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International Experience Report  
June 5-July 7, 2012  
Berlin, Vienna, Paris

This summer I was given the opportunity to spend time in several European cities, including Berlin, Vienna and Paris. I traveled throughout Europe by train. Between each destination, I spent brief amounts of time in smaller cities and towns, including Kassel, Nuremberg, Innsbruck, and Feldkirch.

My itinerary was designed to support my research of Gesamtkunstwerk in relation to the ideals of twentieth and twenty-first century ‘total theater’ and immersive artwork. My research took me from iconic masterpiece theaters such as the Burgtheater in Vienna and the Palais Garnier in Paris to a jarring experimental performance at Ballhaus Naunynstrasse in Berlin; from highly charged video installations at the Triennial in Paris and Documenta 13 to a live puppet show and an ad-hock Berliner street parade. While my detailed itinerary brought me from performance hall to museum to landmark, it was often the particular circumstance of a place, or the serendipity of engaging in conversation with a local person or another traveler that brought charming surprise to my experience as I dug into the abundant primary source materials of my cultural surroundings.

I spent the first two weeks of my time abroad as a resident artist at the Institut fur Alles Mogliche (Institute for All Possible) in Berlin, Wedding. I am grateful for the dialogue and networking prompted through this residency. In a city rich with working artists and historical archives, the Institut was a wonderful place both to research and to experience art. I spent a great deal of time at art venues and a few of my favorite exhibitions included an Anthony McCall installation of fog and high-powered projectors in a gigantic dark space at the Hamburger Banhof Museum and a multi-venue solo exhibition of Alfredo Jaar.

It was impossible to be in a city so affected by war and not feel the weight of its history. I spent time at the National History Museum and several smaller archives. I found it interesting that even much of the contemporary work included in the 7th Berlin Biennial was rooted in response to the tragedies of WWI, WWII and the Cold War Era.

Near the end of my time in Berlin, I attended an unusual performance, Silk Thread, at the experimental theater Ballhaus Naunynstrasse. Silk Thread was written and performed by the Von Zoukak Theatre Company from Beirut. Throughout the performance, the audience was relocated from the auditorium to the basement to the fire escape to the
lounge, and finally to the stage where the roles of spectator and spectated were abruptly reversed.

I divided my time in Berlin between exploring the city and taking notes and pictures, and spending time in my studio. During my residency I developed a small video installation, Siren Song. The piece was fully realized in the following weeks after returning to Ann Arbor.

I spent a day in Nuremberg before continuing southeast to Vienna. Nuremberg, once the un-declared capitol city of the Holy Roman Empire, was almost completely destroyed by air raids at the end of WWII. The German people rebuilt the city exactly as it had been before the bombings, using the original stone to restore the medieval architecture. It was amazing to view archived images of the total devastation caused by the allied air raids within the seemingly undisturbed walls this rebuilt city.

That evening I had a traditional German meal in an untraditional atmosphere, several stories underground in a cavernous space dating back to 15th century. It was revealed to me after my dinner that, for hundreds of years, this space had been a catacomb. I am still meditating on the uncanny transition of use from tomb to restaurant.
Continuing on from Nuremburg, the train went right through the snowcapped Austrian Alps. Overwhelmed by the sight, I stopped and spent a day in Innsbruck, a town at the base of Hafelekarspitze peak (2334 meters). I was able to take a cable car all the way up the mountain into the fog and snowpack. Disappearing into a cloud was a truly immersive experience. I was able to capture some exciting video here, and am currently working with these files in my studio.

I arrived in Vienna the next day. My week here was full of museums, exhibitions and sightseeing. I was taken by the extravagance of the city center, from the Baroque architecture to the masterfully elegant cakes. Walking along the Danube one afternoon I came across a barge on the river that held a large swimming pool. From my vantage point on a bridge I had a perfect view of this blue square of water sitting isolated in an ongoing band of brown water. I marveled at the sight, as the barge functioned both as a public place of recreation and a highly aesthetic, almost hyper-real inversion of use value.

Among my museum and gallery ventures, I was particularly interested in an exhibition at the Museum Moderner Kunst of David Ter-Oganyan’s digital drawings shown on ten smartphones that were mounted along the gallery wall. It caught my attention because the digital media was formally shown directly on its source, as a drawing on paper, and was not mediated by print, projection or a larger screen monitor. Although the viewers
could not activate the phones or alter the images, this format presented a strong feeling of transience.

During my last evening in the city, I saw a production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, by Tennessee Williams at the Burgtheater. Of particular interest was the tension cast between the gritty set-design depicting a working class, New Orleans tenement, and its setting within in the grand nineteenth-century Italian Renaissance-style building.

On my way back west toward Paris, I spent a night in the small village of Feldkirch, located in the Austrian Alps very near the Swiss boarder. Part of my motivation for this stop was to stay overnight in "The Old Siechenhaus," a building dating back to the early 1300’s, now used as a youth hostel. According to historical archives, it had been constructed as a leper’s colony, and was used as an infirmary during the Black Plague. The building took on various other uses over the centuries, and underwent major renovations in the 1970s. It was unique, even by European standards, to sleep under exposed structural wooden beams that had been offering shelter for more than seven hundred years.

I spent much of my time in Paris sightseeing and viewing exhibitions, including an excellent Anri Sala solo show at the Centre Pompidou and the Triennial exhibition at Palais de Tokyo. It was interesting to see how the Triennial foreshadowed the work I would see at Documenta 13, as both shows were presenting artwork heavily based on research and data of specific locations, political actions and historic events.

While in Paris I also had the privilege of attending Rossini’s *The Barber of Seville* at the Opera Bastille. It was fantastic to see the historic piece live, and observe the formal synthesis of the orchestra, the opera, and the stage.

The last destination of my trip was a three-day venture to Kassel, Germany to experience Documenta 13. As described by Documenta’s artistic director and curator Carolyn Christov-Bakatgiev, the works in this exhibition cover “terrains where politics are inseparable from sensual, energetic and worldly alliance between current research in various scientific and artistic fields and other knowledges, both ancient and contemporary.” Experiencing recent works from over 150 artists gave me a better understanding of what is happening at present in the art world.
My international experience went well beyond fulfilling my research goals. The material, insight and inspiration gained from this time abroad will fuel and influence my work for years to come. I thank the School of Art and Design for supporting this trip and making the experience possible.