

# CREATING A THIRD SPACE

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Kimberly Bradley  
interviewing  
Rebecca Raue

**Kimberly Bradley**

## **What is Ephra's origin story?**

Rebecca Raue

When I was a child, artworks were my friends. I talked to them. They understood me better than people did. It seemed like a playful exchange and thereby deeply nourishing. I remember feeling that I, a child, could actually be in an interaction with the grown-up world, a world that otherwise did not make much sense to me, through art. But it was hard for me to share these encounters with my friends at school. I began to understand that growing up in a household with lots of art was a privilege. I felt it was unfair. I wanted to invite others in. To share.

As a teenager, I learned how to communicate my fascination with my classmates lightheartedly by inventing games and stories. Not long after, the dream of an institution for art and kids began to develop in my mind. Maybe, I thought, I could someday create a venue for exhibitions that would speak to children and adults alike. This would not just be a fun, colourful place (childhood never felt easy for me) but one for asking questions, a place of wonder, awe, and inspiration.

After I finished high school, I went to study art, became an artist myself and lost, or forgot, the vision for a while. But after my second child was born, the dream started to reappear. This time around, looking at life from the perspective of an adult, I realised how much the presence of children is missing in the art world: their questions, their thoughts and ideas, their honesty, joy and straightforwardness. I asked myself how art can have true spiritual meaning if kids are not included. Who else do we exclude by pretending art is only for a certain privileged group of individuals?

Society makes children feel like they lack knowledge, but kids truly have a lot of knowledge. They still have a connection to something that adults have long forgotten.

### **Kids are so often wiser than we are.**

Recently a group of kids came to my studio. We had a workshop about the *Kindertransport* (Children's Transport) during the Third Reich. I made a timeline, and we talked about why we represent time in this way. I asked them what other forms time might take: "What do you think time looks like?" Their answers were clear and immediate: "Time looks like clouds." "I imagine it being a train, and every year is a different car in the train." "It has the form of a tree." If I asked adults the same question, they'd ask me what I meant.

Unfortunately, our society doesn't allow much time for asking these kinds of questions. Or for playing with possible answers. With Ephra we want to change that. We create spaces that feel safe enough to ask relevant questions and maybe even to build new landscapes together.

## How did this approach evolve?

Democracy needs people who believe they matter. From my perspective, art is one of the pillars of democracy. It physically hurts me if people feel they don't belong. Therefore, I want children to experience how deeply their thoughts and ideas, their pains and questions matter. Working with kids is a profound way of building a strong democratic foundation. And, honestly, it's so much fun! Connecting artists and children is literally a dream come true for me. I love seeing what happens.

Over a five-year period, we ran the project *Ephra unterwegs (Ephra on the Road)* with multiple groups of up to twelve children from elementary schools in Berlin. Each group of kids came to us seven times and four of those were visits to artists' studios. They learned how to conduct interviews with the help of a radio journalist and how to take photographs with the help of a photographer. We went to 67 artists' studios in Berlin in total with numerous groups of children. Most of these kids hadn't even been to a museum before, and most of the artists had never had unfamiliar children in their studios.

Each visit was an extraordinary experience for both the children and the artists. In the studio, complete magic happens. It's a creative space, and the children can define, think about, or express things differently because they see that the artist is a grown-up person who does "strange" things compared to other grown-ups they might have encountered. Somehow, the studio visit is about thinking and rethinking life together: who we want to be and why we want to be who we are. It's very fundamental yet still a playful experience.

## Was the *Gedanken spielen Verstecken (Thoughts Play Hide and Seek)* exhibition a continuation of this?

Yes. I always wanted to open the five-year project's juiciness to a broader audience. We'd already done the research, we knew what the kids thought about the artists, so we were able to mount *Thoughts Play Hide and Seek* at very short notice. It had 6,000 visitors over three-and-a-half months.

School groups came every morning. The kids would dive into the artists' work and discover new spots in the emotional landscapes; they would encounter socially relevant topics from poetic and philosophical points of view, and they mostly felt comfortable enough to then share their own ideas.

## What was your curatorial process?

Some artists came on board quickly. I know many of them well, they were the ones I asked first, and it grew from there. Together we chose works that could be accessed and interpreted through different layers. Another criterion was not showing works that might be traumatic to a child. I also wanted some of the art to be

“hands-on” but not all of it. I didn’t want children to leave thinking that all art is something to be climbed on. I also wanted kids to experience how one can look at something and simply be in awe of it.

### **How did the exhibition space function?**

Visitors entered the space, got a pair of slippers, and were shown a “map of emotions” on which parents and children could map where they stood emotionally. Even two- or three-year-olds could understand “the volcano of anger”. Visitors could then choose a piece of wood with a word written on it and leave it somewhere in the exhibition that felt right to them. Afterwards somebody else might take that word and move it to another place. One child took the word “tears” into the show and came back with “love”. Tools like this invited the visitors to inscribe themselves into the exhibition.

We had big cardboard panels in each exhibition space, showing portraits of the artists and their first names, a little story about the prior studio visit and something regarding the work. Mediators in the form of *Reisebegleiter\*innen* (travel companions) – young people between 18 and 25 – were also stationed inside the exhibition to talk to visitors about the artists and their work.

### **Zooming out to the larger art world, where museums can intimidate visitors, do you think there should be more exhibitions like this, in which mediation tools invite people to get much closer to the work?**

I would love for exhibitions and museums to be “third spaces”, where visitors have agency. Museums should be deeply inspiring places of connection, places to simply “be”, places to interact with others. It was beautiful to see people who didn’t know each other become friends by experiencing our exhibition together. In my imagination, kids would come after school and do their schoolwork in Christian Jankowski’s room, for example, or in Ayumi Paul’s room, and be inspired to stay in this energy and atmosphere – to let the art soak into their minds and provide a different take on everyday life. This didn’t really happen though. I believe we do need a new art-institutional model to establish these patterns.

What I feel is missing in our society is public spaces where people can meet – away from a store or a mall. Spaces where people from different backgrounds come together and have a common experience. In the Ephra exhibition we used the words and the map of emotions to spark conversations. I truly believe it’s all about connection. Something meaningful happens in these in-between spaces.

### **What, or who, should art be for?**

I grew up with the idea of the genius male artist, existing on a level that was almost impossible to reach. In museums, the artwork was something to be admired and not interacted with. This idea is so

connected with masculinity. An unhealthy masculinity. It is time to change this! Art should remind us of how we see life, what living means, and how we see ourselves as part of a community.

A girl from *Ephra on the Road* once said to me: “Before Ephra, I thought the world had nothing to do with me. Now I know that the world has a lot to do with me.” For me this realisation is the true basis of democracy. We all need to understand that the world depends on us. We need to know that our response to this world counts, that it is our responsibility! This realisation is what is needed for democracy to blossom. Democracy needs spaces for children (and adults) to learn they are wanted. To learn they matter. To learn they are loved.

We live in extraordinary times. There is so much to discuss. Bringing kids to artists for studio visits opens loving spaces for discussions to take place. The children might get to meet a wonderful person. Someone who doesn't necessarily have an agenda for them but is simply welcoming and – with all their imagination, fantasy, desire, and pain – truly invested in life.

**And the children are brought into a zone of creation, not consumption.**

Yes, and something happens with the kids: they come to a studio and are touched. A child sees an artwork and tells the story about their mother having just lost a child. Something they would have never opened up about in a classroom context. I am convinced that those moments have to do with the artist being present. The children feel it, the touch of sacredness.

In a conversation I recently had with artist Yorgos Sapountzis, he said that an artwork is like a cup. The artist is the provider. Everybody puts their stories inside. Then we drink it. What an image! Children won't forget such encounters. It's very inspiring.

**It's beautiful that these encounters happen on a very intimate level, with some of the art world's biggest players.**

We're taking kids to visit internationally known artists and making space for something to happen. The artists share two hours of their lives with these kids, welcoming them into their studios as if they were important curators. Almost no one said no. I didn't expect that. It's a shift in how art is viewed, a shift in connecting people who would otherwise never meet.

One girl wrote a text about the art she saw in one studio, and the artist told her that her text is pinned on a board in his kitchen now. And she has his catalogues beside her bed. This wouldn't have happened without giving them the space to connect. I believe in art as a powerful tool of transformation. We're living in a time of so much change, war, and conflict, but when I'm sitting with the kids talking to artists, you see this desire to be together: to build something in common.