or curators. This is maybe a romantic idea, an idea that also looks back to artists' salons of the beginning of 20th century, where artists were gathering and starting new ideas. It is also my motivation to expand the message salon to an international context.

AS: What, for you, was the main benefit of the residency series?

EE: For me, the main benefit was the same as with the message salon, to share experiences and to strengthen the bonds, like starting a history or something together. Maybe it won't last for a long time, but it might also be the start to long-term friendships.

AS: How do you feel with your role as ambassador?

EE: Good, because it is exactly what I do anyway. When I am with artists from abroad, I connect them to other people, I take them to openings and introduce them. This is the result of what I've done for twenty years. You just need the sensitivity of asking, "What does the person need?"; and thinking who could be helpful for him/her to meet. I am always being the host. When I have a space, I am the host for guests and for artists, and the same when I do the residencies.

AS: How do you see the Zurich art scene in terms of its openness to international artistic and cultural exchange?

EE: I think it is not enough, especially in Zurich. That is why I thought to do a residency here. There are some residencies in Zurich that work well, for instance at the Rote Fabrik and at Binz39, but then there is nothing else.

In the 1990s, curators went to openings in

off-spaces. This now has disappeared a little bit. It was during this time when a new art scene came up and the Löwenbräu-Kunstareal opened, and a lot of artist-run spaces and off spaces popped up. It was very dynamic, and now I think is not that much anymore. Everything is now concentrated at the Art Academy ZHdK at Toni-Areal. I think in one way it is good and remarkable for a society that the state invests in education, and even in art and creative professions, but on the other hand the underground scene is not so strong. I also think it is positive that here there are still more possibilities than in other places, because there is money destined for art and culture.

That is also why I started with these residencies. The scene needs more exchange. Here in Switzerland, people sometimes really don't see what is going on elsewhere. We have to take care that this exchange happens, and that we don't become more isolated, like an island in a crazy world. We should also share, since here the possibilities are so vast.

AS: How did the artists in residence feel in Zurich? Did they feel welcome?

EE: Yes, I think they felt welcome because I was hosting them and also because I could connect them immediately to people in Zurich. I also invited artists who were all a bit connected to Zurich. Two of them, for instance, had already been in Zurich before the residency: one had a friend here and another artist had an exhibition in message salon one year ago, so he already had friends here, too. This was important, so they didn't feel totally lost; they had an environment in which they felt comfortable. But I know it is difficult, and it is important to have somebody like me who connects them with people. This personal element was very important.

AS: And with the culture in Zurich in general? Did they have difficulties?

EE: It is difficult to say. I would say mainly no, mainly people are open. For example, Anna Lukashovsky, who is a painter, could really motivate people to go with her and paint outside in the streets. People hadn't seen that here in Zurich for a long time. Maybe it was special that my guests were from Israel. I wasn't criticized openly but I felt it a bit. I did not strictly aim at limiting the residency to Israel, but I was in Tel Aviv and that is why I could connect there. It was an experiment, but people already took this as a kind of political statement.

AS: What was each artists' feedback to you as the host?

EE: I would say it was mainly good, but there were also some difficulties. I am doing the program as my artistic project; I have an idea, a frame, and sometimes the artists maybe felt a little bit instrumentalized. Even if I try to keep it as free as possible, there are certain things I want to complete: they had to give a talk, produce the zine and do one or two art walks with me: go on-tour to openings, visit artists' studios or meet curators or any people of interest. All the rest of the time they were free.

This was the vision that I had, a kind of structure that they had to be open to and collaborate with. Overall it was a very good experience.

AS: Would you do it the same way again, in terms of the program and structure?

EE: If I had nothing else to do and somebody provided me with the funds, I would do it in the same way again. But I now have to find funding. I will have to make compromises because this past residency program had a very free structure.

AS: What is your opinion: Is Zurich a welcoming city for artists in general?

EE: This is a difficult question. I think that Zurich is a good city for artists who have galleries and are well positioned in the market. It is also good for young artists who go to art schools. I think that compared to other societies, it is still a very good place for artists because there are possibilities, there is money. On the other hand, having the money can also be a problem; artists are not so free or inspired. In general, it is a very good city. This is one of the reasons I am doing the residencies here: these things in Switzerland are possible. If you are doing things and you keep it going, there is always some way to make it happen. If it is an inspiring city, that is maybe another question.

AS: Was migration a focus to talk about with the resident artists? Were migrant issues or/and their "personal geopolitics" a topic in the discussions with the resident artists? Was it a topic of the works they developed during their stay?

EE: Yes. We had, for example, a series of talks moderated by an Italian linguist who lives and works in Zurich, Dr. Giorgio Iemmolo. The talks were not about artists presenting their work or an art historian

talking about art, but more in the format of *Salon* discussions, inspired by the French Salons of the 18th century: a forum for informal and meaningful conversations about certain relevant self and society topics that were connected to the artist's work. It was more like sitting together at the kitchen table and chatting in a relaxed atmosphere.

The first talk, "Le Salon dans le Salon Nr. 1", was a discussion between painter Anna Lukashovsky, Giorgio Iemmolo and artist Maria Pomiansky. Under the title "Where did I end up?" they discussed the challenges and funny moments of adapting to different cultures. Lukashovsky was born in Vilnius, and lives and works in Haifa; Pomiansky was born in Moscow, immigrated to Israel, and later moved to Zurich, where she works as a painter. A Soviet artist with a Jewish background immigrating to Israel—this is happening in most of the cases of ex-Soviets that immigrate to Israel—they may never feel Israeli although they learn a totally new language. So this feeling of never belonging somewhere is something that is anyway very present in Israel, home to many refugees and immigrants. Identity is anyway a big topic in Israel.

AS: Did you feel identified?

EE: Yes sure, in a way yes. It is something that connects somehow, even if every story is different.

AS: Beyond the art world, how would you characterize the integration of second-generation migrants to Switzerland in terms of their inclusion or exclusion from the national collective?

EE: In the beginning of 1900s, my grandfather left his family and the poor Shtetl in Poland/Russia. He first immigrated to Argentina, then returned to Europe and somehow ended up in Zurich, where he settled down and started a family. My father was born in 1917 in Zurich-Aussersihl, which was called at that time "Shtetl an der Sihl". He lost his Polish citizenship during World War II, and after the war, he lived almost another ten more years without papers, as a stateless person, with no citizen rights at all. Although he was born in Switzerland, and had members of the family killed in the Holocaust, it was still quite an effort to finally get a Swiss passport. It was a very unhappy experience, as he experienced latent anti-Semitism and discrimination. To finally get a Swiss passport, in the 1950s, meant something existential to him.

So given my father's experience, for us, his daughters, it was always clear that we have to vote,

we have to participate, we are citizens of this country. I am critical, I have a background that makes me immune in a way. So this is my story.

For more information visit:
<http://www.messagesalon.ch/>

Captions

1 Benjamin Sommerhalder, message salon embassy, logo, 2015.

2 Esther Eppstein, 2013. Photograph: © Caroline Minjolle.

3 The opening of message salon embassy, live via Skype: Señor Sandwich and Ella Spector from Tel Aviv, September 2015. Photograph: © Vadim Levin.

4 message salon camping site and snackbar, Pfingstweidstrasse, Summer 1999. Photograph: © Esther Eppstein.

5 message salon Perla-Mode: Mark Divo, 7. Dada Festwochen, June 2012. Photograph: © Esther Eppstein.

6 message salon caravan, 2001: Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Collection on Display, 2014. Photograph: © Esther Eppstein.





Esther Eppstein (b. 1967 Zurich/CH) currently lives and works in Zurich. In 1996, the artist and curator founded message salon, Zurich's longest existing independently run art space, which has matured since then into a central meeting point for the local art scene. It became a gathering place where artists could connect and exhibit their work, serving as the first exhibition venue for many young artists. It started at Ankerstrasse (1996–98), then moved to a mobile artist-run space in the form of a caravan (1998–2000 and now part of the Collection of Migros Museum), then to Rigiplatz (2001–06), followed by Perla-Mode at Langstrasse (2006–13), and since 2014 it is the message salon en route. The "message salon embassy", Eppstein's first artist-run artist residency in Zurich, was active from May to September 2015 and welcomed four Israeli artists from Tel Aviv and Haifa.

Agustina Struengmann (b. 1983 Buenos Aires/AR) lives and works in Zurich and holds an MA in Curating ZHdK. Among her curatorial projects are the exhibition A Performative Piece by Nicole Bachmann at Museum Bären-gasse, Zurich, (2015) and Reflections on artistic services, performance and the institution, a film in which interviewed artists reflect on the artist's role in the context of institutional commissions (2015). She is currently working in a project for Manifesta11/Parallel Events: HnC/agency for the new contemporary. Produced in collaboration with artist Martin Schick and producer Marisa König Beatty, this agency will provide performance art for private spaces. Struengmann is further in the process of creating a foundation to support artists from Argentina through collaborations with residency spaces in Europe. She has contributed to magazine Barzón, the Journal of Curatorial Studies, Art Nexus magazine and OnCurating.