

# Letter from Luckenwalde

## The work of E-WERK

'This was the chief's office, and that was the secretary's space.' Herr Bernd Schmidl, former deputy chief of Luckenwalde power station, is outlining the past uses of a small complex of rooms at what is now E-WERK Luckenwalde (Artnotes AM430), where we have been shepherded for an interview. Like many former East Germans, Schmidl has little English, so his answers are translated by Florine Lindner, a creative producer for E-WERK, co-director Pablo Wendel's artistic practice. The pretext for my visit is the latest installation of 'Power Nights', a biennial event and exhibition series held at the site. But the history of E-WERK itself, a former brown-coal power station which now generates renewable energy to heat and light a gallery and living quarters while selling excess back to the grid, is the big story.

The wider backdrop to that story is the history of Luckenwalde, a settlement of 20,000 half an hour south from Berlin by train, but another world culturally, politically and economically. 'I assumed I was still in Berlin the first time I visited,' says E-WERK's artistic co-director Helen Turner, who sourced the site with Wendel in 2017. Initial impressions, however, were quickly revised, and the E-WERK team have since made a point of actively engaging the local community. In any case, Turner immediately 'fell in love' with the building itself, a strange amalgam of art nouveau artistry and early municipal modernism from 1913 whose marvellous stained glass entrance-way transom window, showing a fist clutching lightning bolts, has been adapted to form the E-WERK emblem.

Luckenwalde was the site of much inventive utopian architecture during the early 20th century, including Eric Mendelsohn's stunning Expressionist hat factory, and a Bauhaus-era swimming pool adjacent to the plant - all crisp lines, primary colours and glass panels - built as an exercise space for the workers. (Last year, the empty pool was carpeted in sand to stage Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, Vaiva Grainytė and Lina Lapelytė's immersive opera *Sun and Sea*, the first chapter in the second instalment of 'Power Nights'.) East Germany claimed Luckenwalde after the Second World War and the factory kept running - under gruelling working conditions. Everything changed after 1989, however, when businesses across the town were bought up, asset-stripped and disbanded. 'Thousands of people lost their jobs,' Schmidl says. Although the power station did not initially suffer the same fate - ironically, working conditions drastically improved under the new owners - it soon ran out of local buyers for its energy and folded in 1992. A decade of economic and cultural malaise followed: 'all the kids finishing school left in groups. All the cultural institutions closed down.' The town's population shrank by a third.

Located in the once-notorious state of Brandenburg, Luckenwalde was a site of neo-Nazi agitation during the 1990s and 2000s. That threat was seen off but the more insidious growth of mainstream nativist nationalism in the late 2010s has troubled the area. 'In Germany, society is really splitting apart,' Wendel tells me during an informal interview, while grappling with one of the many toddlers who form a lively part



Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, Vaiva Grainytė,  
Lina Lapelytė, *Sun & Sea*, 2017/21, performance

of the onsite community. 'The right-wing movement is really strong around here, particularly in the countryside.' The populist Alternative für Deutschland party won in Brandenburg during 2019's European elections and was second in the state elections of the same year.

'Unless you get together and talk, you won't change anything,' Wendel goes on. He sees E-WERK as a forum for cultural dialogue, using art as a medium of personal and social transformation.

'When we staged *Sea and Sand*, it was just amazing. We had local volunteers, some of them definitely right wing. But then they were suddenly in this amazing environment with this international crowd, and the opera was very emotional, very heart opening. I really thought some of them might be walking out of it as different people.' The optimism might seem wide-eyed but it's worth recalling that Wendel was the driving force behind firing up a century-old coal-fired power station, unused for 30 years, without any prior technological training.

How was that achieved? Wendel deployed a 'little trick', says Herr Schmidl with a chuckle. 'You don't have to know and do everything, you just need to know people who can.' When the E-WERK team moved in, an advert was placed in the local newspaper inviting former power plant employees to share their knowledge and time to help bring the plant back to life. 'They really became the greatest advocates of the project,' Turner recalls. 'It would have been impossible to do it without them.' Wendel concurs. The labour was unpaid but the revitalisation of the building, Schmidt suggests, is a source of pride for the town. 'There are a lot of buildings round here just crumbling into to the ground. People are amazed that this place hasn't had the same destiny.'

The working model of the revamped plant is the stuff of steam punk fantasy. The original conveyer belt, magnificent, clanking and grumbling, is used to transport chipped wood gathered from local forest beds to a silo in the factory basement. There, it is filtered and heated without being fully burned (a process called pyrolysis) to produce wood gas, which heats up water pipes to produce steam. The steam activates turbines which generate electricity. Meanwhile, some of the gas is fed into a 'mobile power station', an artwork called *SUPER DUTY* made from

a 1950s fire engine, with woodchip storage in place of the water tank and a pyrolysis machine where the pump was. 'We are able to drive this thing around. So if you have a gallery or museum that needs energy, let us know,' Wendel says during a tour of the site.

A set of performances and exhibitions are in full swing when I visit on 30 April, as part of a Power Nights live event (the next day's May Day celebrations are a reminder of the town's vestigial socialist identity). It is part of the slowly unfolding second iteration of the series, the head of which, Katharina Worf, explains the thinking behind this incremental approach: 'Why do we always produce and produce without any time to reflect on anything? That's not how we want to do things here.' This idea of circular economies is ingrained in the theme of the second Power Nights programme, *Being Mothers*: 'Mother is meant in an abstract sense. It's to do with caring for the earth, a consciousness around ecology.'

This is borne out in the shows on display, chosen by guest curator Lucia Pietroiusti, former Serpentine curator and the founder of a curatorial project, *Radical Ecology*, whose mission very much matches that of E-WERK. In particular, attention to non-human intelligence and consciousness, both as an end in itself and as a means of envisaging sustainable ecologies and economies, is a binding theme. Himali Singh Soin's *Static Ranges* is a multi-disciplinary project exploring ideas of toxic seepage, erotic connection, and signal interference between different cultures and natural environments (an 'eros of the toxic,' as the artist puts it to me), based on the true story of a CIA and Indian Intelligence-designed spy camera, powered by nuclear energy, placed in the Himalayas to record Chinese weapons development during the Cold War. Revital Cohen and Tuur Van Balen's *Three Hearts* takes the non-human consciousness of the octopus as a conceptual fulcrum, using its system of multi-coloured display as the basis for a sound and light show that connects up with trance culture, planetarium stargazing, and ideas of the 'cosmic trance' taken from Walter Benjamin.

There is a question, of course, as to whether these projects – not all of which are described here – really resonate with Luckenwalde's residents. 'People say there's a lot of English spoken here,' Wendel admits, 'and of course the programme of events is quite intellectual.' But 'art can reach everyone,' he insists. 'People come whether or not they think they understand it.' Some come to voice dissent: 'We had one guy come on a tour who shouted all through it that we were gentrifying,' he remembers with a wry smile. 'I don't really see how, but we spoke to him afterwards.' He pauses and goes on: 'That's what this place is. We're open to everyone. It's not always easy. We have difficult conversations. But I feel like it makes a change.'

**Greg Thomas** is critic and editor based in Glasgow.

## Salerooms

### Good Times

The May sales of Modern and Contemporary art in New York, which used to be packed into one week, were spread out over two this year and these bumper sales posted their highest ever total for a series of Modern and Contemporary art auctions at \$2.785bn (£2.22bn), up \$45m on the previous most-valuable sales series held in May 2015, which realised \$2.74bn (£1.74bn).

It is hard to edit down the long list of milestone results, so what follows is a series of snapshots that begins with Andy Warhol's *Sage Blue Marilyn*, 1964, from the estate of the late dealer Doris Ammann, which was bought by Larry Gagosian for \$195.4m just below the estimate at Christie's, where 50 other artists' records were broken in a week. These included Edgar Degas' familiar sculpture *The Little 14-Year-Old Dancer*, 1879–1881/1927, which I saw in London where it was being toured, not in real life but as a hologram in a vitrine, and which nonetheless sold above estimate for \$41.6m.

The biggest record in relation to estimate was for the late African-American artist Ernie Barnes's concoction of sinewy jiving figures *The Sugar Shack*, 1976, which was used as the cover for Marvin Gaye's album *I Want You* the same year, as well as in the credits of the 1970s TV sitcom *Good Times*. Estimated at \$150,000, the work was the subject of fierce competition before selling for more than a hundred times the estimate at \$15.3m. Before this decade, Barnes was a quirky footnote in the market, sold only in the staid American art (Thomas Hart Benton et al) and specialised African-American sales. His biggest collector was filmmaker George Lucas, whose Lucas Museum of Narrative Art owns ten examples amongst all the Norman Rockwells and NC Wyeths.

Until June 2020, paintings by Barnes had never made more than \$50,000 because the African-American market boom had not yet fully embraced him. Last month, Christie's included this work in a high-profile evening sale, next to market luminaries Pablo Picasso, Jackson Pollock, Paul Cézanne and Vincent van Gogh. Twenty-two telephone bidders were lined up to compete with bidders who had arrived in person, including an art adviser from Gurr Johns in Los Angeles, acting for Hollywood business manager Larry Tyler, and 53-year-old private collector Bill Perkins, variously described as a hedge fund manager, film producer and high-stakes poker player. Perkins eventually won out at a totally unpredicted price of \$13.1m and treated on-the-spot press enquiries with comments about how he had loved the work since childhood, how undervalued black American artists were, and how this work should be worth \$100m.

After the sale it was revealed that the painting had been consigned for sale by Ales Ortuzar, a dealer who specialises in unrecognised artists and who, with gallerist Andrew Kreps, then announced they were representing the artist's estate – a timely deal, worth 20 times more after the sale than before.

Sotheby's then kicked off the second week with the second part of the most valuable single-owner collection ever sold, owned by divorced couple Linda and Harry Macklowe (Salerooms *AM452*). All 30 blue chip works by Andy Warhol, Alberto Giacometti, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning et al sold, mostly within estimates, for \$246m in total, with no surprises. The sale felt comfortable but dully predictable.