

**Ex-Embassy:**

**Framing**

***Sonja Hornung (AU/DE)***

EX-EMBASSY  
EXHIBITION AND TEXT SERIES

at the former Australian Embassy to the German  
Democratic Republic  
Grabbeallee 34, 13156 Berlin  
August 4–31, 2018

EX-EMBASSY is hosted by artist Sonja Hornung (AU/DE)  
with curatorial advice from Rachel O'Reilly (AU/DE).

Contributing artists: Megan Cope (Quandamooka); Archie  
Moore (Kamilaroi); Sumugan Sivanesan (AU/DE), Carl  
Gerber (DE) & Simone van Dijken (NL); Sonya Schönberger  
(DE); und Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll (AU/AT).

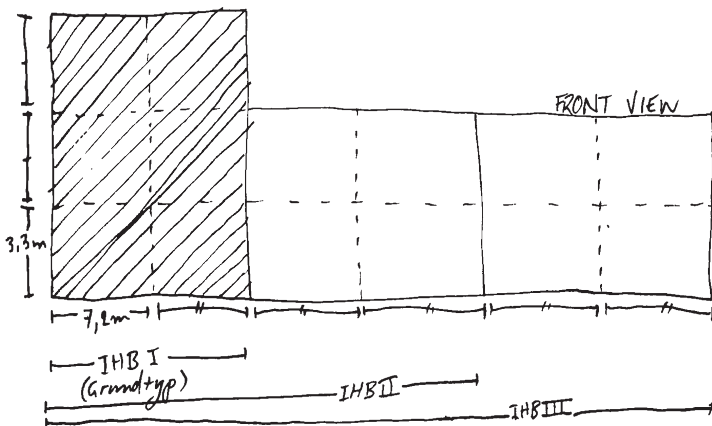
Contributing writers: cultural studies scholar Ben Gook  
(AU/DE); legal scholar Sarah Keenan (UK); historian Peter  
Monteath (AU); artist, critic and curator Rachel O'Reilly  
(AU/DE); writer Nathan Sentance (Wiradjuri) & poet  
Raelee Lancaster (Wiradjuri).

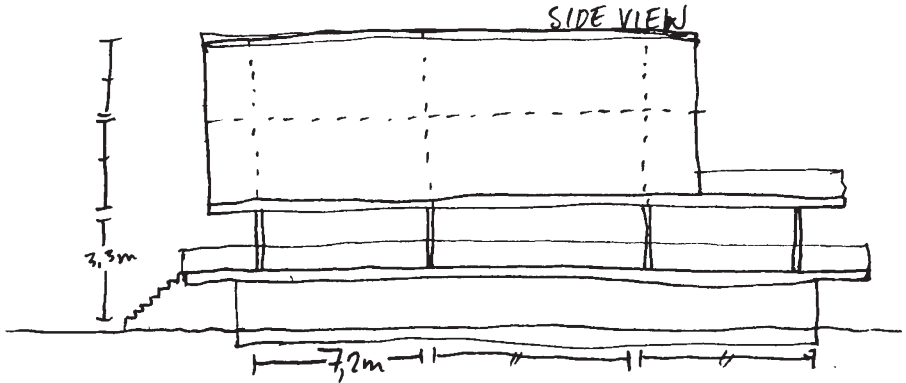
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Between 1965 and 1975, in Berlin's northeastern borough, Pankow, an architectural experiment was carried out. A total of 135 embassies and diplomatic residences were built from scratch from just four prefabricated, modular designs. Swathes of Pankow, until 1961 the seat of power of the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED)', were transformed into East Berlin's diplomatic quarters, with 46 versions of the 'Pankow' model built around 'Die Esplanade' west of Vinetastraße, and 82 versions of the 'Magdeburg' and 'Gera' models scattered throughout the borough. The third model, the Ingenieurhochbau (IHB), was realised by the 'VEB Bau- und Montagekombinat Ingenieurhochbau Berlin' collective.<sup>2</sup> It was realised just seven times from three variegated versions, and consisted of a prefabricated skeleton: a concrete-steel grid with horizontal intervals of 7.2m and vertical intervals of 3.3m. Once installed onsite, this skeleton was mounted with white concrete slabs and a carrara wash finish, also prefabricated. The following diagrams (made while reading one of the few studies on the GDR's embassy-building experiment, dug out of the archives of the Technische Universität Berlin) demonstrate the IHB's modular nature and its three variations - IHB/I, IHB/II and IHB/III:





The IHB's architectural legacy has been traced variously back to Bauhaus, the International Style, and the flat-roofed, segmented embassies and consulates constructed by the US in the 1950s in Havana and Düsseldorf.<sup>3</sup> However, its technical lineage lies in the art of prefabrication, perfected in the GDR in mass housing projects beginning in the early 1950s in Hoyerswerda and culminating in Berlin's Marzahn of the late 1980s.<sup>4</sup> This one-size-fits-all approach encapsulates the aspirational mode of engaged socialist modernism. The new diplomatic buildings rolled out in Pankow were allocated to sending states with seemingly little or no discretionary regard for their standing in the diplomatic hierarchy.

Yet woven into this imposed, prefabricated grid, each used space or place is shaped by many other forces, tensions and debates. This *specific* building was a state institution enshrining mutual recognition between the GDR and Australia, a settler-colony that itself refused – and continues to refuse – treaty and therefore diplomatic recognition of Aboriginal nations on the continent.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, as the building played out its

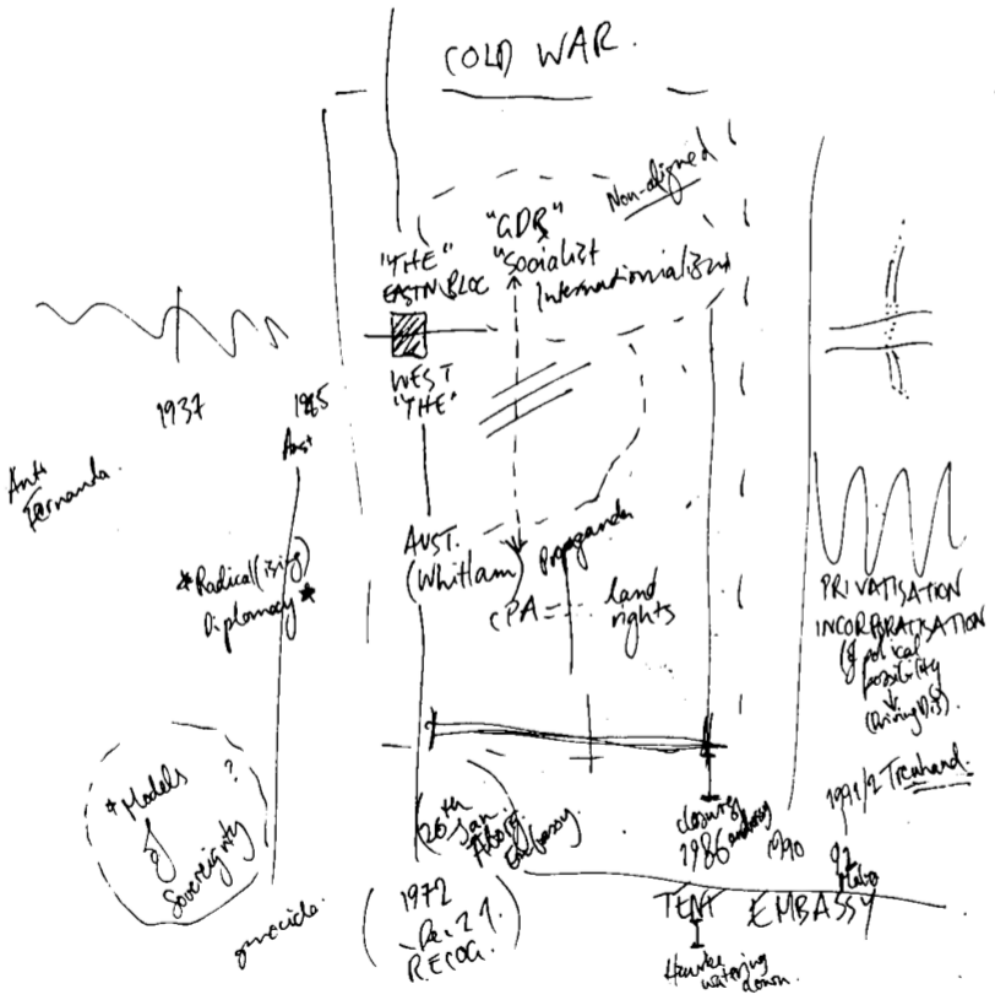
role as an embassy to Australia for only eleven years, from 1975 to 1986, its subsequent ownership history typifies the post-Cold War legacy of privatisation and land valorisation in the former East.<sup>6</sup>

The exhibition and text series Ex-Embassy pivots on the rift between the idealistic flatness of an imposed architecture or frame – that is, a modular imaginary with the ambition to expand itself into a universal for all people and all places (‘the frame’ itself here having, since 1989, shifted from state-socialism to a jump-started neoliberal political economy today powered primarily by real estate) – and other, incommensurable formalisms that strategically interact with, project, bypass, resist or are subsumed into this model. Such processes are fundamentally entangled with the question of how specific spaces are shaped, by whom, and for which bodies?

Geographer Doreen Massey defines space as ‘the simultaneity of stories thus far’. Massey argues that while the discourses of modernity assumed ‘one story, led by the ‘advanced’ countries/peoples/cultures . . . the imposition of a single universal’, processes of globalisation project an equally illusory vision of borderless space that is, in fact, pockmarked with and dependent on expulsions, inequalities and violent exclusions. In contrast, Massey posits an understanding of spatiality as something that emerges from interaction on all levels; that is multiple, essentially open and ongoing; that must be, in other words, malleable.<sup>7</sup>

Bearing this in mind, the material state of the building today may be better represented not by the above diagrams, but by (for example) the below schema, which materialised while thinking through Ex-Embassy in its early phase together with the exhibition’s curatorial advisor, Rachel O’Reilly (AU/DE) – and this would simply be a provisional beginning:

# COLD WAR.



In this way, the exhibition and text series *Ex-Embassy* assumes the form of a non-neutral platform, from which invited artists and writers draw attention to often dissonant narratives of place, territory and social conflicts: trajectories that, in some cases, move beyond or explicitly explode ways of reading the site's parameters. The following offers one possible way to navigate these trajectories:

– Sonja Hornung

Entry to the embassy's garden is frustrated by an intervention staged by artist Archie Moore (Kamilaroi). A space is replaced with a wall, which is then replaced with the illusion of space. Drawing on the legacy of trompe l'oeil (French: 'deceives the eye') painting techniques, *Image* (2018) raises questions around the role fictions of political freedom, universal access and freedom of movement play in the context of persisting social and physical barriers: from racism and other forms of discrimination, to stigma due to illness or socio-economic inequality. While it is possible to glimpse what is ahead, certain spaces are kept physically out of reach: but importantly, such barriers are imposed by others.

Tracing one example of the phenomenon of spatial division as it plays out, cultural studies researcher Ben Gook's (AU/DE) essay, *Privatising East Germany: Re-unification and the Politics of Real Estate*, examines the persistence of the East/West divide in Germany following the largely unacknowledged repercussions of the privatisation of former East German assets, resulting in the emptying-out of the labour market, and echoing, Gook argues, a more general transformation of politics into 'real estate'.

Projecting beyond a present state of play, the collaborative tennis performance *Ex-Pat Cash* (2018) asks: what happens to an elite, imported game when it is globalised and commodified? Berlin itself is infiltrated by so-called 'expats' who play their mostly unwitting role in upscaling land value in that other game: real estate. Focussing on the dilettante body's experience when obliged to 'perform' in an unfamiliar framework. *Ex-Pat Cash* is a collaboration between artist Sumugan Sivanesan (AU/DE), artist - and tennis teacher - Carl Gerber (DE), and artist and musician Simone van Dijken (NL). The performance is accompanied by a run-

ning self-reflexive conversation between the tennis ‘players’ and Simone van Dijken’s electronic guitar riffs, which frame and exceed the dialogue. Ex-Pat Cash thinks through the tennis match as a game with rules that, historically, have changed over time and will change in the future: but on whose terms?

An essay by legal theorist Sarah Keenan, *Space and Subversive Property: Holding Up Relations of (un)-Belonging*, thinks through how property might be understood as something that ‘holds up’ belonging, designating what (or who) is ‘in place’ (or not). Keenan argues that property is malleable: deployed differently, it is capable of becoming subversive to normative systems of inclusion and exclusion, tarrying against racialising property logics.

Embassy architectures speak to the calculus, and endurance, of Western models of immaterial law and sovereignty. Rachel O’Reilly’s (AU/DE) essay, *On Non-Alignable Materialisms*, traces a history of alliances on the frontier that precursor the telling of non-alignable contemporary art histories.

On what basis does ‘recognition’ of a sovereign person occur? Situated in one half of the former embassy’s representative conference room, *The Blaktism* (2014) draws on the artist’s experience of obtaining her ‘Certificate of Aboriginality’. In the video, a Quandamooka woman undertakes a ceremonial anointing in order to have her status recognised in a ‘white phantasy’<sup>8</sup> upheld by ever-present cultural authorities in the Australian landscape. Focusing predominantly on the physical marker of skin, the video draws attention to the settler-colonial state’s fixation with what it calls ‘Aboriginality’, an English word and invented legal criterion that calls into being a conveniently ‘authentic’ and commodifiable body.

Also in the conference room, a second work by Archie Moore (Kamilaroi), *Text* (2018), presents parliamentary records from Australia's inception in 1901 through to the infamous maiden speech of anti-immigration politician Pauline Hanson, emphasising politicians' repeated rhetorical use of the phrase 'swamped by...' ('...Asians'; '...the Aboriginal vote'; '...Communists', etc.). Such rhetoric draws attention to enduring continuities in racist paranoias by no means restricted to the 'fifth continent', but which played a specific role in the Cold War.

The text *Ngurang-dhi - from place*, a collaboration between poet Raelee Lancaster (Wiradjuri) and writer Nathan Sentance (Wiradjuri), outlines the colonial control of space through the deployment of settler architectures, such as the iconic Sydney Opera House, which strategically displaced a shell midden: a living archive of Aboriginal memory knitted into the land.

In the essay *Australia and the GDR: Elective Affinities*, historian Peter Monteath (AU) summarises his archival research on the relationship between Australia and the GDR, including on the little-known British anthropologist Fred Rose, who in Australia became a land-rights activist and joined the Communist Party of Australia. Ousted from his public service position by ASIO, he moved to East Berlin, where he taught at Humboldt University and worked as an unofficial informant to the Stasi.

Drawing on nearly a decade of artistic research, Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll's work *Embassy Embassy* (2009-2018) approaches the former Australian embassy and its architectural 'twin', the Iraqi embassy. Her installation includes a slide film and book project in which images found onsite and in Stasi and Canberra national archival material are performatively projected back onto the closed doors of the embassy's foyer, investigating the relationship between surveillance,

intimacy and control. The installation is the setting for and holds collateral of the performance *The Gift* (2018), a bilingual play on words: 'gift', in German, means 'poison'. In the performance, playing part-diplomat, part-translator, the artist sifts through, embodies and spatialises archival material, including an interview narrating how an unnamed Iraqi dissident is served what may be poisoned tea and dates in the former Iraqi embassy. During the performance visitors, too, are served tea and dates, blurring the line between the roles of guest and hostage as the performance negotiates former and parafictional extraterritorialities.

Returning to the garden, Sonya Schönberger's *Clean Square* (2018) reflects on the forceful re-construction and containment of specific (urban) spaces. The artist removed all weeds and dirt from a designated area. Chosen plants were, however, salvaged and transplanted into ceramic pots made by Beate Bendel, who graduated with Hedwig Bollhagen, the maker of the embassy's protective ceramic screens. During the exhibition opening, the artist named and identified each plant's history and healing properties before it was redistributed through a raffle among the public. *Clean Square* draws attention to the task of caring for inter-generational histories through acts of responsibility, tenacity and care *after* the moment of expulsion, questioning what belongs where, who decides, and why.



- 1 The Socialist Unity Party of Germany was the governing political party of the GDR (German Democratic Republic).
- 2 Led by architect Horst Bauer, who also designed Berlin's iconic Café Moskau.
- 3 Tobias Doll, Elisabeth Eulitz, Karla Schöffner. *Berlin-Pankow: Sozialistische Botschaftsbauten Städtebauliche Dokumentation - Freiraumplanung - Typenbauten*. Masterarbeit im Masterstudium Denkmalpflege der TU Berlin, Wintersemester 2012-13.
- 4 One key architect involved in the urban planning of Marzahn, Wolf-Rüdiger Eisentraut, was in 1996 to renovate the embassy itself when it was transformed, briefly, into a medical laboratory.
- 5 A 1970 'Neues Deutschland' article compared Australia to 'neo-colonialist' South Africa, citing its ambitions towards regional dominance, its racist 'White Australia' policy and 'arch-reactionary' denigration of Aboriginal people. See: Walter Kocher, "Der folgsame Vetter des Uncle Sam", *Neues Deutschland*, 12.7.1970, 6.
- 6 The site was rented from the GDR by Australia, however operations were prematurely closed down in 1986. Held by the public hand for a time, the site subsequently hosted a kindergarten, the Deutsche Industrie- und Handelsbank AG, and the medical laboratory bioscientia Institut f. Laboruntersuchungen Ingelheim GmbH, before being privatised by the BImA (Institute for Federal Real Estate) to investor Lars Dittrich, hosting the media start-up tape.tv, being resold to

real estate developer Prexot GmbH and now: hosting the artist studio complex Atelierhaus Australische Botschaft Ost, who are currently attempting to extract the building from the speculative real estate bubble, looking towards collective ownership formats.

- 7 Doreen Massey, *For Space*, (SAGE Publications, 2005) 70-71.
- 8 Romaine Moreton, 'Authentic Aborigine: White Fantasy' in Fiona Foley, Louise Martin-Chew and Fiona Nicoll (Eds.), *Courting Blakness. Recalibrating Knowledge in the Sandstone University*. (University of Queensland Press, 2005).

Sonja Hornung is a visual artist who grew up and studied in Melbourne, Australia. In 2012, she moved to Berlin to undertake a Masters at the Berlin-Weissensee School of Art (completed 2016). In her artistic practice, which moves between installation, public performances, silkscreen prints and drawing, she often attempts to insert emancipated forms into pre-existing orders. After moving to Berlin in 2012, she spent two years attempting to convince embassies to replace their national flags with a flag with no meaning (*Emptying flags*, with Neue Berliner Räume, 2012-2014). Her work has since been shown in various institutions and project spaces. She was a recipient of the Melbourne National Scholarship (2005-10) and the Mart Stam Studio Scholarship (2016), and has been funded by the Australian Copyright Agency (2015), the European Cultural Foundation (2015), Kunstförderung Steiermark, Austria (2017-18) and the DAAD (2009-10, 2015, 2016). Working in close collaboration with curatorial advisor Rachel O'Reilly, Sonja Hornung is organiser and initiator of *Ex-Embassy*.