

A new Alliances

Simone Neuenschwander

I still remember this warm evening in May 2008 – the red light of the sunset behind the chimney stacks and cranes; a few people on the street, smoking cigarettes and drinking beer, inside the leftovers of a pizza order, the cartons assembled into a sloppy pile. It was the preview dinner at the artists' run space New Jersey*, before a talk entitled 'Artists exhibiting Artists' at the Museum of Contemporary Art Basel. At that time, New Jersey – as in Robert Smithson's description of the post-industrial landscape of New Jersey in the 1960s – was located in small premises on the border of a huge highway construction site in the northern part of Basel. Since then the entire area has vastly changed, and today it has a brand new urban structure, while New Jersey, still located in the same space, has also steadily developed.

In the years before New Jersey, artists' spaces and collectives such as Die Versicherung, Vrits or Schalter had started to change the art scene in Basel, responding to the need for exchange with international artists, and to the need to nurture self-organised structures – within a city with a very high density of art institutions, enjoying a very high level of public subsidy and private patronage. In a place where artists were more used to coexistence than to collaborating, where no young galleries represented upcoming artists, and where local artists such as Christoph Büchel tended to become less engaged when they achieved success, New Jersey managed to create one of the most influential art spaces in Switzerland. Since then their work has had a huge impact, notably by creating alliances between different art scenes, including alliances between the usually competitive scenes of Zurich, Basel or Geneva.

The group around New Jersey demonstrates with great clarity what it means to produce art today. More than ever artists choose flexible positions and claim control over the art system: becoming curators for prestigious exhibitions (Artur Z'mijewski for the 7th Berlin Biennial or Willem De Rooij at the Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin), forming ambitious artist-run galleries (Reena Spaulings, New York; Galerie Meerrettich, Berlin; Studio Voltaire, London) or collaborating with, and drawing attention to, artists of an older generation (as in Nairy Baghramian presenting Janette Laverrière). New Jersey operate by supporting each other and 'featuring' their artist friends (to borrow a term from the music industry), and they often make strong references to 'artists' artists' such as John Armleder, Ettore Sottsass and Walter Pfeiffer. Other important elements in their practice include the rapid flow of information (Facebook, YouTube), and the collecting of motifs during their numerous travels (including journeys to the USA and to Tbilisi, Georgia). They cruise to openings abroad, connect with emerging artists and build up a network that is based on artistic exchange, shared tastes in music, fashion and style, and also – even if it sounds romantic – friendship.

The artists, curators, designers and authors around New Jersey form a changing cluster of personalities, tapping into the accelerated means of communication and travel. By curating works in unpredictable constellations, far from pretentious strategies or hierarchies, they created their own system of valuation, producing lively impulses – and a model which might show curators and institutions how to keep pace with the future.

*New Jersey is an artist-run exhibition space that has premiered many of the artists exhibiting in Corso Multisala. New Jersey was founded by Daniel Baumann, Tobias Madison, Dan Solbach and Emanuel Rossetti.

Simone Neuenschwander is a curator and writer living in Basel and Berlin, and has recently been appointed as one of the curators of the independent exhibition space OSLO10 in Basel.