

But advisable it is, to confront the mythical powers with trickery and recklessness. —Walter Benjamin

BARRICADE DAYS

The St. Pauli neighborhood of Hamburg is the poorest in Western Germany, though Hamburg, paradoxically, is the second richest city in the European Union. St. Pauli stretches to the Elbe River and is densely built. Public space is rare and what little exists is heavily occupied by tourism, cappuccino addicts, and the red light district. More than 50 percent of the residents have no German passport. So the situation is tense.

Winter '87 began a decisive year for Hamburg and in my life. That winter is now known in local history as the “barricade days” for the assault on the heroic squat on Hafenstrasse in the St. Pauli neighborhood. Barricades erected around the squat to prevent the police from entering the territory surrounded half of this neighborhood. St. Pauli was unified against the government. The Hafenstrasse struggle was breaking news, and fears of a riot if the police rushed to clear the area and demolish the houses were not exaggerated. During the struggle a service was established to guide school kids through the barricades. The best bands in town played nightly on an improvised stage in front of the squatted homes with the help of electricity stolen or supplied by neighbors. In every advertising agency a poster with “Hafenstrasse viel gut!” (Neanderthal-type German for “Harbor Street much good!”) was the cool thing to have. The senseless police brutality was too obvious to ignore and moved even some conservative citizens to side with the rebels. I was a person on the fringe supporting, as many did, the clever tactics of the squatters, but far away from the frontline.

After fourteen days the government abandoned their eviction attempt. Eventually the Hafenstrasse squat was legalized. A temporary autonomous zone came into existence before we knew to call it such. A piece of land had been shot out of the map of state control. The struggle inspired Hamburg’s left to ini-

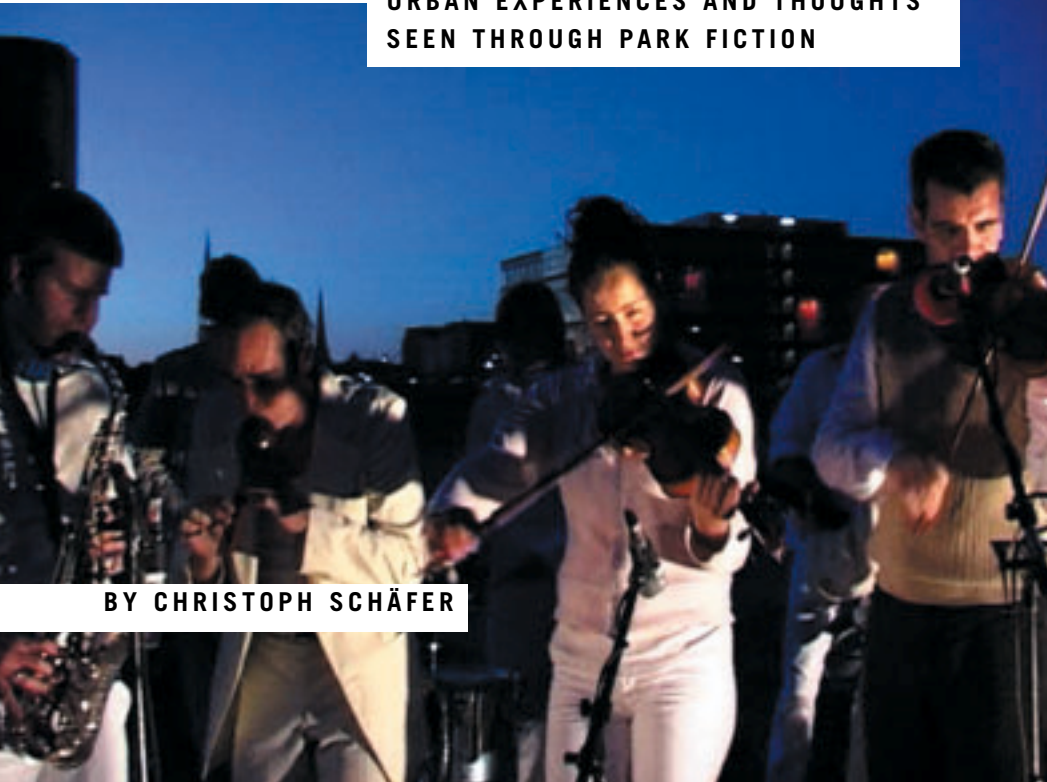
far left top:
Palm Tree Island

far left bottom:
Schwabinggrad Ballett performing during Unlikely Encounters in Urban Space congress



The City is Unwritten

URBAN EXPERIENCES AND THOUGHTS
SEEN THROUGH PARK FICTION



BY CHRISTOPH SCHÄFER

tiate projects like Hamburg's free radio station, FSK, still playing hard today. This success left behind a network and a sense of what was possible in the St. Pauli community. The barricade days also marked a turning point. They were the last large-scale confrontational militant action in Hamburg for years to come. The barricade days, in their scale and their shocking consequences were not repeatable. Afterwards, the city government was determined not to let anything like it happen ever again. The government refined their negotiating skills, their repressive instruments were adapted, and they developed more powerful but soft-looking tools of surveillance.

ACID HOUSE

Also in '87, a new method of operating and moving appeared, a change in paradigm that is still unfolding. For me, it started with music from Chicago and Detroit. Acid house music, more than probably any music style before it, is more about mixing—playing pre-recorded tracks—than about live music produced by a live band. While punk rockers questioned the band-audience relation by storming the stage, house was about people dancing, and not about being “the audience” in the first place. Consumers became participants irreversibly. What also started with acid was the conscious idea and ability to create situations. “Raves,” the temporary and unauthorized use of empty buildings, became a mass activity.

The disco became a place to celebrate the city by intensifying and transforming that which gets on one's nerves in the daytime. If a city is noisy, polluted, and crowded, a good disco is a joyful place because it is louder, stinking of smoke, perfume and sweat, and too full. Maybe it was the use of psychedelics that gave us the sudden ability to trust one another and see oneself as part of a collective with the power to construct situations, but suddenly, everyday urban life was the most exciting starting point. An adventurous spirit drove us into the strangest of places to produce encounters and surprising events in the most unlikely spaces.

The city was full of possibilities. An aquarium in a Thai restaurant was definitely not a sign of petite bourgeois squareness, as New Left theory would have it, but a miniature garden or a

promise of happiness, a window into imaginary worlds. At the local carnival we no longer saw the automatic photo machines that take your picture during your ride as a sad commercial sign of alienation, but as a sick yet reflexive tool.

This changed point of view, and a newfound ability to redefine spaces, was definitely one of the starting points of Park Fiction. A rave called “Park Fiction in St. Pauli—beatbombs on Berlin” half-ironically renamed all of the little pieces of land left at the harbor wall that would become part of Park Fiction according to their everyday use. The space between the squatted houses roamed by a gang of rotten punk-dogs was renamed “Hafentreppenhunderpark” (Harbor Staircase Dog Park). A slope usually occupied by heavy drinkers was renamed “Bierdosenpark” (Beer Can Park). These “parks” were transformed into different “areas” for that rave, and the name of the Park Fiction project was born.

PRIVATIZED VIEW—SOCIALIZED SHADOW

Hamburg is now marketing itself as the New Media Harbor City. For this reason the dominant ideology in current Hamburg city politics is image-policy meant to cultivate this identity. Park Fiction began in 1995 at the same time as the harbor wall along the Elbe River was being sold off to new media companies. The city government planned to obstruct St. Pauli's last view of the river with a block of heavy buildings along the harbor wall. The neighborhood did not want these buildings. We wanted a public park instead. But authorities always ignore desires like this. Because the Elbe shoreline—the harbor wall—is a place where power particularly likes to represent itself, our desires were even more hopeless. Things that might be tolerated in other places as interesting alternative flavors are automatically confronting power and the dominant ideology in this location. For both sides every step taken on this undeveloped green space is symbolic.

Demands for the park rather than the harbor wall development were carried out by a network left over from the Hafenstrasse struggles, especially social workers from the local community center, GWA (Community Center of St. Pauli-South), priests, and the visionary headmistress of a local school.

They managed to arrange negotiations with the local politicians. Lingered behind these negotiations was the threat that a militant struggle might light up again. The city needed to avoid this. However, the classic forms of lobbying were about to lead to a dead end. A year after I joined the negotiating group we developed a new set of practices and concepts informed by re-readings of classic Situationist texts and the writings of Henri



Billboard showing community-led design for the park

Lefebvre, as well as reflections on democratic art projects from the seventies, conceptual art, unsatisfactory public art, and acid-related experiences. This mix precipitated the transfer from “demanding a park” to “Park Fiction.” In 1994, the Zapatistas proclaimed, “We decided to stop preaching to people and started to listen.” This sentence marked a dramatic rupture in revolutionary thinking and practice, and was a critical model for how we would proceed.

At this point, Park Fiction consisted of myself, Cathy Skenea, and a local network of St Pauli neighbors, social institutions, the nearby church, squatters, artists, shop and café owners, together with the intense Hamburg music scene based around the Golden Pudel Klub (Golden Poodles Club), a club located in a tiny old house right in our park, which the government would have liked to demolish too. The Golden Pudel

was founded by Schorsch Kamerun and Rocko Schamoni, musicians from a scene around Die Goldenen Zitronen (The Golden Lemon) a band that began in the eighties as fun punks, played during the Hafenstrasse riots, turned down offers by major labels, and developed a place for poetry, artists, and experimental bands. The impact of Park Fiction’s connection with the Golden Pudel cannot be overestimated. The club opened a field of resonance with musical subcultures, which often feature higher style awareness and playful relationships with social codes so often missing in political groups and their reliance on objective analysis of conditions. Of course, bands also attract a lot of people.

PRODUCTION OF DESIRES

We had to find different ways to operate if we wanted to engage public space as a field of dispute. Political groups on the left, as well as the rulers on the right, usually underestimate art; none of them take it seriously. As sad as this is at times, it can also be beneficial to those making art because many of your actions will escape suspicion. With this in mind, Park Fiction started collectively producing desires: lectures and park-related exhibitions in the local church, shop windows, in schools and so on. We worked to open a little “parallel knowledge universe.”

On the streets and the slope of land for which we were fighting we staged *Activities Anticipating the Park*. We had an open-air cinema, agit-prop slide shows, and raves. Shortly after Park Fiction’s actions began, Cathy Skenea and I were invited by the state cultural board, who were unaware of Park Fiction at that time, to develop a plan for a public artwork. We did not want to plop down a sculpture, instead we suggested developing Park Fiction. A park by the harbor wall was already a real thing on many levels—in the community’s mind, in the hip and trendy music scene, and on the national art scene. So we approached the state with demands.

Park Fiction’s initial idea was to organize a parallel planning process and a collective production of desires for the park without being commissioned to do so by authorities. We developed a process that was open and approachable by anyone who

wished to take part in planning for a real place connecting arts and social movements without falling into the trap of taking the “legal” bureaucratic path. This planning process was supplemented by a program we called *Infotainment*, which included lectures on parks and politics, parks and their ideological backgrounds, and what filmmaker Margit Czenki called “art and politics making each other more clever.”

When the politicians finally entered the scene they found themselves in a complex field where they had difficulty moving. For a short moment in time we made the rules of the game. We had a lively idea of what we were doing and firm ground under our feet. They were in the “stupid” position, looking like what they are, boring people who just block things, which they did. The cultural board agreed to finance Park Fiction in early ‘96, but the senator for urban development cancelled our funding later that same year when he heard about our project. So that winter we made the decision to take more militant action to pressure the authorities. Things, however, developed differently.

HARBOR HOSPITAL

The city decided to demolish the very popular Harbor Hospital in St. Pauli. The hospital is only half a mile away from the park. After clearing the first wing of the hospital, to the government’s surprise, the empty building was squatted by activists. The squatters were strongly supported by the neighborhood. Weekly demonstrations took place, and for the first time ever

The Park Fiction archive
at Documenta 11, Kassel
Germany, 2002



there was a strike in the red light district. 1997 was an election year making the government ready to negotiate on the hospital and any other problems in St. Pauli to calm the movement. A round table dealing with the park was installed; those of us from the neighborhood were on one side, the authorities on the other.

Round tables are dangerous things; their name suggests an equal balance of power while the shape conceals the unequal status of the participants. Speaking with bureaucrats means half-accepting their—the dominant—way of thinking and negotiating. In this case it was unavoidable, but we managed to agree that Park Fiction would occupy the space along the harbor wall, and Park Fiction would organize the planning process. As a sign of trust, we demanded that the budget for the project, blocked by the senator for urban development, be transferred to our bank account before the elections. This happened and we began.

DEVICES

We organized a project, *The Planning Process Like a Game*, giving out game-boards instead of leaflets that described the access points where one could become involved in our process. We opened a planning container that held the *Modeling Clay Office*, a telephone hotline for people who were inspired late at night, a garden library, and a project called the *Archive of Desires*. There was also the *Action Kit*—a mobile planning office with questionnaires, maps, dough, dictaphone, foldout harbor panorama, and instamatic camera to capture ideas.

We employed pseudo-sociological instruments, quoting and recycling tactics from a deeply social-democratic era in the late '60s and early '70s, while referring to the betrayed promises of the past. The difference between our methods and that of most social workers is in our work concept—integrating artists, designers, programmers, researchers, and shop owners, in a non-hierarchical rhizomatic open process. We believed that our planning process had to allow artistic practice the potential for autonomy, resistance, and unwieldiness. Collaborating with others should not mean reducing yourself to a social worker. Nor should it mean reducing your artistic work to the administration of the creativity of others.

We were not objective. We took sides from the beginning. Using our skills we played with the forms that power, corporate culture, and mainstream media use to denigrate small projects relative to their existing wealth. For example, we fashioned a planning container painted the same colors as the Info Box used at the Potsdamer Platz construction site in Berlin, the biggest corporate building site ever in Germany. As a tonic for the exclu-



The planning container

sion of the citizens and the parliament from the planning process, the developers of the Potsdamer Platz constructed the Info Box. The box was filled with three-dimensional animations of the architecture, sculpted heads of the architects, and all kinds of “participatory” games like a chessboard that featured chess figures shaped in the style of the buildings. Our planning container, by contrast, was filled with materials exploring what a city could be, and offered many possibilities for the visitor to directly influence our planning process.

In 1998, we determined the riverfront park’s focus in two community conferences. The park would consist of “islands” with different functions, designed by different people. Together as a group we chose only the general functions of the park and picked favorite designs. We did not want the ideas to become

neutralized by consensus, so after the initial decision the individual or group behind each design was allowed to complete their designs according to their own vision. Through this approach, Park Fiction claimed a public space for the non-commercial production of the neighborhood’s desires.

WHO OWNS THE CITY

In 2001, an investor bought the Kasematten, a building underneath a part of the Park Fiction area. The investor immediately made himself known in the community by chopping down trees in front of the houses along the Hafenstrasse. A month later sections of the park and the Kasematten were suddenly surrounded by fences guarded by security men. Shortly thereafter, a glass-aluminum construction was erected in front of the Kasematten for a special event, called Media Night, paid for by the government to accompany the national New Media Congress “Hamburger Dialog.”

At this time very few members were active with Park Fiction. The headmistress had left the school and the priests were busy with other concerns. Those of us left protested the use of Park Fiction territory by the investor and scrutinized the situation in a flyer called *That’s Gentrification*.

Because of our publication support came from sides we did not expect. First from electro-musicians associated with the Pudel Klub who understood the investor’s presence as a threat to the last remaining free and cheap spaces left in Hamburg, and who were especially angry at the DJ’s who agreed to spin at Media Night. Support also came from Rote Flora, a squatted autonomous cultural center in the north of St. Pauli, whose building was sold by the city to the same investor. And, late but crucial support came from former squatters in Hafenstrasse.

After our flyer, someone created a witty counterfeit letter that really kicked things off. In it, the City Development Company (STEG) invited everybody in the neighborhood for a glass of champagne and a chance to mingle with new media people during Media Night. Of course STEG publicly denied having written that invitation, and this denial appeared in all the newspapers.

Then, a day before the Media Night, Schorsch and Rocko from the Pudel Klub declared themselves “official supporters” of the event, dressed as investors in white construction helmets, and shot a fast video about the numerous corporate buildings rising along the river, dropping all the catchphrases of neo-liberal newspeak: win-win-situation, subcultural ambience, private-public partnership, etcetera. Our group planned an information stand and an open-air screening of Margit Czenki’s movie *Park Fiction—desire will leave home and take to the streets*.

By the afternoon of the event hundreds of police had blocked the entire area around the Kasematten. Residents were barred from their houses. People who started to protest were beaten. Protesters threw money at the politicians and investors, shocking the new media people arriving at the party. Schorsch and Rocko’s video was shown on a giant screen outside Pudel Club, with the Park Fiction film screened on the other side, projected over the heads of the police lines from a neighboring house.

After the events many of the participants formed a short-lived but effective group called *wemgehoertdiestadt (whoownsthecity)* that organized a well-received press conference analyzing the protest and the function of subcultures in rundown areas before they are gentrified. Later *wemgehoertdiestadt* organized an event for re-appropriation of the Kasematten. The bad press caused the investor to never hold another event in this location. But still, in spring 2004, the Park Fiction area of the Kasematten is fenced in.

FLYING CARPET

After nine years of activity, the park is finally being realized. Two components officially opened in September 2003: the *Palm Tree Island or Tea Garden*, and the *Flying Carpet*. Summer 2003 was the hottest in history and people used the park heavily in a variety of nice unplanned manners. For instance, whenever the sun was shining at five in the afternoon, some fifteen to thirty three-year-olds entered the park to play on the flying carpet. This was an age group we did not consider at all because you would not have seen them in the public spaces of St. Pauli before the park existed.

Nine years is, however, too long for such a small project. During the long process and the close negotiations with author-

ities in the realization phase, key parts of the project have been damaged, forgotten, or corrupted. Some significant parts of the design may not be realized at all. For example, the *Pirate Fountain*, featuring translucent images of Anne Bonny and Mary Read, two cruel eighteenth-century Caribbean pirate leaders that would glow blood red and poison green at night, is not financed, and one of the most popular designs, the *Strawberry-shaped Treehouse*, has fallen from the plan completely.

For us, it is not certain at this time if we can continue cooperating with the authorities. We can do so only if central elements are built, and if our vision for a link between the urban everyday and the imaginary is visible in the design of the park. If, instead the integrity of the project is corrupted and designs are boiled down to the uninspired urban planning you see on every corner, we will cancel our cooperation with a bang.

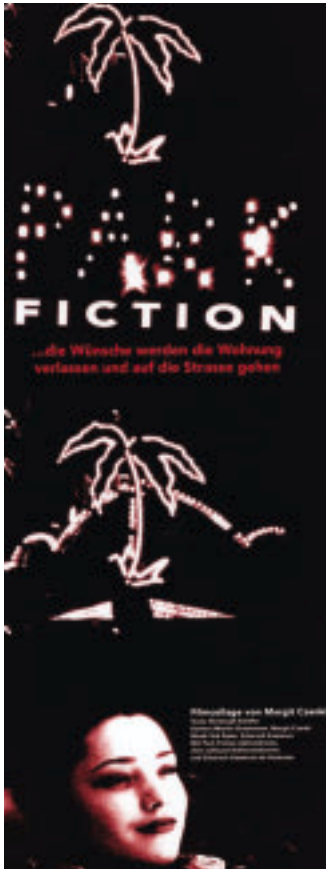
The Flying Carpet, Elbe River, and the Hamburg harbor
Photo, Brett Bloom



UNLIKELY ENCOUNTERS

Independent from these actions we found it necessary to expand our horizons. As a first step, we organized an international congress in 2003, “Park Fiction presents: Unlikely Encounters in Urban Space,” as the basis for a possible Institute for Independent Urbanism. We invited groups who, like Park Fiction, attempt to redefine artistic practice under post-industrial conditions. Groups like Sarai Media Lab from Delhi, India; Borderhack

and Maclovio Rojas from Tijuana, Mexico; Ala Plastica from La Plata, Argentina; Cantieri Isola from Milan, Italy; and Ligna and Schwabinggrad Ballett, both also based in Hamburg. The congress events were held at locations throughout St. Pauli, including a disco on Hafenstrasse, the church, the Buttclub, the Harbor City, and on a boat on the river. In conjunction with the congress Park



Poster for Margit Czenki's film *Park Fiction*—*desire will leave home and take to the streets*

Fiction exhibited a version of the Park Fiction archive, an installation we originally created for Documenta 11 (an international exhibition of contemporary art that occurs every five years in Kassel, Germany). The archive, which features a wide historical collection of posters, drawings, photographs and all form of ephemera, was presented between translucent sails on the Reeperbahn, a famous street in St. Pauli. We also organized guides from the community who offered tours through the exhibition and the park.

With the proposed Institute for Independent Urbanism we will push urban discourse forward. For urbanity, as a discourse, is its own line of thinking and cannot be reduced to “urban planning.” We see the urban not as a unified artistic vision, but as a set of practices opposed to the state and not identical with the democratic. The urban is an accumulation of differences where the unexpected can linger. Simply put, a city worth living in is a place of contradictions living with each other, piled up and potentially growing exponentially.

The Institute for Independent Urbanism will build on some of the lessons learned with Park Fiction. We will develop tools, attitudes, courage, practices, and programs that ignore cultural and class borders to make unlikely encounters, meetings, and connections plentiful. The institute will explore constituent practices that avoid addressing the state directly, in favor of street-level investigations for connecting arts and social movements, engaging in alternative forms of science, squatting land, and otherwise challenging dominant systems of urban planning.

MEGACITIES

We were often told that Park Fiction was only possible, only “real,” because everybody in the group lived in that specific community, and that the project is not reproducible. But the real reason it is not reproducible is because local situations change too fast, and different groups must develop their own devices and rhythms. I do not believe, however, that in order to work with a place you must be local. Cities are built by the imaginings of the outsiders, the migrants, and the travelers who conceptualize what a particular place could be.

When I visit Mexico City, I see a city where the vast majority of houses were constructed without architects and urban planners. The same is true with Delhi, Jakarta, Calcutta, Dhaka, and Buenos Aires. In contrast to these informal cities, Northern European cities look like three-dimensional realizations of ideologies. Park Fiction has challenged this reduced view of the urban. We have worked so that “public space” can produce desires, relate the city to the imaginary, and be rooted in the urban everyday.

Today, it doesn't seem farfetched to believe that the financial crisis of Argentina could happen in the major centers of global capital sooner or later. From this view, small art projects, informal encounters in a park, or innocent acidic experiences like mine constitute letters sent from the about-to-vanish-past to a very near future where we will have to reinvent cities and our everyday lives on a much bigger scale. In Hamburg-St. Pauli, our aim was to stop the city government from blocking our last existing public view of the harbor. At first glance this project might look exactly like the opposite of struggles around informal settlements in the cities of the Global South where neighborhoods are often demolished by the government to be replaced with public parks. But to us the informal settlements, like our park, are the blueprint for possible cities of the future. Cities that ignore the architectural trade. Cities that are a product of the people who inhabit them, not the business of specialist urban planners. Cities that exist as a deep and genuine rupture.