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ON BUILDING LOOPOLES OR MIGRANTPOLITAN AS A STATE OF MIND

This text provides an insight into the process of „MIGRANTPOLITAN“ and why we are all forced to become tricksters these days. The MIGRANTPOLITAN is a small wooden building in the backyard of Kampnagel – International Center for the Finer Arts in Hamburg – Europe’s largest production center for contemporary performing arts located in a former crane factory building.

Against the backdrop of demographic shifts, the million refugees en route to Europe and the divide within the host societies, we as an art institution see ourselves faced with a particular responsibility. The current political situation demands that this issue become central, that new measures are planned and platforms for participation and communication are created. Opening up the theatre means creating space for new art forms, for burning issues and critical stakeholders from a variety of disciplines. At the Kampnagel theatre, we are continually attempting to create spaces in which diverse communities and cultures come together, in which sociopolitical concerns are debated and collaborative means of living together are rehearsed. Through the integration of refugees into our operations and programming we attempt to create equitable forms of exchange and to provide ongoing support to independent artistic and cultural production by refugees.

To start our narration I have to go back in history, back to the year 2014: In 2014 Kampnagel’s International Summer Festival invited Hamburg interventionist architect group „Baltic Raw“, consisting of Móka Farkas, Christoph Janiesch and Berndt Jasper, to build a small copy of ROTE FLORA in the backyard of Kampnagel.
With this project, Baltic Raw, whose pieces have been shown at venues including the Expo Shanghai and the Hamburger Kunsthalle, took up a critical urban discourse. This creation reflected on the city’s relationship with its buildings, artists and residents. The building was ready for the 25th anniversary of the occupied Rote Flora building in Schanzenstraße, which still is the heart of the discussion regarding the most recent Hamburg property speculation, artistic resistance and police intervention.

The Lampedusa group, a self-organised group of around 400 refugees and migrants from different African nations, was rejected the right to stay by the local city government. The officials refused any kind of support or shelter. Mayor of the city of Hamburg (one of the richest cities in Germany) at that time was Olaf Scholz, SPD, who is the current treasury secretary of Germany.

The pressure to offer accommodation for thousands of people became stronger and stronger. So solutions were needed badly.

Kampnagel was asked to use parts of its venue to transform into temporary emergency shelter for „accepted“ refugees. We discussed a lot these days. Finally we refused. What would have been the difference between using an abandon supermarket or our former factory halls? We didn’t wanted to offer easy solutions and also we didn’t believe in the concept of mass accommodation.

We started to think of small solutions for big problems.

So instead of dismantle the building after the festival, we made it suitable for winter and usable for parts of Lampedusa group as an artistic and social place, a loophole and temporary shelter. In close cooperation with the refugees and future residents, the building was converted into a home. The former copy of „ROTE FLORA“ turned into ECOFAVELA LAMPEUSA NORD – consisting of 6 multifunctional single-rooms, 1 collective living room, kitchen, shower and eco-toilet. Six members from Lampedusa group moved in this project. But even though the „freedom of the arts“ is a serious thing in Germany, we also have very strict rules to follow – just think of building permits or misappropriation permissions... So to make this all working, you not only need ideas, money, structure and so on... You also need to become and act like a trickster.

One member of AFD-Party reported the project to the police and called it a „housing project for illegal people“. Our artistic director Amelie Deufhard explained to the authorities it’s not a living project – it’s a durational performance art installation (6 months ongoing every day for 24 hours). I call this method „art as camouflage“. Through
this artistic framing the authorities accepted this construction. But it dealt with its own transiency.

6 Months later the project was over and the ECOFAVELA residents were provided private apartments. Some left Hamburg or the group. But still thousands of refugees were stranded in camps. Lampedusa group got smaller, other refugees started to organise their own activist groups.

We needed to reinvent ECOFAVELA to continue producing tricky loopholes to practice our solidarity. We made a kind of needs-analysis with the refugees we knew from our networks. They needed safe space to gather, space to hang out, a place to go to. A place to flirt, a place to party, a place to recover from the stress in the camps. A place to hide, a place to show off. A place to experience new forms of community...

Larry Macaulay, founder of REFUGEERADIO NETWORK, a media activist from Nigeria and me wanted to avoid reproducing power-gaps and confirm social roles we didn’t choose ourselves. Everybody we talked to wanted to escape the „refugee status“ to finally start living and stop waiting for papers or perspective. We read texts by Thomas Nail, Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Denver. His thoughts on MIGRANT COSMOPOLITANISM became our source of inspiration. I give you just a small quote:

The true agents and movers of cosmopolitan history and politics have always been, and continue to be, migrants. (...) If we want to understand the prospects for a truly global community, we have to move beyond the critiques of citizenship, nationalism, and liberalism, and propose an approach that will not structurally exclude the millions of migrants and refugees of the world. We must create what I propose to call a “migrant cosmopolitanism”.

Well, Cosmopolitanism is a privileged thing: if you have the papers, the world is yours. You can travel easily. We attempt to combine the positive aspects of cosmopolitanism with the political struggles of migrants and refugees. A bottom-up cosmopolitanism: Migrantcosmopolitanism.

In 2015 ECOFAVELA transformed into MIGRANTPOLITAN. We rearranged the inside structure, took out some walls and changed the decoration. Without changing the outside of the wooden box in the backyard it converted into something new.
Quote from a British magazine:

This little shed provides a safe space for the Migrantopolitan, where they can be themselves and not a ‘refugee’. On the far corner of the wall there is a ‘refugees welcome’ poster, but at the Migrantopolitan they have scrubbed out the word ‘refugee’ and replaced it with ‘humans’.

The MIGRANTPOLITAN has become a space, a laboratory and meeting place in which new forms of collaborative working, living and partying are explored and developed. Here, the social categorizations of “refugee” and “local” are abandoned and participants collaborate to create cosmopolitan visions.

In 2015 Anas Aboura, a political activist from Syria joined our MIGRANTPOLITAN team. He is a professional networker and immediately started to spread the word and to connect with diasporic communities. Since the opening until today round about 10.000 people visited the MIGRANTPOLITAN so far. We wrote concepts and applied for fundings. We got bigger – and started to create jobs. Anas became a curator. This constellation of people and opinions, and of artistic and political practices, has led to the creation of concepts that are already making their mark on the Kampnagel program – with the successful event series ORIENTAL KARAOKE, for instance, as well as the REFUGEE VOICES TV SHOW – among other places.

As a label, MIGRANTPOLITAN also works as producer and enriches the program with highlights that have been shaped by a migrant perspective – for example, the new „DUB-KE, adventures in Arab techno“ series. A performance group established itself, also regular events like jam sessions and film clubs or a queer-refugee-group. To feed our independent, self-organised „Migrantopolitan Bank“, we do regular events like „Solicasino“, where losing money becomes an act of solidarity. Others opened up a café inside MIGRANTPOLITAN. We start from the needs of our members and find creative solutions for structural problems. Trickster-Style. „Think like a criminal, act like an artist“ is our artistic mantra.
Once again the space shifted without modification: it became more than a place. It became a perspective. But only for a few people. This was not enough. We figured out how we can empower more people. How we can create more visions and jobs around our vivid action center. And every year we have to fear that the authorities will not extent the permission for the next season. We have to constantly claim our own vision. What does not fit is made to fit. But not only we on the privileged institutional side had to become tricksters. Also our new arrivals are forced tricksters: they had to use fake-passports to go through borders, they had to invent their biographies to achieve a better status – we started to use this experience. Self-empowerment through self-invention, fake it till you make it. We made virtue out of necessity. The MIGRANTPOLITAN offers easy access to identify with- and attitude becomes art. We kept on writing applications and enlarge our team. Those in the team who are in need of „BLEIBEPRESPEKTIVE“ got a honorary post- which is almost as valuable as a job because it counts in the „Bleibeperspektive“.

In 2017 we were so fed up by mass media presentation of refugees and started our own TV show- „Hello Deutschland – Die Einwanderer“, a kind of overwriting of a popular German TV show. * And of course THE MIGRANTPOLITANS are the main characters, the house became our set. We created our own narratives.
And of course we have big plans for the future. This time we really want to modify the building itself. A migrantpolitan version of Gropius’ University of Baghdad – this time with the architects of UMSCHICHTEN. Unfortunately the application failed. But we are sure to find other sources. Tricksters don’t accept a „No“ on this level.

Today MIGRANTPOLITAN still exists. Recently we won the POWER OF THE ARTS Award, the HAMBURG NORD KULTURPREIS and were nominated for the TABORI PRICE. But we didn’t get it. From the outside it’s still a wooden box which still looks like a small copy of ROTE FLORA, maybe a little abstract… But it shifted from a temporary festival architecture, to a home, to a community action center and finally turned into a concept much larger than the building itself: an autonomous self-made institution. Maybe we Migrantpolitans are architects of society, not of buildings.

*new media socialism / Hello Deutschland-Die Einwanderer (Hamburg 2017/18), fiktionale Reality-Soap