

Powerful performance

A former coal power plant south of Berlin is going back on the grid as a centre for contemporary art

Since 2012, Performance Electrics, an artistic enterprise founded by German artist Pablo Wendel, has been producing power through art. I'm talking about electrical power: the kind that switches on your lights, lets you boil the kettle and watch your next favourite Netflix TV show. All thanks to making art.

Up until now, the collective has been working at the intersection of sculpture, installation, performance and creative technology to create artworks that facilitate the collection and distribution of electrical power. They call it "Kunststrom" (art electricity), and so far it has ranged from building solar-panel sculptures out of electricity pylon fragments, to guerrilla actions such as performers roaming around public spaces with accumulator backpacks that collect energy from any available plug. They might not be the most straightforward ways to generate energy, but they do work.

The end-users of this energy, which range from museums to private homeowners, believe in the power of art, quite literally. And with this non-profit endeavour investing 100% of its profits back into the production of artworks and electricity, Performance Electrics has created an unusual sustainable model that benefits the communities it chooses to work with in more ways than one.

This September, the organisation will launch its most ambitious project to date, a former coal power-plant station in Luckenwalde, about 80km south of Berlin, which it has converted into a 10,000 sqm centre for the contemporary arts. E-Werk Luckenwalde will supply its own electricity and contribute to the local and national power grid. Running across

four floors, it will have a multiplicity of spaces on offer for both the presentation and the production of contemporary art, including a turbine hall and adjacent gallery spaces, workshops and affordable artists' studios. And all the while, the renovated and sustainable power plant will be producing electricity at an industrial scale – the antithesis of its former life burning brown coal, which is considered especially unfriendly to the environment.

Leading E-Werk's opening artistic schedule are Wendel himself and Helen Turner, who has joined the team from the UK's Cass Sculpture Foundation. "For our first year it was important for us to think about an expanded notion of energy, particularly in relation to autonomy and production," says Turner. "It was also crucial for us to pay attention to our location. This is only the second contemporary art space in Brandenburg, so we wanted to start the conversation with something that feels quite familiar to the community of Luckenwalde and its particular industrial history."

Launching during Berlin Art Week, the programme will feature a flagship commission by artist Lucy Joyce, who, working with former factory workers and other locals connected to the building's past and present, will create a sculptural installation highlighting one of the greatest sources of energy and power: the sun. Using mirrored arrows, the artist and her collaborators will create reflections from the nearby rooftops, all of them pointing to E-Werk. Audiences will be able to look up to witness the action live, or watch a recording of the performance within the gallery. Making direct use of E-Werk's electrical power, artist Nicolas Deshayes will be producing a series of

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Images
Courtesy of
Performance
Electrics



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The inside of
Performance
Electrics' Off
Road installation



cast-iron wall-hung sculptures that function as both artworks and radiators, pumping hot water directly supplied by the plant. There's also a live performance programme, curated by Block Universe, London's annual performance-art festival, featuring artists including Nina Beier, Nora Turato and Fernanda Muñoz-Newsome, among others.

Throughout its first year, E-Werk will also roll out E-Pavilion, a series of three architecture commissions that will provide additional space for educational activities, production facilities and a public programme. "We are treating the pavilion commissions as prototypes, but with the hope they will become long-term or even permanent fixtures to the estate," says Turner. "We wanted to fill the grounds with utopian architecture, and it is important that there is room for experimentation and openness for that to truly happen."

Utopian ideas about electricity generation, explored through art, have been at the heart of Performance Electrics' work from its inception, and although electricity and its accompanying manifold uses will now not always necessarily be produced by the art at this ambitious new complex of buildings, a constant supply of power will be generated in tandem to the creative endeavours. The aim is to make enough to power the entire arts centre itself and up to 100 single-occupancy households in the area.

"Not many people *really* understand what electricity is, or how it works, and I think this lack of accessible knowledge is a tool of control to limit people's ability to choose, to self-determine and to create new models of operating, within a market or otherwise," says Turner. "Following Performance Electrics' mission, at E-Werk we will continue to be an example of the possibility of being off grid."

Above
The Luckenwalde coal plant, set to become an arts centre that will generate energy for the grid

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Top to bottom:
Off Road, an installation of a series of "wind sculptures";
Infobridge, part of a 2014 collective project in Darmstadt

“For our first year it was important for us to think about an expanded notion of energy, particularly in relation to autonomy and production”



Facing page
Top to bottom: Nina Beier, who is performing as part of E-Werk's events programme; Varta Bande, a project in which performers roam around charging their backpacks

Above
The power plant's entrance – with electricity-themed stained glass