

AIR Krems, July-September 2011
Jen Liu – USA

Quietness

Even in the throes of summer, the abiding sense was of quietness, and all the wonders this amount of quiet brings.

I had an exhibition to finish, only barely started in New York, and set to open in the UK in mid-September. Expectation, worry for the near future, and for my abilities to finish so much work in such a short time were my feelings as I arrived in the Vienna airport. Therefore, as soon as I arrived I set to work, unrolling large unfinished drawings and laying out preliminary notes for a new video. Over the coming months I worked intensely, finishing those drawings, making a series of smaller drawing/collages, and shooting in various locations – the Natural History Museum in Vienna, a bridge over the Donau, the Hoepfner's wine cellar in Zoebing, among many others.

But on quietness: amidst the frenetic activity, there were the quiet mornings, ringing bells in an otherwise empty soundscape, runs along the Donau accompanied by lapping water and waddling ravens, and the night, a thin landscape of life through lit windows, getting scarce as the hours passed. This quietness rounded the otherwise sharp edges of my production, making thoughts, otherwise lost in the demands of a loud city life, possible.

It is only this quiet that made it possible to finish my exhibition, and for that I'm grateful.

Generosity

From the very start, David Komary and Sabine Gueldenfusz were incredibly giving of their time, of their efforts, and of the attention that is demanded from a foreign artist plucked from home and replanted in another place.

There is no doubt that one does not know a city or country after only three months: one only skims along the surface. However, I can say that my time in Krems was marked by generosity, in nearly every encounter: from David and Sabine, but also from my handful of friends in Vienna, from beautiful Krems itself and the adjoining town, as well as Vienna, full of art and life. The intense quietude of the studio was punctuated by time with friends, over coffee, over the ubiquitous white wine, over beautiful dinners, surrounded by art, new friends, long nights discussing art's beauties and aggravations. Exhibitions of international import in the museums and galleries were mediated by off-space openings and makeshift outdoor events, artists and curators gathered to burn off their anxieties in the warm summer air.

I had only been to Austria once before, the sort of visit in which one collapses on the hotel bed, after many hours of installation, the sound of BBC News ushering in sleep with its sharp, clipped tones. To be allowed to encounter it again with the fullness of a period immersed in work and life, was nothing short of miraculous.

There is the special type of engagement with place that an artist has while on residency in a foreign land. We become foragers, we take the cast off impressions of an everyday life, and re-frame them as precious artifacts, moments in which we hope to have grazed the reality of those

we have visited. I will remember the train ride to Vienna, passing fields of sunflowers, their wide faces seeming to nod off in the late morning sun, and the sudden switch to an urban landscape, made all the more sudden for having nodded off to sleep myself. I remember cutting open an apricot fresh from a tree, and being greeted by a little worm, bringing me to a days-old image of the seemingly meters-long marillen cake snaking through the historical center, as I dodged slow-moving revelers on my way through town. And I will remember editing a video about a woman struggling with fear and death, to the sound of teenagers screaming on gravity-defying rides at the fairground, ringing through the otherwise quiet night air of Krems. Many other images and sounds as well, too many to list, will be well-remembered.

And now, back in New York, I have brought back these foraged gems: as I run in my noisy Brooklyn park, I imagine the calm Donau to my right. Just last night I emailed images from the remarkable Franz West exhibition from September in Vienna, to an artist friend. And tonight as I gather my thoughts, I look at the images of an exhibition that would not have been possible otherwise. But above all, the many conversations started and revived with my peers in Krems and Vienna, will be sure to continue over the coming years – a lasting gift of AIR Krems.