

UP ON DSCHUNGEL

Volker Zander

„IT IS THE FAINTEST AND SIMPLEST EXPRESSION THE WATER EVER MAKES, AND THE MOST HIDEOUS TO A PILOT'S EYE. IN TRUTH, THE PASSENGER WHO COULD NOT READ THIS BOOK SAW NOTHING BUT MANNER OF PRETTY PICTURES IN IT, PAINTED BY THE SUN AND SHADED BY THE CLOUDS, WHEREAS TO THE TRAINED EYE THESE WERE NOT PICTURES AT ALL, BUT THE GRIMMEST AND MOST DEAD-EARNEST OF READING MATTER.“[1]

Fanzines are best when handed over in person. UP is focusing on “interesting architectures,” and published in Antwerps by Koenraad De-dobbeleer and Kris Krimpe. UP4 is a project by Berlin-based artist Alexander Lieck. It stars the extinct Berlin nightclub Dschungel during its “dismantling” in 2006. Lieck says that no other work in his oeuvre to this date has caused such passionate reaction. His photos hit a nostalgic local nerve: evidence is about to be destroyed, memory seemingly to be erased.

Lieck's work for UP4 consists of black and white photographed studies of a deconstruction site. It documents the dirty course of the passage from old to (re)new. “Dismantling,” as we read in the title, is a rather gentle expression for the destructive procedure of stripping a building, ripping suspended ceilings and tiles from walls, and tearing down the walls and floors themselves. The space we get to see is one big showroom with a high ceiling. Bright sunlight is beaming through wide storefront windows. Whatever context is outside, it's blitzed out, invisible, not there.

An elegant open staircase is the glamorous star at the center of this pretty room, powdered with crumbled plaster and crushed tiles. Powerless electric cables hang like liana all over. Spaghetti columns hold up the gallery. The photographer wanders through the room, up and down, focusing on the stairs and interior relics. The gallery's layout is zigzag-shaped, and its rim is covered with mirrors poised to crash, causing a topsy-turvy effect in the eye of the viewer. What is left and what's right? What's before or behind us in this pretty mess? Where are we?

Dschungel was the nightclub to be at in the late 70s and early 80s in West Berlin, located on Nürnberger Straße a few hundred meters south of the shopping center near the Gedächtniskirche. Born in Berlin in the late 1960s, Alexander Lieck was just a teenager when he started to frequent Dschungel in 1982. By then, the club was synonymous with the hyperstylings of new wave, and was a magnet for artists, musicians, actors, micro- and macro-celebrities, and all sorts of tourists, all eager to be selected by the bouncer at the door.

Because of its limited space, West Berlin was the only city in northern Europe without nightlife regulations. Supported by a 24-hour public transportation system, the walled-in Westberliners were able to colonize the night in order to simulate spatial freedom. In Berlin, culture was heavily subsidized by a far-away federal government. Low-standard apartments in 19th century quarters guaranteed cheap rents – an attraction to the “voluntary prisoners”[2] emigrating fresh from the moldy FRG hinterland. For a decade the fucked-up ruinous condition of an at first bombed out then closed up metropolis made West Berlin the romantic parquet on which to shoot up drugs and hang out with big rock stars.

The Dschungel had its first incarnation in the mid 1970s at Winterfeldplatz (now Slumberland), and then moved to the 1950s-interior masterpiece at Nürnberger Straße. This had been a restaurant, designed by the Chinese architect Chen Kuen Lee, who studied free-floating post-war spaces in Hans Scharoun's office. Although called a discotheque, music in the Dschungel was only ever received as a cool wall tapestry. Dancing there has been described as a peripheral semi-private activity in a dark side room[3]. The Dschungel was bright as daylight, lit by neon lights that provided the opposite of the general sense of late 70s darkness and coziness. . More important than dancing was performing ascent and descent of the omnipresent stairs, under the observation of

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[1] Mark Twain „Life on the Mississippi“, Montreal: Dawson, 1883.

[2]

Exodus, Rem Koolhaas, S. M. L. XL, page 7, Rotterdam, 1995

[3]

Alexander Lieck in Interview with the author, Berlin, December 11, 2007

[4]

Guido Schirmeyer „Mal sehen was im Dschungel läuft“, http://www.welt.de/print-welt/article553390/Mal_sehen_was_im_Dschungel_laeuft.html, December 15, 2000

[5]

narch+ Nr.122 „Von Berlin nach Neuteutonia“, Aachen, 1994

an audience lingering on the balconies of this panoptical theatre.

The audience started to build up cohesive family-like structures. Dschungelkinder had father/mother figures and godfathers, holding court or office hours for them. Like any important club it developed an ecosystem, with warm and cold spots, niches, watering holes, and rituals about when to show up and how to leave. My favorite resource on Dschungel history mentions a 'spiritual family reunion' onsite in December of 2000 (the club was sold and operated under new management until 1996), which shortlisted a who's-who of designated protagonists and eyewitnesses for the historians to come. [4]

Alexander Lieck left Berlin around 1987 to study and live for more than a decade in Enschede, Amsterdam, and Antwerp. He says he never missed missing out on the colonization of the East, the heydays of rave culture and the annoying effects of centralization in a hooray Neuteutonia[5]. Uninspired by an over-inspired “Berlin Mitte” public, he resettled in the former “West” around 2000. The opportunity to take a camera inside and be able to shoot the disassembly of one of his teenage heavens, he considers to have been pure luck. Curiosity and happiness fueled the project's momentum. These photos have become a material in his artist's practice. The structure of the fanzine became a canvas on which to study the musical or cinematic effects of arranging this strip of pictures, of a deterritorialized interior space under attack from the sledgehammer. Only the title in the fanzines impressum leaves a hint that we should read the pictures as a both corrosive and fertilizing moment in a cultural spin cycle.

