



ARTISTIC AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE AT VILLA AURORA

- A view from Los Angeles

The Villa Aurora is an international meeting place and artists' residency, fostering German-American exchange in the fields of literature, music, art, and film as well as in political and social thought. Located in the former Pacific Palisades home of Lion and Marta Feuchtwanger, the Villa functions as a living memorial to the great artists and intellectuals who found refuge from Nazi Germany in Southern California. It also reminds us of the important role these exiles played in shaping the art and culture of their new and sometimes inexplicable home.

Appropriately, the core activity of the Villa Aurora is its Artists-in-Residence Program, which each year brings up to sixteen individuals for three-month stays at the Villa. These younger artists and writers are not required to be German citizens but must be living and working in Germany to qualify to apply. In addition, every year the Villa offers the "Feuchtwanger Fellowship," which provides a residency of up to twelve months to a writer who is being persecuted or forced to live in exile. The "Feuchtwanger Fellowship," like the Villa Aurora as whole, stands as a reminder that efforts to stifle freedom of expression did not end with the fall of National Socialism but, in fact, occur daily around the globe.

During their stay, fellows pursue projects in their specific fields. As president of a college that employs 250 working artists and as husband of a writer/photographer, I have seen first hand how much a retreat from the interruptions of normal life can mean to an artist. Writers, composers, and visual artists routinely report accomplishing two or three times as much work as would have been possible in their normal contexts. Villa Aurora, located in the beautiful hills of Pacific Palisades and looking out beyond Malibu to the Ocean, offers all the peace and concentration associated with artists' retreats. Judging from the ambitious concerts, exhibitions, screening and readings at the Villa, it seems clear that the residents are finding their time artistically productive.

As with the exile years, greater Los Angeles—only a few miles away—offers the stimulations and challenges of a great urban center. Thanks to the relative ease of international travel and communication and the concomitant internationalization of the pop culture and arts industries, the bafflement of finding oneself in Los Angeles is a good deal less than for the World War II generation. But Los Angeles, in its scale, diversity, geographic dispersion and sheer Americanness can still be a sufficient shock to one's assumptions about the world to influence the future production of an artist.

The delicate task of the Villa staff consists of at once creating an environment of protected retreat within which the visiting fellows can work and, at the same time, easing the entry of the fellows into the cultural

life of Los Angeles. The Villa staff organizes individual presentations for each of the artists and works closely with local cultural and educational institutions to organize readings, exhibitions, concerts, screenings, workshops, panel discussions, salons and receptions. In ten years, the partnerships developed range from the Getty Center and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, to the Los Angeles Institute for the Humanities and the Los Angeles Public Library, to the University of California Los Angeles, the University of Southern California, and my own institution, the California Institute of the Arts.

These partnerships and collaborations around readings, screenings, concerts and theatrical performances provide unique opportunities for the Villa residents while at the same time enriching the artistic, cultural, and educational life of Southern California. To take an example from our experience at CalArts: 1996 Villa resident Karin Apollonia Müller came to our attention when the Villa staff contacted my office about the possibility of Karin using our darkrooms during her stay in Los Angeles. From that first meeting, Karin has grown into a member of our extended community. In consequence, some years later, she became one of the five artists commissioned to investigate—through photography, film, and video—the effects on the urban fabric of downtown Los Angeles of the building of the Frank Gehry-designed Walt Disney Concert Hall. Even as I write, two powerful sequences of her photographs, “City Blues” and “Tree Series,” are on display as part of this five-year project’s culminating exhibition in the Gallery of CalArts’ downtown facility, the Roy and Edna Disney CalArts Theater (REDCAT). Müller herself now divides her time between Los Angeles and Berlin.

Müller’s experience offers a striking but in many ways familiar instance of the long-term consequences of connections made during the artists’ residencies at the Villa. Often links made during one artist’s stay open possibilities for future residents. During his 2001 residency, composer Peter Ablinger reconnected with CalArts-affiliated composer Daniel Rothman, who had lived and worked in Paris and Berlin and had recorded and released Ablinger’s “Orgel und Rauschen” through his record label Los Angeles River Records in the “Villa Aurora Editions” with the support of Villa Aurora. Rothman, together with Michael Pizarro, Co-Chair of Composition and Experimental Music Practices at CalArts, then arranged a concert/installation by Ablinger at the Santa Monica Museum of Art and a performance in conjunction with the MAK Center for Art and Architecture. Included in the MAK Center concert as well was the music of James Tenney, holder of the Roy E. Disney Family Chair in Music at CalArts.

Rothman has gone on to arrange concerts for other composers at the Villa, including Jamilia Jazyzbekova, and has worked collaboratively with Villa writers including Michael Lentz and Yoko Tawada. Indeed, Rothman credits the Villa with helping him to overcome the isolation he experienced in coming to Los Angeles with its widely separated art, music, and writing scenes. Pizarro, after meeting Ablinger through the concerts mentioned above, programmed Ablinger’s 6 hour electronic work “Das Buch der Gesänge” at CalArts; and Ablinger and his group, Ensemble Zwischentöne, has subsequently performed Pizarro’s work in Berlin. Moreover, Pizarro has presented other Villa Composers at CalArts, including Makiko Nishikaze and Georg Nussbaumer, and like Rothman, has worked with writers at the Villa as well. With

help from the Villa Aurora, Pissarro translated Italian/Austrian poet Oswald Egger's volume "Room of Rumor" which was published in Los Angeles by the Green Integer Press as a "Villa Aurora Edition." When Egger later returned to Los Angeles, the Villa organized a bilingual reading of the book with him and Pissarro. He also worked on several pieces involving combinations of music and poetry. One piece, entitled "a sea of ptyx" was premiered at CalArts while Egger was in residence at the Villa; another, "Twelve Gardens," was premiered at the Merano Musikwochen in Meran, Italy.

Over time, the relationship between the Villa composers and the School of Music at CalArts has deepened, with nearly every fellow invited to give a concert or presentation at CalArts, often with the assistance of yet another CalArts faculty member, composition program co-chair Mark Trayle. CalArts faculty and advanced students have in turn regularly performed fellows' work at the Villa. Here too, new friendships and collaborations have emerged. Trayle and Villa fellow Michael Wertmüller improvised together and recorded in the CalArts Dizzy Gillespie recording studio. Wertmüller later wrote a "double concerto" for Swiss guitarist Stephan Wittwer and Trayle (on laptop) along with the chamber ensemble Neue Musik Berlin. This piece, "die zeit: eine gebrauchsanweisung" (time: instructions for use) was premiered at the Donaueschinger Musiktage in 2001.

As part of the 10th anniversary celebrations of the Villa at the end of 2005, a series of concerts was presented in Berlin, performed by the German ensembles trio e-vent and Ensemble Mosaik from Berlin, and the Los Angeles ensemble, EAR Unit. The concerts featured a broad range of former Villa residents, as well as music by Daniel Rothman and Mark Trayle, as well as two other CalArts composers, Music School Dean David Rosenboom and Stephen Lucky Mosco. Best of all, the CalArts composers were performed, with one exception, by the German ensembles, while the EAR Unit performed works by a number of Villa residents plus several American composers.

As the examples above demonstrate, the benefit of exchange among artists extends well beyond the sharing of knowledge and experience during a Villa residency. Once a commonality of interest and possibility of friendship emerges, the connections tend to continue through time, leading to artistic work drawing on the shared perspective reaching audiences well beyond the individuals immediately involved. In the process, the cultural life and breadth of perspective of the nations involved is enhanced; and even this is not the end of this train of events. At CalArts, the lives of numerous students have been touched by visits by Villa artists, opening up new imaginative horizons and helping these younger artists to imagine art-making that crosses borders. Would that the meetings of our diplomats could reach such depth, continuity, and ongoing consequence!

In the account above, I have focused primarily on music, just one of the disciplines sponsored at the Villa and I have described the experience of a single institution. To fully appreciate the impact of the Villa, the account above must be multiplied many times over, by the Villa residents from other fields and by the range of institutions with which the Villa has entered into regular collaboration. Writers in residence read

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regularly at the Green Integer/Sun and Moon Press, the New Mastodon German Bookstore and at the University of California in Los Angeles, with additional events co-sponsored by the Los Angeles Public Library, the Strasberg Creative Center, and the Los Angeles Institute for the Humanities. Screenings by filmmakers resident at the Villa have been held at institutions ranging from Raleigh Studios to the Los Angeles Center for Contemporary Art and from the Orpheum Theater to the Directors' Guild of America. Exhibitions have been developed with the Sam Francis Gallery, the UCLA Kinross Gallery, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), the ACE LA, China Art Object and c-level galleries and at the USC School of Architecture. There have also been frequent and productive cooperative activities with the Goethe Institute across a broad range of the arts.

Beyond the individual residencies, the Villa Aurora also sponsors an ongoing series of lectures, discussions and symposia on American and European issues. Most important among these are the "Transatlantic Programs" that bring together German and American participants to discuss and exchange their thoughts on various topics ranging from aspects of exile to writing and the arts today. Particularly memorable among these programs are two recent symposia on exile. "Exiled in Paradise?"—the title drawn from Anthony Heilbut's standard work on the subject—was organized jointly with the Institutes for the Humanities at the University of Southern California and New York University. Among the participants were writer Lawrence Weschler, Los Angeles Times Book Review Editor Steve Wasserman, Die Zeit publisher and former Henry Holt publisher Michael Naumann, and Heilbut himself. A fascinating series of presentations brought home the profound influence of German exiled writers in the United States.

"Building Paradise: Exile Architecture in California" was organized jointly with the Federal Chamber of Architects in Germany and the University of Southern California. Participants from Germany and the United States discussed the historical aspect of exile architecture as well as the reception and adaptation of these architectural impulses in private and public buildings and in industrial design.

The first part of a two part symposia, "All Mixed Up: Rethinking Europe and America in Literature" was held at Villa Aurora in April 2005 and the second part in November 2005 at Literarisches Colloquium (LCB) on Lake Wannsee, Berlin. In Los Angeles, writers of mixed origin from Japanese-German Yoko Tawada to Polish-German Artur Becker and from American Janet Sternburg to Nigerian-American Chris Abani and Dominican-American Junot Diaz read from their work, bringing new light to the cultural, political and economic landscapes of Europe and the United States as they have been transformed by the new wave of immigrants in the past two decades.

These 10th Anniversary symposia followed on a series of literary colloquia. In 1995, "Living and Working in Exile" brought a thrilling array of exiled writers together, including Mohamed Magani (Algeria), Yang Lian and You You (China), Majid Naficy (Iran), and Anchee Min (China), as well as Russian PEN president Andrey Bitov to discuss the challenges and, in some cases, advantages of writing from exile. In 2000, "End of the Millennium—End of the Literary Age?" brought together an impressive range of Ger-

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man and American writers and intellectuals, including among others Ana Castillo, Patrick Roth, Günter Ohnemus, Thomas Meinecke and Freimut Duve, who discussed the future of reading. “What happens when a German-American publisher becomes German Minister for Culture?” was the topic when I joined then German commissioner for culture and media, Michael Naumann, for a public conversation at the Villa. I recall with particular delight Dr. Naumann’s account of the difficulty of adjusting, after a life as an editor and publisher, to the deliberate evasiveness of political language.

In a relatively short time, then, the Villa Aurora has emerged as a powerful artistic and cultural center in Los Angeles. Through the outstanding artists in residence there, an imaginative range of programming, and a citywide network of institutional partnerships, the Villa has become an indispensable locus of imagination, discussion, interconnection, and cross cultural understanding. As a resident of Los Angeles, my life has been enriched by its presence. As the leader of an educational institution, I have seen the Villa’s impact on cultural understanding and artistic collaboration. As a member of the Villa’s board, I am proud to be associated with this invaluable international resource.

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