

GALERIE

Oficina del Ciudadano

20.11.2015 – 16.01.2016

An Exhibition by Sol Calero

Curated in the context of POW by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung and Solvej Helweg Ovesen

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Galerie Wedding – Raum für
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**Oficina Del Ciudadano / Bürgerberatung / Vatandaş Ofisi / Ofisi Citizen /
Citizens' Advice Bureau / عمادة المواطنين / Biuro Porad Obywatelskich**

On the Relationship between Guest and Host in Sol Caleros' Work

The current exhibition by Sol Calero (1982) in Galerie Wedding is a contemporary reenactment of the former function of the gallery space, which was a ›Bürgerberatungsstelle‹ in ›Rathaus Wedding‹ (The City Hall of Wedding), a Citizens' Advice Bureau. Built in the style of ›Neue Sachlichkeit‹ (The New Objectivity) in 1928, the city hall building was financed by the Berliner Bank, then called Sparkasse Berlin, which originally occupied the attractive ground floor corner space towards Leopold Platz in which the gallery is situated now. However in between being a bank and a gallery, the space was, as mentioned, a ›Bürgerberatung‹ from 1978 till 2009, a service organ offering administrative and welfare help to residents. The architectural style of the New Objectivity of the building is characterized by being a cult of the objective, the hard fact, the basis for functional work, professional conscientiousness, and usefulness. Formally the ›Rathaus‹ and thus also the ›Bürgerberatung‹ maintained its supposedly fully functional New Objectivity aesthetic till today. However was it fully functional in all terms? When the ›Bürgerberatung‹ first opened in 1978 a new entrance door was built from the street and directly into the counseling office in order to improve public accessibility to the office by avoiding the ›Rathaus‹ main entrance. That same year an article was published titled ›Direkt von der Straße in die Wedding Bürgerberatung‹ (Directly from the street into the Wedding Citizens' Advice Bureau), Tagesspiegel 1978, where the social, communication and transparency ethos of this ›Bürgerberatung‹ was criticized in an academic survey:

›The students would like to see four areas improved in the future Citizen Advice Bureau: a better relationship citizen-administration, a better overview of the administrative processes for the public, a better understanding of the administration of the citizens' problems as well as a systematic evaluation of the suggestions and critique coming from the public. (...) The nursing of the exchange inside the District Office should amongst others be part of the duties of a Citizen Advisor.«¹

This survey reflects the experience of German-speaking citizens in Berlin 37 years ago. Some of these social pitfalls of the city administration and citizen service sound familiar: administrative bureaucratic misadventures are part of our collective memory. But how could

1 Quotation in original language: ›Vier Bereiche wollen die Studenten in der künftigen Bürgerberatung verwirklicht sehen: ein besseres Verhältnis Bürger-Verwaltung, eine bessere Übersicht des Bürgers über Verwaltungsabläufe, ein besserer Einblick der Verwaltung in die Probleme der Bürger und eine systematische Auswertung von Anregungen und Kritik aus der Bevölkerung.(...) Kontaktpflege innerhalb des Bezirksamts soll unter anderem zu den künftigen Pflichten eines Bürgerberaters gehören.« Translation by the author.

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a Citizens' Advice Bureau be transformed to serve the purpose it should ideally serve, i.e. host, support, guide and accompany citizens? How could a Citizens' Advice Bureau be converted into a space of conviviality? Venezuelan artist Sol Calero, whose artistic practice can be understood as a catalyst that precipitates a modification, transformation, metamorphosis of space(s) f.e. exhibition spaces into convivial, sociable and habitable (as in Latin habitabilis »that is fit to live in,« or habitare »to inhabit, dwell«) spaces such as internet cafes, classrooms, hair salons, and Salsa schools with a Caribbean touch and color-scheme visits the former function of Gallery Wedding as »Bürgerberatung« from formal, conceptual and functional original positions. Oficina del Ciudadano reexamines how a bureaucratic office could be redesigned to embrace any person living in Berlin, usurping the potentially intimidating rigidity of administrative German formalities.

In the exhibition Sol Calero lends Latin American interior style and radical hospitality to the »Bürgerberatung« reenactment, and extends her intervention by adorning the »Rathaus Wedding Kantine« downstairs with Caribbean Christmas decorations. The two spaces offer the residents of Wedding a warm and welcoming place in the winter. The exhibition space is transformed into something it was before, yet it is also turned into something »foreign« to the host-culture. Who feels at home and who feels estranged in this office with no clear administrative facilities, no clear purpose apart from the hosting or in the cantina with unusual Christmas decorations? Can we imagine an **Oficina Del Ciudadano** that is a »Bürgerberatung«, which also is a »Atandış Ofisi«, an »Ofisi Citizen« as well as a »Citizens' Advice Bureau«, a »مادة المواطنين« or a »Biuro Porad Obywatelskich«?

An important function added to the space is the ethos of hospitality; out of the experience of trying to fit into someone else's society Calero designs an atmosphere that thrives on the premise of the foreigner; an office that to some people might not be recognizable as such. A displaced concept of service and hospitality, which according to Calero, aims to create flexible spaces where anything can happen and which adapt themselves to their visitors' needs and questions instead of the opposite. Eventually the question becomes: does the guest always have to fit in?

»When you grow up in a country like Venezuela (or another '3rd world' country) everything seems to be happening »out there«... somewhere in the world, namely in the USA or Europe. You were practically born to wait for a better opportunity. And someday that time arrives and you are out there, somewhere in Europe finally living your »dream«. But after all of this process of dreaming, what you actually become is an immigrant, which is always going to be reflected in anything you do or try to be. And this is how I started seeing myself as an artist too once I realized that, after all these years of following that »dream«, I was, and I still am, that immigrant that is trying to fit in someone else's society.«²

To displace a full interior of a Latin American office in Galerie Wedding is an artistic strategy to change the role of host and guest in a similar way to how Derrida deconstructs the power-relation between guest and host in his lecture »Of Hospitality«. Here he explains how the guest can liberate the host, who is cocooned in his subjectivity as host:

»This is always the situation of the foreigner, in politics too, that of coming as a legislator to lay down the law and liberate the people or the nation by coming from outside, by entering into the nation or the house, into the home that lets him enter after having appealed to him. (...) »as if«, then, the stranger could save the master and liberate the power of his host; it's »as if« the master, »qua« master, were prisoner of his place and his power, of his ipseity, of

2 Interview with Sol Calero by Adam Carr, <http://www.artuner.com/insight/interview-with-sol-calero/>, 2014

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his subjectivity (his subjectivity is hostage). So it is indeed the master, the one who invites, the inviting host, who becomes the hostage - and who really always has been. And the guest, the invited hostage, becomes the one who invites, the master of the host. The guest becomes the host's host.«³

Caleros **Oficina Del Ciudadano** is a displaced office (aesthetic-cultural codes) existing on the premise of unpredictability and vulnerability; a space with a foreign and in principle endless amounts of overlapping ethnic frames of reference. Calero liberates the space and the identity of German administration – even if in service of the citizens – from its own traditional host-character, which can be seen as hostage to rigidity, order, and impermeability.

To her current interior reworking of Galerie Wedding into an ›Oficina Del Ciudadano‹ Calero not only follows the codes of intimacy, inhabitability in latino interior style as well as gestures of hospitality, which has often been exorcized e.g. in Hollywood movies or soap operas and reduced to materializing pure superficiality. Here however the artist goes beyond such stereotypes and equips the Oficina Del Ciudadano with the interior language of hospitality. A welcoming interior styling that welcomes its visitor whether he or she speaks English, Arabic, an African language, Chinese, German or Turkish, which ca. 50% of Weddings residents do as their first or second language. Superficiality, cheerfulness and formal play stroll hand in hand over clichés towards a more bendable kind of ›Bürgerberatung‹ which is here an Oficina Del Ciudadano trying to meet foreigners in a place - language wise - that feels like home. As Derrida notes; where a foreigner to the nation is normally defined based on the site of birth and the law of blood, it is important to understand language, mother-tongue as the ›homeland‹ of foreigners and migrants:

»...exiles, the deported, the expelled, the rootless, the stateless, the lawless nomads, absolute foreigners, often continue to recognize the language, what is called the mother tongue as their ultimate homeland, and even their last resting place.«⁴

The function of the **Oficina Del Ciudadano** today in this exhibition is seen from the optic of a migrant or person estranged to German administrative culture; who through the instinctive savvy of ›hospitalidad‹ and improvisation modulates expectations of German bureaucratic firmness and fairness. Oficina Del Ciudadano is not a ›Bürgerberatung‹. Oficina Del Ciudadano is a Citizens' Advice Bureau that asks the host to answer the questions that the guest poses in the language the guest speaks; that leaves the door open.

With Derrida: »Let us say yes to who or what turns up...«.⁵

3 Jaques Derrida J.D. Step of Hospitality in »Step of Hospitality / No Hospitality«, in the series Cultural Memory in the Present, edited by Mieke Bal and Hent de Vriiers, Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 125

4 Ibid. (Derrida) p. 89-90

5 Ibid. (Derrida) p. 77

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