

## Do You Believe In Strangetown?

**Strangetown Diaries** was a long-term project I started in 1989, which was all about analogue photography and cultural as well as architectural research around a historical quarter of Dresden called *Äußere Neustadt* (Outer Newtown). In the beginning the project was just about taking pictures by chance. By the time I realized that the quarter – because of the historical circumstances in Eastern Germany around 1989 – was changing fundamentally, I decided to turn it into a long-term project.

I had discovered the *Äußere Neustadt* in 1989, a few months before the fall of the Wall. Raised in a part of Dresden that was as old as me and seemed to have no certain history I was fascinated by *Äußere Neustadt* from the very first moment I saw its buildings. Most of them are from the end of the 19th resp. the beginning of the 20th century. A few can be dated back to the 18th century. With its labyrinth of backyards, its decorated gloomy facades, its overgrown ruins, elegant bays, little towers, stairwell toilets, dirty coal cellars, antique tiled stoves, and its empty streets – with nearly no cars parking or passing by – the quarter was like a big adventurous architectural museum to me.



Alaunstraße 82 (backyard), 1989, Ilford b/w on ORWO paper



graffiti on Nordstraße

As a matter of fact in the end of the 1980s the *Äußere Neustadt* was in very bad shape. The socialist government's declared plan was to let the already damaged buildings rot away and later blow up the ruins to build up a whole new quarter instead, clean and controllable. The government tried its best to ruin social structures as well as infrastructures. They took care that people moved out of the quarter but not in. Many of the stores had been closed and a lot of the houses were ruins.

The people who lived there were mostly old ladies, squatters, punks, artists, alcoholics with or without families, and criminals. Some of the artists and underground people called it *Bronx* instead of *Äußere Neustadt*. This nickname was an exaggeration but indeed the quarter had such a rude reputation that many Taxi drivers refused to take you there.

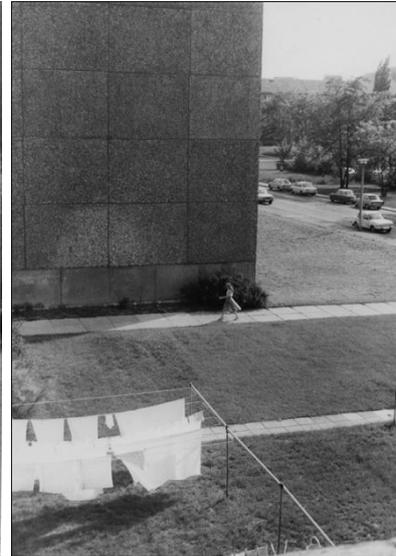
I found out that the old ladies who lived there run symbiotic relationships with an invisible army of wild cats who lived there too. A lot of cats no rats. In *Johannstadt Nord* – a post war modernist quarter on the other side of the river, where I used to live – we had a rat problem despite of the modern concrete architecture, tons of rat poison, and a clean kept neighborhood. No cats but a lot of rats.

The first series of pictures I took were black-and-white shots on *Ilford-Film*, developed on *ORWO* paper. I remember using a very simple *Beirrette* camera. The first results I showed to my grandfather *Bambi Gimmel* who was historian, artist painter and interested in photography too.

Bambi showed me old maps of the *Äußere Neustadt* from the end of the 19th century. I found out that it was one of the few European Wilhelminian quarters which most extensively had survived the bombings of World War II.



East German Trashcans (Neustadt), 1989, Ilford b/w on ORWO paper



Holbeinstraße (Johannstadt Nord)

After the fall of the Berlin Wall the socialist system of the German Democratic Republic collapsed. Western Germany took over and our life changed tremendously. I started to hang out more at *Äußere Neustadt*. First I lived at an antique apartment on *Bischofsweg 22*. Then my parents split and together with my mother I moved to a similar historical quarter nearby, called *Leipziger Vorstadt*. There we lived on *Friedensstraße* (Peace Street). At that time the name of the street seemed to be kind of a sarcastic joke because everyday life on this street had violent aspects.

A lot of criminals and weirdoes used to live there. Some practiced shooting right out of their windows and one of our neighbors got killed. There was always a bunch of stolen cars parked at the end of the street. But on the corner was a tiny movie theatre called *Casablanca* with an excellent movie program, a little bar, and a wild tubby cat named *Boogie*. I remember seeing *Quadrophenia* and the director's cut of Tarkowski's *Stalker* there.

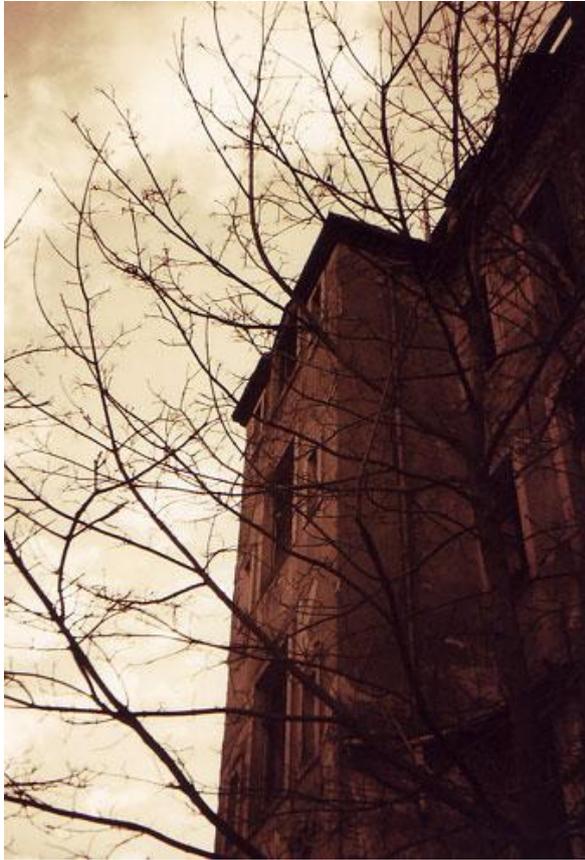
In 1990 artists, squatters, and political activists – who wanted to set a sign against occupation and commercial exploitation by western speculators – initiated the *Bunte Republik Neustadt* (Colored Republic Neustadt). The idea was to turn the *Äußere Neustadt* into an independent republic for one weekend in the end of June, as kind of a performative act. The government of the *Bunte Republik Neustadt* consisted of a monarch and a cabinet of ministers. Although I was very young I was nominated to become the *Ministerin für Finstere Machenschaften* (Minister of Dark Doings).

First I didn't like the idea of becoming a minister but when I got to know the whole plan I liked it very much and said yes. The first official duty of this government was to depose itself in order to give all power to the people. Also we had our own passports and offices to exchange money into our own valid currency called *Neustadtmark*. On the bills of this *Neustadtmark* were pictures of Marilyn Monroe, Charlie Chaplin, Che Guevara, King Kong as well as other important creatures. One bill was illustrated with Karl Marx and Michael Bakunin doing arm wrestling.

Part 1 & 2 of a short movie about the first *Bunte Republik Neustadt* can be seen here (I appear in the second part to perform the Minister of Dark Doings):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CzpoikLAqKU>    <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Imf7nlcEfqM>

Between 1990 and 1999 I continued to take pictures for photography series of *Äußere Neustadt*. Furthermore I started to photograph an old graveyard I had discovered near *Friedensstraße* and took a few pictures of *Friedrichstadt*, a quarter located on the opposite side of the river with interesting architecture and history too. At that time I used XP2, a black and white film I crossed with color paper, except a handful of pictures I took using color film.



*Görlitzerstraße (backside)*



*Vault House (on the graveyard)*

The XP2 series were first exhibited at *Nordbad* (Northbath) in 1995. *Nordbad* was another historical relic of the area. In the end of the 19th / beginning of the 20th century a lot of the apartments at the *Äußere Neustadt* had no bathrooms and so the people used to go to *Nordbad*, a public swimming baths that offered not just a swimming pool where the children from the quarter were taught how to swim but also single rooms with bathtubs and shower stalls to be rented for half an hour.

*Nordbad* was re-opened in 1994, when a lot of inhabitants of *Äußere Neustadt* still had no bathrooms at their apartments. I used the waiting space of *Nordbad* to present my photos. The title of this first solo exhibition was *Do You Believe In Strangetown?* Later the picture *Sway* was chosen for an official edition of art postcards.

Until approximately 1995 the *Äußere Neustadt* was still spooky and charming but it was plain to see that the old atmosphere was changing. The German Democratic Republic didn't exist anymore. The *Äußere Neustadt* had survived the Socialist dictators and their infamous plans but after that obscure antique dealers from different European countries showed up and tried to take everything out of houses and ruins they could sell such as doors, windows, stucco, ovens, and furniture.

Speculators destroyed parts of the historical substance. Old ladies moved out or died. Squatters and artists got kicked out of houses. The little shabby pubs and more corner shops closed. Instead tourist bars and malls opened. Activists tried more or less successfully to stop or prevent exploitation and so step by step the quarter's atmosphere was saved or transformed into something new.

It became clear that the variety of new *Äußere Neustadt* would be as interesting as the homogeneity of former *Äußere Neustadt*. Entrepreneurs, artists and activists built up culture projects such as the *Kunsthof* between *Alaunstraße* and *Görlitzerstraße*. A lot of students from other cities and countries moved in and even though traffic had increased the invisible army of cats was still around.



member of the invisible Army of Cats in action



graffiti on a new building

Also it can be said that the original concept of the *Bunte Republik Neustadt* was successful. A handful of people who wanted to set a sign used a unique moment in history to influence the social structures of the quarter and create an enduring vision. After the first celebration the *Bunte Republik Neustadt* became a rather commercialized annual event but its original spirit can still be found in everyday life.



*Kamenzer Straße*



*Pulsnitzer Straße*

In the end of the 1990s I changed material and used *Agfa Optima* for color pictures. The pictures on this page were shot around 1999 and 2000. Changing material from time to time was a tribute to the transformation of circumstances as well as a matter of expression.

In our world everything is constantly changing. When it comes to contemplating what's true or not, this is one of the things we can count on and a good reason for me to follow one theme for so long. Practically this means, you constantly have to hold on and let go at the same time for a longer working period, which of course is not necessarily for everyone.



Probably the biggest potential is the aspect that time will be definitely on your side if you give it a chance. Of course there will be no fast results and every picture you create is an uncontrollable step into an unknown future. So it's better to get rid of ego-centered points of view before one starts working. Otherwise all you get is cheap self fulfilling prophecies instead of interesting results.

Last but not least artistic long-term projects can have a very interesting effect on your nervous system. Thanks to the longtime commitment doors of perception practically open up by themselves and all you have to do is to walk through and enjoy the purifying before-after-effect of your work.



Pictures on this page: Before / After (above & below) - opposite side of Bahnhof Neustadt (1994 and 2012)