



Profile

Bernd Scherer

Born in 1955. Bernd Scherer holds a doctoral degree in Philosophy from the Universität des Saarlandes and is author of several publications focusing on aesthetics and international cultural exchange. He comes back to the House of World Cultures as Director in 2006 from the Goethe Institute, where he served as Director of the Goethe Institute Mexico from 1999 through 2004 and subsequently as Director of the Arts Department for the Head Office in Munich. Previously, Scherer headed the Department of Humanities and Culture at the House of World Cultures and also served as its Deputy Director. The start of his directorship thus represents a return to an institution in which he from 1994-1999 played a decisive role with respect to organizational and artistic development.

Presenter Interview

プレゼンターインタビュー

As it prepares to reopen with a newly renovated building, Berlin's House of World Cultures is broadening its vision and role

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The House of World Cultures (Haus der Kulturen der Welt: HKW) of Berlin is a government organization established in 1989 for the purpose of introducing non-European culture in Germany. Since then it has presented a wide range of cultural programs for the people of Germany. This August, a large-scale renovation of the HKW facilities will be completed and its programs will launch anew under the direction of Bernd Scherer. We spoke with Mr. Scherer about the new face of the HKW.

(Interviewer: Fumiko Toda, at the Japan Foundation, March 14, 2007)

The year 1989 when the House of World Cultures (Haus der Kulturen der Welt: HKW) was founded was the historical year that saw the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the almost two decades since, there have certainly been many big changes in German society. Considering this, have there been significant changes in the operating policies of the HKW during this time?

The concept of the House of World Cultures as an organization to present culture from outside the Europe to the people of Germany was established before the fall of the Berlin Wall. This is a very important fact, that the idea to create a platform for cultural exchange with non-European cultures in the city of Berlin was born before the Wall came down. In the 1980s when HKW was established the big influx of immigrants in Berlin and throughout West Germany was causing dynamic discourse concerning "multiculturalism." At the time, the cultural and academic facilities in Germany had a very good relationship with not only the European countries but also with America, so it was natural to look beyond the Western cultures and attempt to actively build relationships with non-Western cultures. From the beginning, HKW had no specialized facilities like a museum or theater and its building was a renovated conference facility. This is why the organization has engaged in programs over the full range of cultural genre, from the fine arts to the performing arts and literature, and we have engaged in academic programs as well. In the early years after the organization's founding we mainly presented art exhibitions and performances by artists from the developing nations outside of Europe. However, since the audience attending these events were mainly the many people from regions like Latin America or the Mediterranean living in Berlin who were involved in the arts, one of the big issues we had to deal with was how to make the HKW's mission reach a larger audience in the German society. Entering the 1990s and what can be summarized as the era of globalization, HKW sought to answer the needs of the times by shifting its focus to contemporary art in a way that would systematically reveal global movements. And we have continued these efforts to this day while working in cooperation with other organizations like the Martin-Gropius-Bau Berlin and the Hamburger Bahnhof - Museum für Gegenwart – Berlin (the national contemporary art division founded in Berlin in 1996).

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The House of World Cultures (Das Haus der Kulturen der Welt)



The House of World Cultures is a leading centre for the contemporary arts and a venue for projects breaking through artistic boundaries. The House of World Cultures has set itself the task of presenting cultures from outside Europe through their fine arts, theatre, music, literature, film and the media and engaging them in a public discourse with European cultures. The House of World Cultures' program focuses on the contemporary arts and current developments in the cultures of Africa, Asia and Latin America as well as on the artistic and cultural consequences of globalization. It gives priority to projects that explore the possibilities of both intercultural co-operation and its presentation.

The building now serving as the seat of the House of World Cultures was originally designed as the Congress Hall. It is one of Berlin's most famous landmarks. The building is situated in the cultural and political centre of Berlin.

The House of World Cultures is a nonprofit-making institution belonging to the Federal Republic of Germany. It is a division of the "Kulturveranstaltungen des Bundes in Berlin GmbH", which includes the Berliner Festspiele and the International Film Festival, Berlin. The House of World Cultures is supported by the Federal Government Commissioner for Cultural Affairs and Media and by the Foreign Office.

<http://www.hkw.de/>

One of the things that became clearer in the 1990s was that the non-Western world had developed new centers. These included countries like China, India and Japan. Personally, I am quite familiar with the arts scene in Mexico and I believe that Mexico is another country whose arts gained considerable international recognition in the 1990s. These are examples of countries outside of Europe that have grown stronger politically, economically and culturally, and many cultural facilities have been built as a result. This is evidence that dynamic social and cultural scenes are blossoming outside of Europe and it means that there has been a big development in the discourse about the role of arts and culture and the forms they should take. Just as the HKW building, which was located on the "periphery" of West Berlin, moved to the "center" of Berlin right after the fall of the Berlin Wall, you can say that our organization's theme (regional culture) also changed from a focus on "peripheral" culture to new "centers" of culture. It is very appropriate here to cite the words of the curator of our last *documenta* (in 2002) (*), Okwui Enwezor, who said, "This international discussion of center/periphery is having greater repercussions here in Germany." At the same time, we are seeing a global trend in which a large number of contemporary artists are moving from the southern regions to the northern regions. Today, if we have an exhibition of African art, you will see many of the artists coming from Paris, New York and London. In other words, the regional divisions of the old map of the world are becoming almost meaningless.

In light of these new conditions, I believe that HKW is at a point where we must re-examine the issues we need to deal with. As a cultural institution that deals directly with the new issues that globalization has brought, I want to see us to work together with the artists of each country toward the development of their non-European regions rather than sticking to the old definitions of regional divisions in culture.

Another issue for HKW now is to make sure that the themes of the projects we plan are ones that have clear relevance for us as individuals in the society we live in. I believe that this is a very important point in order to make sure that the theme is not simply exoticism. We have to treat these as themes and issues that are relevant here in Germany and throughout Europe, it should not be a discussion of the exotic. That is what's important. And it is the same in the way the work is approached.

Besides HKW, Germany has another big national government agency in the area of international exchange in the Goethe Institute with its 144 branches in 80 countries around the world. What is the division of roles for these two institutions?

The role of the Goethe Institute (established 1951) is to introduce German culture to foreign countries and as a result, it is an institution whose projects are mostly abroad. In contrast, HKW is at present an institution that produces projects from the new [non-European] cultural centers for the German domestic audience. If I were to express that in terms of a slogan, the Goethe Institute opens the door of Germany to the outside world, while HKW opens the world's doors to the German audience. As institutions we support each other and we often collaborate on projects. However, because of the difference in our aims we do not simply "import" projects that the Goethe Institute has done and re-package them for the German domestic market. The Goethe Institute has a lot of high-quality, localized information, so when we plan a project we get their cooperation in gathering information concerning the country involved.

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Can you tell us about the nature of the German government's policies concerning international exchange in recent years?

Speaking generally, the German government's policies reflect more the importance of an international cultural exchange. That means that the Goethe Institute has been given the biggest initiatives and also that the HKW has been given a larger role. This reflects a fundamental realization that in order to achieve mutual understanding of the type that will help solve the conflicts in today's world, it is necessary to approach each other mainly from a cultural perspective. This consciousness has become particularly strong now that we are seeing cultures outside of Europe develop from what was once considered "peripheral" culture into important new cultural "centers" in their own right. Another important factor is the fact that cultural conflict, such as those involving the Islamic nations, has developed into major political issues. For HKW, it has become increasingly important that these issues be analyzed clearly through transnational media like television and the Internet.

However, in Germany we have a principle of the freedom of the arts and academics, which prevents the government from intervening directly in arts and culture. This reflects the insight that the arts and culture cannot just be used as instruments for policies. They are free expressions of individuals and groups within the society. And the state sees it as its obligation to support it within the country but also in the dialogue with other countries.

What are the policies that HKW pursues its independent projects on? In 2006 you had thematic programs focusing on Brazil and China. How are these themes decided?

Normally we invite eight to ten international specialists from a number of fields to sit on a planning committee to develop themes for our programs in a workshop setting. Rather than just presenting exhibitions, for example, we believe it is important to be producers who present "intellectual assets" in the fundamental sense of the term. And I believe that this is something that is achieved only through workshops and doing the necessary research.

For example, when we chose China as a theme, we decided together with a group of experts on a concept of "Culture – Memory" between Past and Future. This is a theme which at the moment is very much discussed in Germany too and that led to a number of ideas and, for example, it connected strongly to memories of the Great Cultural Revolution. In the exhibition we did a presentation of documentary photographs from just after the Great Cultural Revolution in the 1980s and the ensuing development of artistic photography. And, working on the context of the fact that performance of Chinese opera was prohibited in all opera houses in China during the Great Cultural Revolution, we produced six operas. After their Berlin performances they were eventually performed in Shanghai as well.

From now on I don't think there will be any programs like this that focus on a particular country but I think it is very important that we continue to do this kind of program where a number of specialists and institutions cooperate over a considerable period of time to develop projects.

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One of your programs in the performing arts field that started in 2002 is the "In Transit" festival. Can you tell us specific contents and background behind this festival? It seems that in recent years you are making particular efforts in the area of collaborative programs.

The basic approach behind the In Transit festival has four aspects: "presentation," "production," "reflection" and "laboratory."

When looked at from a curatorial perspective, I believe you can say that works the HKW produces for the festival are ones born of collaboration with internationally renowned artists. In other words, the basic concept behind In Transit is that the cultural production does not come from one culture but is something that is born from trans-cultural interaction.

The fourth aspect, "laboratory" that I mentioned is a methodology we developed with Sarat Maharaj, a South African born Indian philosopher now living in London. It is based on the principle that knowledge is not just the intellectual knowledge gained by reading or studies but also includes things "expressed with the body." In our "laboratory" program we seek mutual discussion and discourse that will lead to presentations of these various types of "knowledge."

We recently held a conference together with the "Kulturstiftung des Bundes" on the subject of "Wissen in Bewegung" (Knowledge in Motion) and it produced exactly this kind of discussion of how knowledge is not limited to intellectual knowledge but also includes knowledge expressed by the body and how this is experienced. This is meaningful because it leads to efforts to try new things, rather than just expecting the usual type of output in the form of written materials.

Are there any specific collaborative projects with artists that you have planned?

For our 2008 In Transit festival we plan to have the New York-based dance theorist André Lepecki be the curator. And, in any event, I believe that the four aspects of Presentation, Production, Reflection, Laboratory that I mentioned earlier will continue to be an important conceptual core of this festival in the future.

Could you summarize the other HKW programs for us? And are there any particularly notable projects you have planned?

The HKW is closed for renovations until July of 2007, so there are no programs going on at the moment. After the building reopens in August we will be preparing for some major projects in 2008.

One of the first things will be the start of a new festival focusing on electronic music called "World Tronics." Also, we are thinking of how to use the HKW building for some projects in connection with the summer music festival "Wassermusik"(Watermusic). The HKW building stands on the banks of the Spree River and Berlin is now in the process of developing the waterfront areas and there are now many attractive cafes and gardens. And, we have recently seen the opening of the new arts space "Radialsystem." I would like to see us use our building and such to do programs now that build on this local character and the cityscape.

In particular, water is going to be a very important issue in the coming ten to 15 years. I think it would be good for us to do a festival that looks at the theme of water through the filter of the arts. We could hold workshops and international conferences on the theme of water and perhaps introduce artistic aspects in the process. In the future we might be able to have underwater events, do things like create an island in the river and we could possibly project movies on the water. I believe that the important thing would be for us to take water as an inspiration for art rather than treating it just as a theme for ecological projects.

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When planning these kinds of programs, the important thing to keep in mind is how HKW should connect to the society and who our audience is. One of the things that defines Berlin as a city is the fact that it is made up of a number of distinct communities, but we don't cite this merely as the issue of immigrants or the Turkish population that makes up one third of the citizenship. It should be cited as a fact that means there are a variety of different milieu existing simultaneously in German society. The fact that there are 7.5 million immigrants living in Germany is certainly important but Berlin also has some completely unique cultural scenes, such as the historical Charlottenburg district with the Charlottenburg Palace (Schloss Charlottenburg), which is a World Heritage site, and the artist community district of Prenzlauer Berg in the former East Germany sector. HKW must serve as a meeting point for these different cultural scenes.

I believe that what is expected of us in the HKW is to take advantage of the unique aspects of Berlin as a city and to serve as a place where Germany meets the outside, in other words where the national meets the international. And, at the same time, we are expected to be a place where the arts and academics come together to create a synergistic effect. This is the kind of environment we must constantly work in.

So, will there be any events to celebrate the opening of the renewed HKW building in August 2007?

The renewal opening will be held on August 23. As a program to follow the reopening, we have put together an exhibition on the theme of "New York" as a joint production with New York's Queens Museum. Why New York at this time? There are several reasons.

In one of these, the context of globalization that I mentioned earlier is a very important point. I believe that the concept of the "local" plays an important role here, and I got the idea of examining the history of HKW, in particular the history of its building.

The HKW was actually built by Americans some 50 years ago. An international architecture exposition was held in Berlin in 1957 and the building built by the Americans as a venue for that expo was then donated to the city of Berlin. In short, this building was a symbol of the modernization of the West. At the time, in 1957, Berlin was an occupied city and there was little else in the area around the building. When you look at it from that perspective, this building suddenly appeared out of nowhere, like a UFO suddenly landing on "planet Berlin." (Laughs)

I see your point. (Laughs)

In the early years of the 1950s, Stalin Avenue (stalinallee, present frankfurter allee) was the symbol of the Eastern (Soviet occupied) half of the city and our building became an opposing symbol of the democracy and freedom of America, or the Western nations. Here there was an ongoing political debate about East and West Germany. But it also became the subject of criticism as a form of Western propaganda against the East and a symbol of the Cold War.

In 1980 there was an incident in which part of the roof collapsed, and that was taken as an opportunity to undertake a renewal project for the building that created the present HKW building. In short, this is a building that directly reflects the last 50 years of world history. We thought of looking at these 50 years not from the perspective of globalization but from the perspective of the city we live in. In other words, by looking at Berlin and New York, as a city that symbolizes the West, and seeing them from the perspective of "transatlantic modern cities" that have affected

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each other across the Atlantic, we chose a practical theme of looking from the transatlantic symbol of Berlin at New York, as a symbol of globalization, we could bring to the surface a number of the issues that are facing the globalized world today.

From the standpoint of economics and cultural and also in terms of being the site of the 9.11 attacks, which is certainly one of the defining events in the world in recent years, New York is truly a symbol of the contemporary world.

The **Queens Museum of Art** that we are working in collaboration with on this exhibition is located in the Queens Borough of New York, which is a “peripheral” borough with regards to the “central” Manhattan and it is a “melting pot” with many immigrants from different cultures and with different religions. It is also in a historical section of the city that has been the site of two World’s Fairs, one before World War II and one after. In this sense, it can also be seen as a sort of “transmuseum” that is in a situation very similar to us at HKW.

Our specific [New York project] program will be officially announced in May, and it will be a large-scale comprehensive program including exhibitions, performances, music programs and conferences. After it is held in Berlin it will tour to The Queens Museum of Art, and we are also thinking of a joint program with Carnegie Hall.

What other kinds of programs do you have planned?

After this New York project we are thinking about a large-scale project dealing with the Middle East situation and how artists are and should be reacting to it. In short, this [New York] project is the start of an ongoing series through which we consider how to involve ourselves with the processes of changes we are seeing in today’s world.

In fact, we have had one project going on during the renewal. It is called “Meine Baustelle” (My Construction Site). Since we couldn’t use our building for a whole year from the start of the renovation work in the autumn of 2006 to the completion in the late summer of 2007, we decided to use the building as best we could during the period it was closed to think seriously about what new roles we ourselves could play and at the same time disseminate the thought process to the outside. Actually, in the 1990s after the fall of the Berlin Wall, there have been a good number of projects using construction sites. Recent examples include the numerous projects that took place at the Palast der Republik, which many people have probably heard of.

In our case we decided to hold project every weekend at the renovation site over a period of six weeks. The word “Baustelle” (construction site) has the meaning of a construction site where the structural framework of the building is exposed, and it can also be taken to mean a person’s “thinking process.” Furthermore, “Mein” (my) means that a personal (my) perspective is necessarily involved.

Based on this concept, we have been holding a series of projects titled “Meine Diplomatie” (my diplomacy), “Mein Haus” (my house) and “Mein Markt” (my market) as parts of our “Meine Baustelle” program. Meine Diplomatie approached the problem of dealing with the themes of culture and politics from the standpoint of the individual. Mein Haus approached the issue of what form the urban environment should take in the globalized world by looking at buildings themselves. With Mein Markt we plan to create a real market inside HKW.

Originally, a market is a place where the value of things is converted into monetary value. In other words, it is a place where the process of conversion is played out. This doesn’t mean just a museum shop. For example, we will have a designer group from Sweden and boutiques like Prada and Gucci and young people from

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the Mitte district set up creative shops or portable kiosks and the prices of their goods will not be set, so people have to bargain to set the prices. The idea is to change the building into a market and create "Shops – Landscape in Berlin" map. This takes place in May.

If people become more conscious of participating in the world from their standpoint as individuals, many individual perspectives will gather in this building and we can make it function as a "meeting place" where people can work together. This is what we are trying to achieve here.

The role of culture and the arts in society has changed greatly in the last 20 years. It seems that Germany today is facing various issues like the high unemployment rate and the problems of the young. What are your expectations for the role of culture and the arts?

Of course I believe that these issues have to be addressed and I feel that politics is playing an increasingly important role in today's culture. But, artists have the ability to feel what is likely to happen tomorrow and the day after tomorrow with a high degree of sensitivity. I believe that themes or questions should not simply be picked up from the political context but that they should be developed through the involvement of artists.

In this way, I don't believe that a cultural institution should borrow its themes directly from the political context but, based on the question of how to develop things into a cultural or arts context, I believe that we should direct our efforts toward the search for ways to join in a dialog with government and society. My belief is that we cannot work together with government in the absence of a cultural or artistic perspective.

The HKW has engaged in a variety of programs over the past 20 years but I think that it is very difficult to judge the success or failure of these programs from a social standpoint. It is not something that can be reduced to numbers, and I believe that it will take a very long time before we know clearly what remained in people's minds and what inspired people.