

Do You Believe In Strangetown?

Strangetown Diaries was a long time project I started in 1989. It consists of photography and cultural as well as architectural research all around a historical quarter of Dresden called *Äußere Neustadt* (*Outer Newtown*). In the beginning the project was just about taking pictures. But by the time I realized that the quarter (because of the historical circumstances in Eastern Germany between 1989 and 1999) was changing dramatically, I turned it into conceptual photography.

I discovered *Neustadt* in 1989, same year the Wall came down just a few months ago. Raised in a part of town that was as old as me and seemed to have no certain history I was fascinated by *Neustadt* from the very first moment I saw its buildings. Most of them are from the end of the 19th or 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!) *Neustadt* seemed 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 area was in very bad shape. The socialist government had planned to let the buildings rot away and later blow up the ruins to build up a whole new socialist quarter instead - clean and controllable. They took care that people moved out of *Neustadt* but not in. They tried to ruin social structures as well as infrastructures. Many of the stores were closed and most of the houses were ruins. Some of the underdogs who used to hang out there called it *Bronx* instead of *Neustadt*. It had such a rude reputation that Taxi drivers refused to take you to this part of town. But that was just superficial stereotyping.

The few people who lived there were old ladies, squatters, punks, artists, alcoholics with or without families, and criminals. The old ladies run symbiotic relationships with the invisible army of wild cats who lived there too. No rats but a lot of cats. In *Johannstadt*, 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 *Beirette* camera which was a very simple one (they hardly trust you with expensive cameras if you're a young hooligan chicken). I showed the pictures to my grandfather Bambi who was a painter. He showed me old maps of *Neustadt* from the end of the 19th century. I found out that it was one of the few quarters in Europe that had survived World War II.



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



Holbeinstraße (*Johannstadt*)

After the Wall came down the socialist system of the German Democratic Republic collapsed. Western Germany took over and everyone's life changed tremendously. I started to live in the quarter. First I had a room on *Bischofsweg 22* (I never paid rent for). Then my parents split and I moved to *Neustadt* together with my mother. We lived on *Friedensstraße* (*Peace Street*). At that time the name of the street seemed to be kind of a cosmic joke because everyday life on this street had very 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 was killed with gas. There was always a bunch of stolen cars 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 who lived there.

In 1993 *Bunte Republik Neustadt* (Colored Republic *Neustadt*) was initiated by artists, squatters, and underdogs who wanted to set a sign against occupation and commercial exploitation by Western speculators. The idea was to turn *Neustadt* into an independent republic for one week-end. The government of the *Bunte Republik Neustadt* consisted of a monarch and a cabinet of ministers. I became the Ministerin für Finstere Machenschaften (Minister of Dark Doings) which was not my idea and to me it's still a mystery who nominated me.

It was probably the shortest career of my life because the first and last official duty of this government was to depose itself in order to give the power to its underlings. Power to the people! We even had our own money. On the bills were pictures of Marilyn Monroe, Charlie Chaplin, King Kong, Mickey Mouse, and other very important creatures. One bill was illustrated with Marx and Bakunin doing arm wrestling. Part 1 & 2 of a short movie about *Bunte Republik Neustadt* can be seen here (In the second part I appear to perform the Minister of Dark Doings):

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

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

During the 1990s (between 1994 and 1999) I continued to take pictures for photography series of *Neustadt*. Furthermore I started to photograph an old graveyard near *Friedensstraße* I had discovered. Also I took some pictures of *Friedrichstadt* which was located on the opposite side of the river - a different quarter than *Neustadt* but 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 exhibited at *Nordbad* (*Northbath*) in 1995. *Nordbad* was another historical relic of the area. In the end of the 19th / the beginning of the 20th century a lot of the apartments at *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 learned how to swim but also bathtubs and shower stalls that could be rented for half an hour.

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

Neustadt was still spooky and charming but it was plain to see that this atmosphere was going to fade. The German Democratic Republic didn't exist anymore. *Neustadt* had survived the Socialist dictators and their infamous plans. Antique dealers showed up and took everything out of houses and ruins they could sell such as doors, windows, stucco, ovens, and furniture. Old ladies moved out or died. Speculators destroyed parts of the historical substance. Squatters got kicked out of houses by the police. The little shabby pubs and a lot of corner shops closed. Instead tourist bars and malls opened. Activists tried more or less successful to stop or prevent exploitation.

Step by step the quarter's atmosphere was saved or transformed into something new. It can be said that the variety of new *Neustadt* was as interesting as the homogeneity of former *Neustadt*. Entrepreneurs and artists built up culture projects such as *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 (IAC)* in action



graffiti on a new building

Also it can be said that the original concept of *Bunte Republik Neustadt* was successful. This handful of underdogs who wanted to set a sign used a unique moment in history to influence the social structures by creating a vision which seems to last. Nowadays *Bunte Republik Neustadt* has become a very commercial event but the original spirit can still be found.

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.



Kamenzer Straße



Pulsnitzer Straße

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. That is one of the few things we can count on and maybe that's the reason for me to hold on for so long following one theme. Besides artistic long time projects have a very interesting effect on your nervous system. Doors of perception will practically open up by themselves and all you have to do is to walk through – not to speak about the before-after-effect which purifies your brain. I know that it sounds easier than it is. To hold on and let go at the same time is not necessarily for everyone.



Probably the biggest potential is the aspect that time is definitely on your side if you give it a chance. Of course there will be no fast results and every picture you take is a step in an unknown future that is uncontrollable. 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 an interesting result.



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