

**mousse 30**

## **Starship**

**By Gigiotto del Vecchio**

*Starship is a paper spacecraft. A Berlin-based magazine with Ariane Müller, Martin Ebner and Hans-Christian Dany at its helm. It began as a way to accelerate thinking about art in Berlin, to prevent the scene from foundering on the craters of career-money-coke. Gigiotto Del Vecchio met the crew for a conversation that retraces the recent past of the Berlin art scene and the versatile activities of this publishing collective.*

### **gigiotto del vecchio**

*When did you decide to move here and what was your approach, in terms of life and work, to the city?*

**a**

I would like to use a method. I would like to use layers. Like everyone is always adding a layer. And we see where they end up in densities or fields. So here would be my first:

My first impression of Berlin, when they took me to my residency in Kunstwerke, was climbing up these stairs, up to the last floor where they opened a door into a totally dark attic. There was a mattress in the corner – this was it. I thought it would be light and sunny up there, but instead it was just dark and dusty. While I was there a TV company discovered my space as the ideal place to shoot Crime and Punishment and they chose it for the place where Raskolnikov goes mad, and it was apt. It was a funny setting, empty and wide, but with strange shadows. This was when they had no telephones in Berlin Mitte. There were not enough lines and mobiles did not yet exist, so you would end up being cut off from the city. Klaus Biesenbach would drop in now and then, always with either a Belgian collector or a curator from MoMA, or someone else looking for genuine, newly discovered Berlin artists, which was fun in the beginning. After a month I had learned the Berlin directives: never engage with the market! And I kept the door shut.

Those were my first steps into Berlin.

**b**

It is interesting for me that your memories of the mid-1990s in Berlin start with a rather dark image. Being aware of the permanent presence of this obvious and at the same time hidden sense of terror was an emotional basis of being in Berlin at that time for me. It seemed not too hard to understand – but at the same time, as an Austrian young person having freshly arrived, I was not fully prepared for it. Language was a key. For example, when a Berliner said to me “Hau rein!” [Dig in!] I was confused. I also rejected for a long time the common saying “Alles klar” [all clear], because I believed I had learned from Franz Jung’s *Der Weg Nach Unten* that this, through long periods, had to be said by Berlin residents to avoid any possible conflict with the policemen in the street. Nothing is clear, I thought. Anyway, at the time we had a lot of discussions with mostly German artists – about politics, power and art. As an Austrian, you seemed to be speaking a different language: the sentences were not so short, the punchline was often rather hidden, which ended in a situation of more or less polite non-understanding.

**a**

You came on a very rainy day, when the people who turned into An-Architektur had started to deconstruct the building next to Palast der Republik, the GDR foreign office – now nobody knows it ever existed, anyway. The Berlin Senate, then a bunch of wild-west capitalists – I remember a senator was shot down by the real estate mafia, the bank scandal was still to come – had decided to tear it down for the reconstruction of the city palace, but it was all kept quiet. So these people, mostly architecture and art students, stepped in and started to tear it down in advance. This was one of the starting points of this involvement with the shape of the city, the planning decisions, and everything that culminated in the Inner City Action Days.

But on a sunny day I was sitting at Oranienburger Strasse’s only coffee place, at the time – Obst und Gemüse – which no longer exists – and Klaus Weber and Katja Reichard passed by and we decided that it might be possible to join Klaus Biesenbach’s Venice Biennial idea, Club Berlin, in which everyone – it seemed, but I didn’t know everyone then – had at first refused to participate. In the end most of the artists who were then in Berlin decided to be part in this first big “Berlin” representation thing – some decided to leave the train again in Spandau, at the last minute, though – and we arrived at the theatre in Venice, where this sort of tribunal was

going on.

Dan Graham, who had arrived earlier, murmured that the setting looked fascist, and it was clear to see that it was about to be turned into a sort of Triumph of the Will light dome, and this made us drop the idea of being part of this “Berlin as the club to be”. But at this tribunal, artists against artists, there was still some shouting and even a bit of fighting about whether this could still be changed, though evidently it couldn’t. We decided to start a new marketing campaign for it – which was where Jazz Club Berlin emerged. Ha ha, we were fighting for the dignity of art against outright entertainment – we were so young. Jazz Club Berlin turned out to be a good name, and we kept it for the space we had for the next few years.

**gdv**

*What about the situation before the birth of Starship?*

**a**

Back at KW Jutta Koether had moved in, and wanted to shoot Blue Movie again, but left before doing it. She also left some of us starting this art group, with the name of the fictional artist “Ulla Bender”. There were Lukas Duwenhögger, Marion von Osten, Gunter Reski, Judith Hopf, Alexander Schröder, Mercedes Bunz, Sabeth Buchmann, Nicolas Siepen, Katharina Wulff, and we did the living furniture, ending up as a huge bed; and the theatre piece for Park Fiction, where we would play the Castaneda piece and the Serra piece and the Buren piece, dug into the to-be-park soil, up to our knees. Park Fiction went to Documenta – later – and we started the magazine.

**b**

In this situation that still felt fresh and new of Berlin art-related tabula rasa, everyone participated with high energy, in the end, to construct new power structures. Maybe this was structurally unavoidable. There were enough people who at least had no doubts about the personal potential of the market, establishing again a rigid functional grid of codes to determine who was part of the family and who was not. Naturally the family was meant to be kept small enough to keep it effective with respect to the growing Berlin economy of attention that was the base for developing an individual career and to make a living in the future. I would also like to add that to me this city, at the time, had the quality of being a phantasmagoric place. The sound of techno was in the air, it was not music, it was friendly energy in the daytime and unknown pleasures in the night. A graffito on Auguststrasse said “Die Menschen arbeiten, die Maschinen singen” [People are working, machines are singing]. It was cold in winter, and there was no central heating.

In the cultural field of the time, wiping out the history of everything that was not compatible with the idea of a juvenile, western-oriented, international but at core German metropolitan new Berlin identity was the main strategy. It worked super-efficiently; in the so-called cafes and bars you would very soon only meet people of the same race, class, gender and age. In the background, you could still feel a little bit the shrinking presence of the poor original East Berliners, but they were soon to be socially erased, as not so compatible.

**gdv**

*When did you decide to start Starship, what was the context in which the project was born?*

**a**

We had all done magazines before: the one in Vienna I did with Linda Bilda called ARTFAN, Hans-Christian and Gunter had been doing DANK in Hamburg, and Hans-Christian did NEID then, together with Ina Wuttke and Martin 0:0, which was more a one-time artwork than a magazine, with You Never Know; and there was no art magazine in Berlin, so we felt it was necessary, and we thought highly of each other. I had always thought Hans Christian and Gunter were just the best German art writers, even before; painful sometimes, but very unique and good. Perhaps it was because both of them are artists, which made their writing so special.

**c**

The idea to develop the magazine Starship didn’t come up in Berlin. We met in Hamburg in the summer of 1998 (or 1997?, I don’t remember the date so well, but I remember the street – Sternstrasse). We had the feeling that something was missing. The magazines we had done before seemed like something from the past. All of us had had experiences with institutional and commercial magazines, and the framework they offered had clear limits. I remember our first talks about what would later become Starship mainly as a discussion about spaces in which other forms of writing, art and related practices would be possible. The name we found for this framework came from the idea of the architecture of a starship – in the beginning we also had the idea of taking this as the basic model of the layout, but, well, the results looked a bit constructed. Berlin still had something, but it was also clear that the years to come would be dominated by consolidation.

Starship was an attempt to avoid a slowdown of thinking, that had been heavily stimulated and accelerated in

Berlin the years before, and now turned to the usual business of careers, cocaine and accumulating money. This definitely didn't promise enough. We were not interested in an opposition to the nascent boom of marketing of individual artists, and we also featured many of the people that some years later became successful, but we only found these activities exciting if we looked at them in a wider understanding of art and culture. The people forcing the boom of Berlin as an art metropolis tried to introduce artists without language and history. This lack of construction had been our main target from the start, or more precisely, we tried to invent the text and the historical map.

We started to produce *Starship* in a quiet garden in Western Berlin, far away from where things were happening. Later we moved to Mitte, into the former rooms of Galerie Neu. That seemed to be in the center, but the main action was the car crashes that happened at all times of day and night in front of our window. It was also really tough to get food that was not disgusting at the time. Later our office moved to Bootlab, a place where politicized computer nerds worked. There were many exciting people, but also the smell of too much testosterone. So we moved to Kreuzberg. Parallel to this change, the year started where we felt like we were nowhere. The internationalization of Berlin was fantastic, the German language left only for the editorial texts was enough, but Berlin had turned into a tourist place and we also had turned into tourists, for many reasons. Mainly because of economic reasons, because there still was no money, or money you could earn under acceptable circumstances.

**gdv**

*Do you feel representative of a possible scene?*

**b**

In retrospect there is a feeling that people always had disrespected each other, and this went in parallel with the overall establishment of a new time management in society, visible for example in the use of mobile phones and personal computers. People just did not have to make reliable appointments anymore, and with the personalized Macbook it was a waste of time to think about sharing production facilities any further.

**a**

The "Darkening" issue of *Starship* for me was clearly related to an art that was then emerging. The main question was whether a more defined explicitness in the choice of a pictorial language was needed in art, given that enough people would be out there to readily read every ambiguity as affirmative, even in obviously cynical works, and they would and did, in the end, turn the ambiguity into a threat that was connected to a vague gesture that seemed to say "we can annihilate: art, people, thoughts, beauty, whatever".

And the chosen ambiguous style, or as you call it smoke and mirrors, sometimes even annihilated itself in advance – out of, it's hard to say, perhaps giving themselves an air of worldliness, or as a reaction to restrictions, maybe even the smoking ban or anti-terrorism measures, that at the same time did away with the glamour of being political correct. It was also triggered by the very prominent notion of rich people being bored by poor people, so nothing should look poor anymore.

At the last revolutionary 1st of May demo it was good to see that there are some people who would still go there. I was first saying I want to be in this block where Foucault and Guattari are, then it turned out they were there, transferred to our Berlin reality, there were also women, and I thought that was good to see. This was during gallery weekend – they always shift gallery weekend to first of May?!

**gdv**

*How has Berlin changed since you moved here?*

**c**

I left Berlin some years ago, because of private reasons and a preference of the air in harbor cities. When I return now I am always overwhelmed by all the activities. But doubts soon arise, mostly about a strange ignorance of political questions. To close the gap between quite advanced forms of aesthetic or social behavior and a lack of radical political work might be an interesting challenge, also for *Starship*, over the next years.

**a**

Hamburg and Berlin seem to be more distant than ten years ago. This very constant networking between Vienna and Berlin and Hamburg and Cologne and Düsseldorf, and maybe even Stuttgart and Zurich, at the time when we started, doesn't exist anymore. This non-locality of discourse is somehow lacking, and it cannot be replaced by a traveling exhibition set that has brought us to many places and which was good in itself. In Foucault's biography, the author talks about these people sitting in the Paris ministries who seemingly were wondering about whether their subject, Foucault, had an income. Let's give him the Institut Français in Tunis! Berlin is just the opposite. There are so many people here who have to work somewhere else. The best, I'd say, teach in

Vienna or Stuttgart, while they live in Berlin. The formal Berlin constantly shows it doesn't need anyone, that we are not invited, which is somehow a strange policy.

**b**

So what we are working on at the moment is the "adventures of all kinds" issue, but I think we have to go through some more adventures beforehand, or raise more money, even when at the moment we have some money because the Kippenberger Interview book you did, while still doing Artfan, is selling. There is also this crime novel: *Stirbt er, der Mensch als Künstler?* [Does man die as an artist?], which we had written as a serial in *Starship* between 1998 and 2000, and still needs to be finished. Hans-Christian is writing a new book and you are writing this Africa book, and meanwhile we are exhibiting or organising exhibitions and Hans-Christian is an emerging DJ.

**a**

The exhibition and book *Poor Man's Expression* you did together with Florian Zeyfang opened up a whole new field of cooperation, also including real old Berlin institutions like the Arsenal, Institute for Film and Video Art, and in the field of ideas the whole avant-garde film movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which I think is a path that has not been followed enough over the last decades. As artists it is not very rewarding to hand out the opportunity to be derogatively called journalists, but as a person I wouldn't want to miss out on the option of keeping fields more open. The food situation is now stable but quite irrational.

\*Starship is Ariane Müller (a), Martin Ebner (b) and Hans-Christian Dany (c)

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