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PRESS



What's next? On the closing of two influential spaces in Basel
By Fabrice Stroun

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Collage by Matthew Lutz-Kinoy and Natsuko Uchino using photographs taken at an Elaine event, the co-organizers pictured, 2013 (courtesy: Matthew Lutz-Kinoy / Natsuko Uchino & Elaine, Basel)

On 31 December 2013, the Basel project space New Jersey shut its doors after six years, close to 80 exhibitions and countless evenings, events and performances. A few weeks earlier, Elaine, the city's Museum für Gegenwartskunst's adjacent 'project room,' held its final, three-day-long events series. Despite the minor logistical quandaries this would bring for many in the area – 'what will I do on Friday now that I'm not taking the train to Basel?' – the sentiment during these closings was more upbeat than wistful.

From the start, both exhibition spaces were predetermined to close sooner rather than later. Elaine was bound to the time span of Nikola Dietrich's tenure as curator of the Museum für Gegenwartskunst, which sponsored the space; New Jersey was always an artistic-curatorial project, with no real aspirations to institutionalize. No doubt, this awareness of impermanency intensified the feeling of being in the then and now. But most important was a widely shared acknowledgement that New Jersey and Elaine (along with a number of other spaces across the country, such as 1m3 in Lausanne) had nurtured a new generation of Swiss-based art practitioners and made a key contribution to the internationalization of the Swiss art scene.

New Jersey launched in May 2008 in a storefront. Helming the space were co-founders Daniel Baumann – a curator born in the late 1960s – along with Tobias Madison, Emanuel Rossetti and Dan Solbach – two artists and a graphic designer, then in their early twenties. In 2012, the group was joined by Mathis Altmann, a German artist living in Zurich and Anina Trösch, a Swiss artist based mostly in Frankfurt. This pooling of resources and aspirations allowed for the trans-generational and social integration in motion since the early 1990s to pass a tipping-point. Not only did New Jersey rapidly become a juncture for the art world in Switzerland, but also a hub for a young international crowd.

This did not happen overnight. Back in 2000, Valentin Carron, living in the small Alpine town of Martigny, claimed that the only way to stay sane as an artist in Switzerland was to consider it 'many neighbourhoods of a single, spread-out urban entity like Los Angeles.' New Jersey was the place where a network of local and international interactions became so normal that one simply stopped noticing. While it is clear that larger socio-political forces were at play, one should not underestimate the particular ecology put in place by New Jersey's members, who were marked above all by a radical mobility. Every presentation became an incitement for collaboration, hybridization and a string of performances. A typical New Jersey show might include a Ken Isaac sleep and work structure, a browsable collection of 1970s utopian architecture books and an installation of lamps made of 1980s digital comics – originally a Madison piece recast as an anonymous collective art work.

Everyone involved was on the move, within Switzerland and beyond. By 2011, some of its members, along with an entirely new cast of artists, musicians and writers, opened the gathering point specializing in film and print ephemera named AP News in a Zurich shopping mall – it, too, shut its doors last year – as well as a 'club-within-a-club' in Zürich's red-light district, called H.O.M.E. (House of Mixed Emotions). With New Jersey, located off a barren highway on Voltaplatz, this constellation seemed like a Ballardian alternative art landscape – both within reach of and outside the mainstream.



Karl Holmqvist und Stefan Tcherepnin what is it that comes coiling in the morning?, 2012, Installation view, New Jersey, Basel (courtesy: New Jersey, Basel)

Across town at Basel's Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Elaine was a more literary beast. After starting in 2011 with a programme of artists' talks (Susanne Winterling, Florian Graf, Marta Riniker Radich), it rapidly became a hyperactive, Caribbean-feeling 'social', a place to meet friends and strangers; to experience art, eat, dance and listen to music. Elaine's programming team was just as multi-generational and multinational as New Jersey's, with Dietrich coming from Germany, curator Scott Cameron Weaver from America via Berlin, working alongside writer Tenzing Barshee (curatorial assistant at Kunsthalle Bern) and artist Hannah Weinberger from Basel. Its closing programme, *Loose Bodies*, orchestrated by Matthew Lutz-Kinoy, included an exhibition of the artist's paintings, film performances, a music recital, an exclusive jewellery showcase by MAWI and no lack of revelry.

So what now? On 9 February 2014, Switzerland approved a far-right referendum to limit 'mass immigration' – critically jeopardizing the free movement of artists and curators in and out of Switzerland and, conversely, the freedom of Swiss citizens to live and work throughout the EU. As the realization dawns that all we experienced in these spaces over the past six years might not define the shape of things to come, optimism has given way to anxiety. The art market is the one other place in the Swiss art world where an equivalent global integration has taken place, and which might well be better tooled to withstand a return of physical and symbolic borders. But the market never was, or ever will be, as fun.

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