

**Exhibit Review:**

***Being an Island (Inselndasein)*. Exhibition at the Daadgalerie, Zimmerstrasse 90, 10117 Berlin, Germany. From 8<sup>th</sup> June to 27<sup>th</sup> July 2013. DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program. Website: [http://www.berliner-kuenstlerprogramm.de/en/veranstaltung\\_detail.php?id=792](http://www.berliner-kuenstlerprogramm.de/en/veranstaltung_detail.php?id=792)**

Artists: Allora & Calzadilla, Álvaro Barrios, Sarnath Banerjee, Chang Chaotang, Christopher Cozier, Alvin Curran & Willem de Ridder, Trisha Donnelly, Annika Eriksson, Allan Kaprow, Christodoulos Panayiotou, Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, Stuart Sherman, Fiona Tan, Ben Vautier, Ryszard Wasko, Stephen Willats.

Curators: Kaśka Bittner & Catalina Lozano.

Islands are typically understood as geographical entities that are surrounded by water and cut off from the mainland or as bodies of land that are surrounded by the sea and isolated from continental areas. This nonetheless seems to be a simplification. However much islands are defined by the interior space they create, they are also defined by the exterior space from which they are protected and/or to which they open up. At the same time, it is the coast that specifically represents that space of fluidity between interior and exterior space.

Islands represent a leftover, fragmented and scattered geography. They look, argues Angus Cameron, unlike continents, like ‘property’ ready to be colonized by physical or mental acts. Islands have occupied such a powerful place in the modern Western imaginary that they lend themselves to sophisticated fantasy and mythology. Paradises, but also Gulags, are typically islands. Writers and philosophers create islands as metaphors: imaginary islands appear as places useful for describing situations in which isolation provides the conditions for utopia, exception, absolute secrecy, absolute control or absolute freedom from *normalized* society; they are also the ‘no man’s land’ which best represents first encounters and colonization. As utopias of ideal societies, sensual paradises, social formations – from radical individualism to collectivities – and through representing notions as diverse as isolation and concentration, panopticon and anarchy, these imaginary islands become metaphorical, useful as a way of thinking about entities that are figuratively separated from the others surrounding them. Metaphorical islands become hard-edged. Since they feed the imagination of philosophers and writers when addressing isolation or social organization, islands have also informed the representation and design of political space in a normative way, as Angus Cameron has stated.

The exhibition ‘*Being an Island*’ seeks to explore the contested notion of the island both as a metaphorical idea of a socio-political space – derived from the context of the geopolitical enclave called West Berlin between 1949 and 1990 – as well as in its geographical sense. In doing so, the project endeavours to embrace a dynamic idea of the island in which the edges of its representation are able to become porous and, through evidencing the limitations of the notion of insularity, to problematize the representation of geopolitical space in order to achieve a more open understanding of the impossible relation of interior and exterior space which has prevailed in traditional interpretations of the island.

As ‘an island in the Red sea’, West Berlin lent itself to all sorts of political fantasies, fed by the imagery of the Cold War. Yet even if the insularity was not absolute, there was still a common consensus on using the island metaphor when talking about West Berlin. It thus seems of importance to reflect on the appropriation of the notion of an island. Works by artists invited

by the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program for a residency in the city serve as a reference for recalling the metaphorical island. Coming from *outside*, many of the international guests of DAAD (the German Academic Exchange Service) brought with them an incisive view on the West Berlin reality, often commenting on its isolation, separation and loneliness, but also on its particular autonomy and specific freedoms. In the exhibition, works by former residency guests conceived between 1963, the founding year of the program, and 1990 thus serve as a first approach to the notion of the island in order to broaden the contemplation from metaphorical islands to real, physical islands.

Taking into consideration the fact that “the metaphorical idea of the island is so powerful that it can be deployed in the absence of even the slightest reference to the reality of islands” (as argues Godfrey Baldacchino in his *Island Enclaves*), the project focuses furthermore on islands as *real* places. Close to 10% of the world’s population consists of islanders with their own specific histories, (often experimental) social formations and identities. Today, their living spaces – islands – are confronted with pressing ecological, demographic, social and economic issues that are specific to their particular situations, but at the same time also embody otherwise transparent mechanisms of the capitalist world: tax heavens, the offshore economy, delocalized tourism. Ignoring the realness of islands might result in their being reduced to a colourful trope, merely an abstraction, or a metaphor, as well as lead to acts of exoticizing and appropriation.

How then can we talk about islands today? Current studies of islands have shifted the debate from the concept of insularity (related to the physical remoteness of islands and ignoring their social and cultural capacities) to the concept of ‘islandness’. While insularity is a normative, negatively charged concept that represents, according to Eve Hepburn “closure and closed minds”, the concept of islandness (even if traditionally associated with limitations) today increasingly emphasizes opportunities and resilience, and – with respect to politics, geography, social issues, history and economy – is understood as complex and multi-dimensional. This means that islander identity and sense of place come to the fore.

By inviting artists from various backgrounds who live and work on *real* islands or work *with* islands, the project proposes a contribution to the emerging debate on islandness that goes beyond the purely metaphorical. It would be illusory to hope that we know how to approach today’s islands and their complexity, but, nevertheless, we would like to take a chance and endeavour to approach islands as socio-political spaces and places with identity.

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