

## **“You have to convince people to stop in their tracks”**

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As usually happens while surfing the net, jumping from one page to another, you discover interesting events and projects going on in the city where you live. Sometimes you also have a chance to meet in person the people directly involved in these projects. That is exactly how it occurred to me to interview the person who's going to be the first piece of this Berlin puzzle called “Shaping CITYzenship.” I exchanged a few short emails with Karin Laansoo, an Estonian curator and writer usually based in New York, before she sat in front of me with brand new white glasses in a cozy bar in Brunnenstrasse.

**I quickly read the short description of your project “Exploitation on Demand” and I found it catchy, although I've never been active in the artistic field. Can you explain how this idea came up and what it is all about?**

I studied at the Estonian Academy of Arts. This year, the Academy celebrated its 95<sup>th</sup> year and I was asked to organize a two-day international conference on the topic of “Art, Image and Exploitation.” The event took place in Tallinn on February 18-19, 2010. So the project I'm running right now in Berlin could be considered a practical follow-up to the academic research and screening program. I responded to an open call titled “Public Sphere and Rhetoric” launched by Sparwasser HQ (ed. Sparwasser is a not-for-profit exhibition space and project, at the moment a residency-center and an office). I was one of the two curators selected and I was provided all the necessary support to bring the idea to life. The project consists of a series of public performances. As a first step we announced an open call for international authors. From the scripts that were submitted, I selected 7 scripts to be carried out by local volunteers in Berlin during a three week period. Aside from these performances and documentation, I also intend to compile a “Training Manual for Public Exploitation”, a collection of scripts that can be used by whomever wishes to realize something similar in other places or different cities.



**So you didn't consciously choose Berlin as the perfect place for your project?**

No, it was because of the Sparwasser residency, but if had been given a choice I would have also selected Berlin. It is not my first time here and I feel very connected to the city itself. The scripts were sometimes location-specific, but in most cases you could perform them in any city.

**Indeed, definitely. As soon as I saw you, I realized that you were too self-confident for a first-timer, eating your dinner in a bar you suggested and with your bike parked outside. You challenge the bad weather the same way as Berliners do. What brought you to Berlin in the past?**

I have many friends living here and I feel very much at home in Berlin. I have had probably 5 or 6 short stays here, either working on projects or on vacation. I also did a German language course years ago, but I can only manage a basic conversation now. Luckily you can survive speaking English and that's something that adds more to Berlin's international atmosphere.

**Now we come to another important topic. What do you think about the city?**

Berlin is alive, it has a lot of inner energy and it is never boring. Personally speaking, I think that if

you don't have an artistic side to express you are somehow missing the city, not experiencing it at the best of its potential. It is the general laid-back atmosphere that makes Berlin a lovely place to be. The city has a relaxed rhythm and you can find your personal space while being immersed in thousands of cultural events. The mix of cultures and languages is amazing. And another reason why many people (especially New Yorkers!) decide to move here is because daily life is affordable in almost every respect, from the rent to dinner out at a restaurant.

**Did you follow any specific criteria for choosing the artists or locations for the performances?**

One of the criteria for choosing the scripts was figuring out if we would be able to perform them within the time given, and also with the people and resources we had available. If the script needed special equipment or types of people we were not able to find, then the script most likely remained on paper. The locations were not a big concern - all performances took place in public spaces and if the author's script was not specific, we found solutions ourselves. No prior permissions were asked. The scripts were situational, responding to either existing exploitation or creating a new one. The results were mostly small gestures and interventions, a few of which demanded public engagement. In terms of practical implementation I used what was available, including both the full support from Sparwasser and random volunteer help. I was contacted by several people who wanted to participate, just like you, and they all found tasks in the project. This synergy from different backgrounds, interests, and professional skills is the most surprising aspect of the project and I'm really happy about it.

**I had the pleasure of personally assisting in the making of one of the performances. It took place in an indoor market in Kreuzberg. In terms of the location, like many spots in the city, the market has passed through several phases and right now you can count only a few existing shops among dozens of empty stalls. Do you think you would have had a different and maybe more active response from the public in a more crowded space?**

You said it: maybe. But it depended more on the nature of the performance itself. I acted as the extended hand for the authors who submitted the scripts and I reinterpreted them according to the local resources. The script you mentioned, by Bruce Gatenby, was most theatrical of the submitted ones with a full dialogue. Direct participation from the observers was not asked, but we got it regardless. In other cases I noticed that people were pretty eager to take part. When performing Kadri Klementi's script, we put our volunteer inside a pushcart and she had to ask passersby along one of the main streets in Prenzlauer Berg to push her to Mitte. People of different ages intervened but for some reason men were more helpful. It was really fascinating to see everybody's reactions from the side, as a photographer.

**So far are you happy with the project?**

When you start a project or you simply present your idea to the public it is always uncertain what kind of response you will get in return. But considering the short time that I spent in Berlin I am happy with the results, both from the authors, the volunteers, and the accidental audiences. There were a few challenges along the way, but the fun of convincing people to stop in their tracks never gets old.