

Ralf Schmitt "Bahnhofsmission" 1994 - 2003



In the fall of 1994, I visited for the first time the construction site of what had once been Hamburger Bahnhof, which had already closed on October 15, 1884 after just four decades of being used as an actual train station by Berlin - Hamburg Eisenbahn. I had already heard years before of the interesting history of the building, but without knowing the details: from 1884 to 1905 it was used as an office and residential building for railroad workers, and from 1906 to 1943 it housed a transportation and architectural museum. After being partially destroyed in 1943, it was left in hibernation during the British Occupation; held by the Reichsbahn until 1983, ownership was transferred in 1984 to the West Berlin government, and plans were made to reopen the building as a museum of contemporary art. And I read some about the directors: I was also familiar with the title of the exhibition curated by Harald Szeeman, *Zeitlos*, which took place from June 22-September 25, 1988, and for the first time made the train station known as an exhibition site to an international public. In 1990, the (re)construction of the complex, originally designed by Friedrich Neuhaus, began, resulting in today's **Museum für Gegenwart Berlin**, built according to plans by architect Josef Paul Kleihues.



Since that first visit I considered myself to be and acted as an **unofficial employee** working at this building that had so often changed its identity. I began using the construction site as my studio, and continued to do so until the opening of the museum on November 2, 1996. In the words of Félix González-Torres, it was all "just a matter of time."





On April 27, 1995 I manifested this “**squatting**” to the outside world, by installing a *fake* German flag and the Belgian national flag on the two towers of the building in response to the flagging of the Reichstag. The flags flew for a couple of weeks, and then disappeared. During Christo’s wrapping of the Reichstag, my mother came to visit me in Berlin, and I led her to “my” studio: in the conference room of the construction site management, we suddenly found the two flags neatly draped over old coat racks. Later, the Belgian flag disappeared, and I took the German flag and used it for a while as a curtain in my apartment.



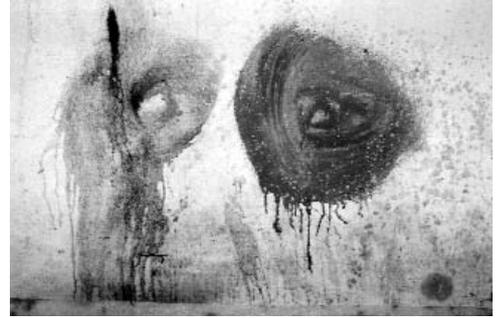
For a time, I walked each day in workman's overalls along the Spree from my apartment to my workplace, to participate on site: walking around, looking, talking, actions, installations, objects, etc. This didn't bother my "colleagues" very much, the bricklayers, electricians, floorers, drywallers; on the contrary, some of them drew, painted, or installed themselves. But this was not the case when it came to the various construction site managers: I was evicted from the construction site twice, while I had arrived at an arrangement of sorts with the watchmen and guard dogs. Occasionally, I would also bring guests to my studio.



A Colleague at Work



A Guard at Work



Action Painting (anonymous)



A Guest at Work (Muse.. To Be)



Rock Drawing (anonymous)



Spatial Installation (anonymous)



Graffiti (anonymous)



Tar Print (anonymous)



Wall Work (anonymous)



A Construction Site Manager at Work

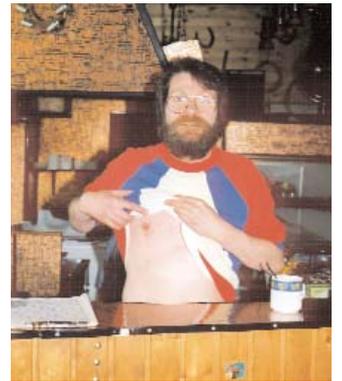


Tangled Cables (anonymous)



Short Circuit

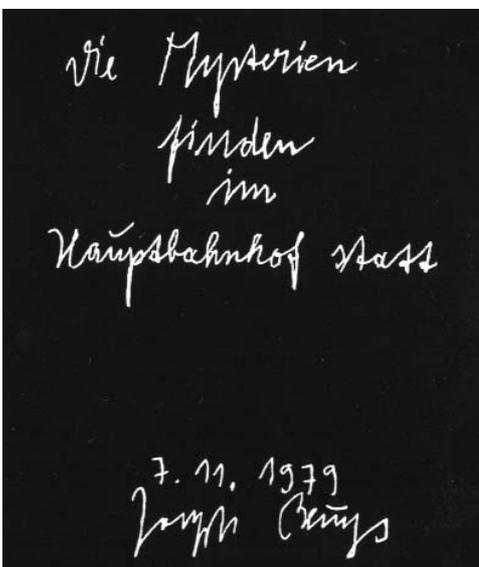
Just as the electricians produced their **tangled mess of cables**, I completed a few short circuits of my own, for example in the form of knotting the cables hanging from the walls and ceilings. To do intentional damage to the construction, I always pissed in the same place. After quitting time, I often went to the neighboring bar to drink a few beers. Outside the construction site, I had dog muzzles printed with the sticker SAFER ART: on a T shirt the words “Ich versteh’ nur Bahnhof”, I had the words “Wer zuerst kommt, malt zuerst” (*The first to come is the first to paint*) engraved on GDR roofer trowels and leaded into glazed picture frames; on a glass lens I branded the words “Hamburger Bahnhof: Mein 1. Atelier” (*Hamburger Bahnhof: My First Studio*) in black solder and installed it in a spyhole.



A Barman at Work



Visit



On the opening evening as well, on November 1, 1996, I put on my overalls and went to work at Hamburger Bahnhof. I dropped my visiting card through a slit in the wooden frame of a glazed Beuys case in the west wing to recall this:

Can the mysteries that have been taking place at Hauptbahnhof since November 7, 1979 also take place here?

A miniature scandal ensued, the attentive guards quickly came by, the security director rushed to the scene, soon mention was made of having me permanently banned from the institution and accusations were in the air, the case could only be opened in the presence of the general director. At a late hour, the “problem” dissolved into hot air and discussion.

Für die Aufbau- und Installationsarbeiten und die Vorbereitung von Installationsplätzen im Hamburger Bahnhof - Neustadt war dringend ein Staubsauger am besten aufzufahren Typ 3:

Kesselbauer Hoover Aqua Plus für den Preis von 483,55 DM

mit freundlichen Grüßen

*Dr. Britta Schmitz
Oberkassiererin*

In 1996, just before the opening, I found various pieces of paper with writing on them in the museum's trash bins, I found various documents, including an order for the vacuum cleaner **"Hoover Aqua Plus"** filled out by the chief curator Dr. Britta Schmitz for **"setting up exhibitions and the preparation of installation sites."**

Around the time of the Museum's first birthday, I faxed this note to various institutions and galleries. Usually presumed to be a **"stray"**, it was often returned to me (Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt/M; Haus der Kulturen der Welt Berlin; Kunststiftung Poll Berlin; Kunsthalle Hamburg). The Berlin gallery Neugerriemschneider offered me their Hoover on the telephone: but unfortunately it wasn't the model I was looking for. Even Paul Maenz offered his help. Hamburger Bahnhof also got many return calls: so that on October 23, 1997 I received a letter of complaint. In a letter to the Hoover European Appliance Group I asked whether they might consider donating such a device for realizing an exhibition project at the Museum für Gegenwart. On October 30, 1997, my request was fulfilled, and the gift was sent on its way.



As a condition, I requested the registration and use of the vacuum cleaner. On May 15, 1998, Britta Schmitz agreed on the telephone that I could officially borrow it to present at an exhibition at Förderkoje Berlin and to use it there. On September 20, 1998, I submitted a last minute offer to the first Berlin Biennale, offering them the possibility of renting the Hoover with the necessary staff. After their rejection, the **"stray"** vacuum cleaner played a part in KAMPAGNE.3000 by Klaus Heid at the now quite dusty Badische Kunstverein Karlsruhe to mark the opening of Martin Disler's last watercolors on October 16, 1998, finally returning to the museum on November 30, 1998.

After this, Alexander Tolnay from Neuer Berliner Kunstverein got involved, with the request to bring the institution a portable CD Player from Taipei, where I went at the end of 1998, and he offered to **"provide official confirmation of receipt, like the Nationalgalerie."** This was not fulfilled.



Vacuum action, KAMPAGNE.3000.AKTIONSWOCHEN, October 16, 1998, Badischer Kunstverein Karlsruhe, with Ralf Schmitt, Stephanie Jünemann, Heinrich Schmidt, Karolina Zupan-Rupp, Zoran Sertic, Uwe Teske, Jörg Brombacher, Klaus Heid, numerous officials from the Kunstverein and visitors of the exhibition opening, Die Letzten Aquarelle von Martin Disler.

Several years passed. When Britta Schmitz invited me to Hamburger Bahnhof in 2002 as part of the exhibition RÄUME II: Aus den Sammlungen der Nationalgalerie, VISIO to spend a **Förderzeitraum** (August 1, 2002 – April 21, 2003), I integrated the still active vacuum cleaner in the spatial installation (http://www.foerderkoje.de/stk_unterseiten/Foerderzeitraum3.htm).

How do the works get out of the museum?



Ruff's Slander

The fact that works land in the museum — and how — is something that has been known not just since Anselm Kiefer's lead airplanes; whether this was a voluntary landing or an emergency landing is of no importance. On a pair of glasses, I wrote the following action concept in February 1995 on this question:



“The S-Bahn surfer is tossed from the S-Bahn, coming from Lehrter Stadtbahnhof in the direction of Friedrichstraße. A boat, starting in Nordhafen, moving up the canal in Berlin-Spandauer Schifffahrtskanal, crosses beneath the Sandkrugbrücke, does the maneuver ‘man over board’ in Humboldt Hafen and picks up the work. And docks at Ladestrasse (lost-fixed). A car then picks up the work and takes it via Invalidenstrasse and the road to Güterbahnhof to the side entry of Hamburger Bahnhof. The work

is then carried into the former station hall, brought to a stable horizontal position and jacked up using an oil pressure switch.”

Because of the high stunt costs the action remained fictional. But when and where the hour strikes and which mission and when and where and what mission and prey are caught and arrive, that is ticked to us by the station clock **“Final Station: The Museum”**.



Matchbox, Bahnhofsmission



Trophy



Ladies' Watch, Final Station: The Museum



But how is the reversal formulated, how do works leave the museum? A first break out attempt took place on December 12, 1976: in the action filmed by Marina Abramovic, *There Is a Criminal Touch to Art (The First Act)*, Ulay (Uwe Laysiepen) went into Berlin's Nationalgalerie, removed Carl Spitzweg's picture *The Poor Poet* from the walls, and went to the living room of a Turkish family in Kreuzberg, when he replaced a poster over the sofa with the picture, then telling the museum where the picture was. The Nationalgalerie then **banned** him from the institution.

On May 27, 2003, the 77-year-old cultural policy maker Hilmar Hoffmann took up yet another hot iron: he wants to allow museums to sell objects from their depots. "What works in the depots do not meet the level required by the museum? What works are present in such high numbers that they can never be exhibited? Only museum curators should be able to decide whether objects to swell, if they can finally buy pictures or sculptures that are lacking in the context of their collection from the yield."



Exactly two months later, a fire took place at Hamburger Bahnhof. Kai Althoff's spatial sculpture **Aus Dir** was totally destroyed, and wound up outside in the parking lot.



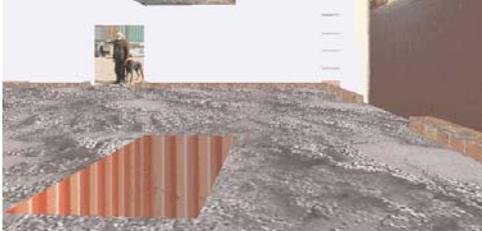
Seven years earlier I was invited by composer and sound designer Rupert Schellenberger to remix a track visually for the project **Morphosis Mind Moves**. In 1997, the CD extra of the same name appeared as a compilation with computer generated worlds by various artists that could be explored in real-time from the perspective of the beholder using a mouse and cursor or cyber helmet and cyberpuck. The level I conceived, with the title *Asian Clusters*, allows for a visit to the planned, but not-yet realized west wing of Hamburger Bahnhof by Josef Paul Kleihues.



There the user encounters a selection of works *from my studio*. The 3D - software imitates computer game aesthetics and thus allows a playful exploration of the animations.



The CD extra was released by ESHU records (ep 97002) and is still today available from Fenn Music Service, Hamburg. This results in a distribution of my unofficial work as a museum practice of an oxymoron called "museum for the present" from the museum to the outside world:



it can happen **everywhere, at any time, and to anybody...**

3 screenshots from *Asian Clusters*