

UNTERDRUCK – KULTUR VON DER STRASSE:

ARTS AND CREATIVITY AS SHARED PRAXIS TO COUNTERACT EXCLUSION

An interactive and immersive musical, in which a range of identities are up for grabs, is at the heart of Unterdruck's role in promoting participation and socio-cultural work, a role which also includes providing classic services such as social counselling and emergency care. In this article, Tanja Ehmann details the challenges and rewards of building bridges between homeless and activist communities and the benefits that creative projects can offer.



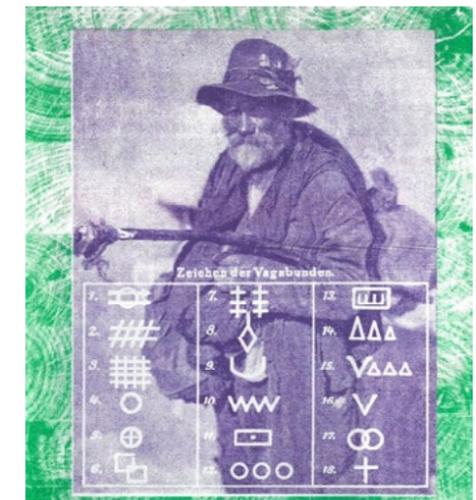
Gogo Trash and Theater Unterdruck performing on Mariannenplatz in Berlin - Kreuzberg during Vagabond Congress in August 2020

A homeless person leaves Berlin in anger and goes into a forest during his wanderings. The area seems deserted. Tired and powerless, he lies down on the unpaved shoulder of a road and falls asleep. The vagabond stumbles upon him at dawn and invites him to share her life on the beach. Here, all who are on the move and wandering meet by chance and are happy to be here, no one has any longing for Berlin. The dancers arrive on the beach and impress the group. The dancers tell of the Vagabond Festival in Berlin. They find approval, only the homeless man wants to stay. Together they convince him and they all leave together. The actors mingle with the audience and watch the performance. They go on stage and dress up in front of the audience. All participants sing the farewell song together.

The storyboard above is from a musical the theatre group Unterdruck - Kultur von der Straße e.V. (Under pressure - culture from the street), an association with a meeting point for homeless people, and an art collective called Czentrifuga in Berlin. The musical

is a collaboration between the theatre group and Gogotrash, the performance group from Czentrifuga developed for the Vagabond Congress 2020. The Vagabond Congress is a project and festival, financially supported by Aktion Mensch an association that supports initiatives who act as stakeholder representatives for marginalized inhabitants of the city and who aim to counteract exclusion and segregation. The aim of the project and of Unterdruck is to fight together against discrimination, isolation and exclusion in order to light up life on the street with constructive perspectives and create a space for solidarity, exchange and self-organisation. The project makes visible mobile forms of living in the city through artistic practices, appropriates a public space with those activities, and shares it with others. We started the project with regular meetings, examined homelessness from different perspectives and experiences, established ideas workshops, decided to collaborate on a Vagazine and produced "propaganda materials" such as stickers, posters, and postcards.

The Vagabond as an image of the mobile inhabitant who is a part of urban society helped to bring together those people who experience space and their habitat through movement, who cross the spaces of residence and create their own paths through space appropriation and constitution. Through mobile networking, we reached visitors of the homeless meeting point, people who care about those who have fallen out of the welfare system, and we cooperated with street artists and activists in the field of the right to the city. The participatory focus of the regularly



Reusing historical imagery and Zinken sign language for a two-colour Resoprint



published Vagazine, which artistically deals with topics related to homelessness and Vagabondage in pictures and text, served also as a mouthpiece for the Vagabond Congress 2020 campaign. The Congress itself collected, presented, and documented the activities during the project period of three years.

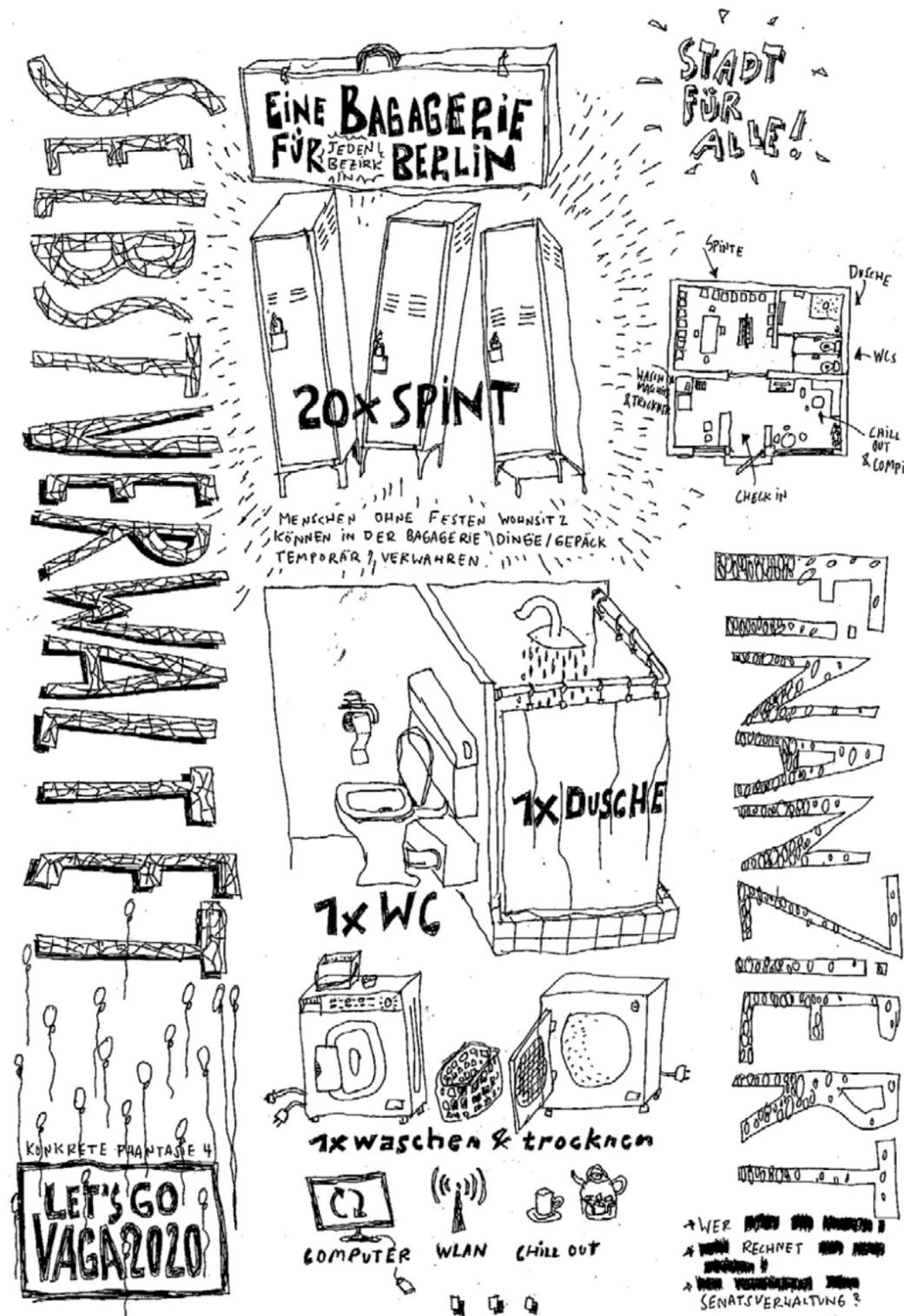
Through the Congress project we established a meeting and exchange place by and for people affected by exclusion and provided a stage for the artistic expression of their different daily lives and the politics of making demands on the welfare system. Furthermore, the Congress shows that it is possible to involve urban society through artistic practices at a public space and create moments containing complementary modes of recognition of the city's displaced inhabitants and hope for the redistribution of social capital.

The self-organization process - getting together, exchanging ideas, establishing demands and visibility by using artistic practices - was meant to bridge the gap between people who are forced to live on the streets and socio-cultural activists. It was not an easy task, especially because visitors of the meeting point of Unterdruck live a busy



Posters from and for the printing action week "Printers and Vagabonds unite"

Through the Congress project we established a meeting and exchange place by and for people affected by exclusion and provided a stage for the artistic expression of their different daily lives and the politics of making demands on the welfare system."



daily life, occupied with struggling to survive and facing stigmatisation, whereas most of the activists do not live in precarious conditions, are used to organizing themselves and to carrying on in the face of adversity. At the beginning of the project, we were enthusiastic about getting a lot of people who experience homelessness involved and were frustrated when we were confronted with mistrust and suspected of instrumentalising these people to achieve our goals. Fortunately, we could rely on the experiences of Unterdruck which has already been active for 30 years. Originating from a theatre play with homeless people, the focus of the Unterdruck is on participation and socio-cultural work, in addition to providing classic services such as social counselling and emergency care. Taking time, exchange of experiences, talking about one's own living environment, establishing a dialogue praxis and expressing it through artistic practices like collages and screen-printing workshops, writing poems, music making and theatre performances, motivated people to get involved. Some were only there for a short time, others for the whole project period. Overall, the joint work on the Vagabonds' Congress 2020, through artistic means, created space for participatory structures and supported self-efficacy, breaking up routines and encouraging self-determined belonging, which we see as an important precondition to fight for ones (human) rights.

Campaign for a Bagagerie like it exists in Marseille, we called it „Vagarie“