

CITY OF PLAY



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PLAYFUL PUBLIC SPACES EVOLVED ON THE OCCASION OF THE
Rhine-Ruhr 2025 FISU World University Games

City of Play

AN URBAN ARTS & CULTURE PROGRAM
RUHR AREA

SPANNING THE CITIES OF
MÜLHEIM AN DER RUHR, DUISBURG, AND ESSEN

SUMMER 2025

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City of Play, launched in the summer of 2025, was an extraordinary art and culture project that united three cities in the Ruhr area and redefined the notion of urban space. Building on the Rhine-Ruhr 2025 FISU World University Games, sport was understood not only as a form of competition but as a cultural practice of play – an attitude, a social movement, and a way to forge connections. This conception of play formed the core of the City of Play project and created a space where sport, art, culture, and science could engage with one another.

Over several weeks, locations in Mülheim an der Ruhr, Duisburg, and Essen were transformed into vibrant landscapes of play. Each city contributed its own topographical, social, and historical characteristics, which were made visible and could be experienced in a new way by the population through artistic interventions. The aim was not only to use the spaces for play, but also to establish relationships: between people and their cities, between different disciplines, between the Ruhr area and the world. The project absorbed the dynamics of the FISU World University Games and translated them into artistic processes that emphasized both movement and encounter.

The central connecting programme element was the so-called "Playground", a mobile container architecture that served as a traveling meeting place, exhibition space, and venue for activities. Under the motto "Play along", it invited residents, visitors, and chance audiences, to rediscover the city – as a place of participation, creativity, and shared experimentation. The modular structure of the Playground made it a visible symbol of the project's mobility: It travelled from city to city, shifted perspectives, opened up spaces for spontaneous interventions, and created a sense of togetherness across municipal boundaries.

In Mülheim an der Ruhr, an urban experimental field was created along transport routes, architectural monuments, and open spaces, highlighting the transitions between everyday mobility and collective playfulness. In Duisburg, the focus was on the inner harbour as a fluid terrain: Water as an urban resonant space became the central motif, on which artistic actions, floating installations, and participatory formats created a temporary sense of togetherness. Essen, in turn, became a stage for an interplay of research, education, and urban art. The summer school there delved into the underground system, connecting international artists with students who together tested new practices of urban action and experienced the urban landscape as a malleable, dialogical space.

The Playground's traveling, city-connecting programme was complemented by text and poster interventions along the railway line between the programme cities. Bicycle tours and boat trips created links and explored the spaces in between the Ruhr area cities.

City of Play was conceived by a team of curators around Georg Barringhaus, Alain Bieber, Stefanie Klingemann, and Mathieu Tremblin, and brought to life by TRANSURBAN, the NRW-wide platform for urban art. Their long-standing experience with urban spaces helped intertwine art, public life, and urban infrastructure in all their facets.

The project would not have been possible without the support of numerous partners. The collaboration with Rhine-Ruhr 2025 FISU World University Games, the participating municipalities, universities, local initiatives, and the Ministry of Culture and Science of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia enabled an extraordinary convergence of athletic, cultural, and social energy. City of Play demonstrated how powerful the dialogue between community, play, and the city can be – and left the Ruhr area with a lasting sense of openness, connection, and creative freedom.

This publication chronicles the City of Play's journey through the Ruhr area, presented in three central chapters focusing on the three project cities. The in-between stages – the programme in motion – trace the project's spatial progression in interim chapters.

The storyline combines pictures with interwoven statements from artists, partners, team, and audience alongside texts on the artistic interventions and programming. Quotes and transcribed passages of three panel discussions contextualize the local discourses around the topics of play, swimmable cities, and urban playfulness. The accompanying Playbook highlights the positions of the project's exhibition in public space, inviting the readers to take action themselves, to engage with the city, and to discover and shape it in a playful way.

The publication becomes a journey in itself, tracing memories, the project's interventions in public space, and the marks they left in the Ruhr area. A region whose architectural industrial heritage, urban expanse, and restless transformation render it a playground of its own making. The journey opens with a contribution from photographer Martha Cooper. Her iconic photo series, "Street Play", captured in the late seventies in New York's projects, stands as a luminous exemplar of the power of play – to wander, to improvise, and to reshape the urban fabric with liberated hands.

Text: Stefanie Klingemann



THE PASSAGES THAT FOLLOW ARE EXCERPTS
FROM THE OPENING ADDRESS GIVEN AT
THE CITY OF PLAY, HELD ON 24 MAY 2025

When artists empower themselves to appropriate space through their own presence and agency, when they intervene in the urban fabric with poetic and disruptive media whether subtly or boldly, provocatively questioning its conventions and norms when they literally turn the space upside down, and you find yourself asking what on earth is going on here, that's when we really start to play with the city!

The artistic negotiation of public space ruptures the routines of everyday urban life. It challenges the design, use, and function of public space. Through the direct act of overturning, reshaping, and reinterpreting – and through the subtle play with expectations and perspectives on our urban environment – art invites us to experience the playful qualities of public space.

It's this moment of absurdity and uncertainty that gives way to a space of new possibilities, an opportunity to create new meaning together. How do we perceive our city? How do we use public space? Whom do we encounter here? What do we do here? And to what end? To whom does this space actually belong?

Starting with a blank slate: Art reorganises public space and very publicly poses the question of meaning, thus establishing situational relationships – between the space and its users, between what is and what could be. Art opens up space for dialogue. For moments of connection. For a shared discourse on city life, and for urban utopias.

When travellers looking out of a train window on their way from Düsseldorf to Duisburg are encouraged to smile at a stranger by artist Coco Bergholm's text installation in the Duisburg dunes; when Brad Downey turns paving slabs into dominoes; when brothers Maik and Dirk Löbber transform a solid structure into a river: The moment of changed perception becomes engraved in people's experiences and memories, indeed in the very essence of urban life itself.

Urban art evolves and resonates within and through space, threading itself into the urban fabric. Through gestures, attitudes, and actions, we are urged to question the given, built, and imagined aspects of the city in the hope of constant renewal. In this process, art stages the city as a source of inspiration and uses it as a framework. Urban art draws on the multifaceted contexts of the urban space – cultural, social, political, architectural, personal, and historical – and influences these contexts. In doing so, it has to work with countless obstacles, to open doors, and to overcome barriers and resistance.

As part of the Rhine-Ruhr 2025 FISU World University Games, the students Olympic Games that will take place here in the Ruhr area this summer, the City of Play transforms urban landscapes into playgrounds. Spanning several weeks across multiple cities, this urban art program translates the realm of sport into a playful dialogue with urban space.

In play, as in sport, we all become players. Free of prejudice. It doesn't matter who we are, where we come from, whether we are rich or poor or speak different languages. What counts is the joy of the game! Play creates a free, open space for connection, experimentation, and self-efficacy. Those who play learn! Through play, we gain skills, discover our built environment, and forge strategies and ways of thinking. Playing in the city means interpreting space: establishing a relationship between space, body, and the object of play.

Playful design succeeds when, with the fewest toys in hand, it yields the broadest spectrum of play. Moving through the city on a wooden board on wheels, a skateboard, you uncover endless ways to engage with the urban architecture. The built environment meets your moving, climbing, and jumping body with an endless array of obstacles and objects to play with. A simple white line or circle on the ground, the joints between paving slabs, or a change in the patterning of a floor covering suggest patterns of movement – stimuli that a child's playful eye will intuitively recognise, prompting to use the geometry of the space as a playground.

Play gives us the gift of being able to experience beautiful moments again and again – moments of success, moments of learning, and moments of togetherness.

In the words of George Bernard Shaw: "We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing."

Playing means exploring the urban space. Playing with the city dissolves the bare logic of public space. Beyond its measured functions as traffic and transit, as a stage for commerce and consumption, public space remains a shared living space – and, above all, a cradle where new possibilities arise. Public space often seems closed off. Characterized by frenzied consumption, salesmanship, restlessness, or – as the artist Adam Kraft says – by the "constant striving for productivity". In playing together, we aim to leave this behind us, to connect, to uncover hidden things, to let our creativity soar, and to show one another mutual respect. It's not about winning or losing – it's about

Text: Georg Barringhaus

savoring the moment, together.

The unifying power of play is also evident in the Ruhr Area. In its cultural diversity, in its seemingly endless urban network that transcends city limits, in its former below-ground mentality, in its cultural and economic interconnection with the world. The Ruhr Area, in the heart of Europe, is Germany's largest economic area and a centre for research and education, boasting an incredible density of cultural institutions, museums, theatres, concert halls, and cultural centres.

The City of Play picks up on the idea of connection in its programme locations. The old freight railway, its viaduct threading through the urban canyons of Mülheim an der Ruhr, now sighs as a cycle highway, linking Duisburg, Mülheim an der Ruhr, and Essen. Duisburg's Inner Harbour, bridging the Ruhr region by river, and Essen's subterranean network of tracks whisper of connection and movement.

The City of Play is likewise on the move. With its mobile and modular architecture dubbed "the Playground", it travels through the Ruhr Area on its two-month journey. The Playground's steel containers and heavy-duty shelving invoke the rigidity of the urban system. Even as people, ideas, and thoughts drift like rivers, the built landscape remains largely static and inflexible, which is also true for urban planning processes. The Playground infuses the city with unceasing motion – a process of creation and perpetual change. Its modular form invites for appropriation and co-creation. From here, art spills into the urban space – you are invited to observe the process and to play along!

The artistic negotiation of urban space I spoke of at the outset is a perpetual back-and-forth with those who dwell in the city, shaping and stewarding its breath. In this exchange, threads of connection are woven, even as friction and resistance rise, giving way to dialogue and compromise. Here, art is also to be understood as a democratic medium, as a plebiscitary element of the city's decision-making system.

My dear city-dwellers, neighbours, artists, international guests, athletes, officials, politicians, and employees of the city administration, let's celebrate the right to the city and the right to play!

Our huge thanks go to the Ministry of Culture and Science of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, which is making the City of Play possible. Thanks to the Rhine-Ruhr 2025 FISU World University Games, which have embraced the idea and value of sport as an integrative force in the same way as art and welcomed them as part of the

Games. Thanks also to our neighbours and to you at Makroscope for allowing us to share your living space with you.

Many thanks to the local authorities for allowing this playful experiment to take place! And thanks to the fantastic project team and the curatorial team behind the City of Play, who have worked tirelessly and with tremendous dedication to transform the city into a playground.

My dear friends, even the rain can't dampen my excitement about launching the City of Play.

Let's play together today!

MARTHA COOPER

1977 – 1980, New York

New York City in the 1970s was gripped by crisis. The city faced near-bankruptcy, struggled to maintain essential infrastructure, and was marked by rising crime and widespread social decay. Stark social inequality was inscribed into the urban fabric, as entire neighbourhoods – particularly those inhabited by marginalized communities – fell into disrepair, succumbing to drug use, crime, and unemployment. Property owners and municipal authorities alike left the socially deprived areas to decay. The so-called “projects” became symbols of structural disinvestment—spaces often perceived as lawless, shaped by poverty and a profound lack of opportunity.

At this time, from 1977 to 1980, Martha Cooper was working as a photographer for the New York Post. She prowled New York’s neighbourhoods pursuing pictures. In addition to daily assignments, she often took feature photos called weather shots for use as fillers when news was slow. While exploring the city’s neighbourhoods, Cooper became increasingly drawn to one recurring subject: children at play in the streets. Martha Cooper began to photograph them.

The city’s poorer neighbourhoods had the richest street life. Martha Cooper was fascinated by the creativity, resilience, and joy of the children, who made the most of what little the streets and wastelands had to offer. One of their favourite spots was Alphabet City – a neighbourhood in the process of urban renewal. An urban landscape full of rubble and abandoned buildings. To a child, the abandoned buildings and rubble-strewn lots made perfect playgrounds, providing raw materials and open space for improvised play. A crumbling tenement housed a secret clubhouse and a rooftop became a private aviary, while a pile of trash might be a source for treasure, building rubble became material for go-karts, and hydrants became water playgrounds. Children often played for hours without adult supervision, often even supervising their younger siblings.



Building a club house from found material, Lower Eastside, Manhattan, 1978

In her series “Street Play” Martha Cooper documents a piece of contemporary American history. She tells the story of the transformative power of play. Motivated by her own admiration of the children and their unbridled joie de vivre, she spent three years collecting images. Her street photography shows unfiltered how play conquers space – how play in its simplicity generates creativity, energy, humor, and a willingness to share.

These experiences profoundly shaped Martha Cooper’s photographic practice. As she documented children’s play in the streets, she also encountered emerging elements of what would become known as hip-hop culture – particularly graffiti and breakdancing. Her book “Subway Art”, published in 1984 in collaboration with Henry Chalfant, documents the beginnings of “New York-style writing” and was often referred to as a “landmark photographic history”.

Text: Georg Barringhaus

Boy with stilts, Lower Eastside, Manhattan, 1978





Kids climbing fence, Lower Eastside, Manhattan, 1978



Fishing for coins, Brooklyn, 1978



Go-cart made from police barricade,
racing on abandoned West-Side Highway, 1978

Flipping on mattress, Lower Eastside, Manhattan, 1978



City of Play: Linking Play to Urban Intervention

INTRO

PLAY FREELY

In his book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, published in 1938, Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga develops an analysis of play as a practice that is actively involved in the social construction of individuals and society, as it prece des culture. What makes this practice possible is that “play is first and foremost a free action” (Huizinga 1938: 25) because it always unfolds as a specific time outside of everyday life. Play establishes its own rules to which players consent; it can never be commanded, otherwise it would lose all its interest. This is, in fact, one of the motifs of dystopian games represented in cinema in recent decades: From *The Hunger Games* to the more recent *Squid Game*, the game becomes alienating when partici- pants are forced to take part.

While “play is superfluous” (Huizinga: 26) because it is merely a pretext for escape, it encourages players’ agency by offering them a unique experience of social interaction within a liberated time, because it is chosen: Freeing up time to engage in a non-productivist activity already attests to the power of action it contains. In this way, play acts as a practical implementation of ethical and sensible issues that players may encounter in their daily lives. It simulates conditions of interaction in favour of a rule or a choice of players. For the duration of the game, it symbolically transposes and rearranges power relations existing outside the game and shifts players’ perception of the situations they experience.

POLITICAL PLAY

The philosopher of art Jacinto Lageira updates Huizinga’s thought: It is through this initiatory dimension that “it clearly appears that play is not only a free practice, but above all, play pushes one to act in order to achieve freedom. [...] Players are engaged in the action of play, which also represents human actions in their social and political interactions” (Lageira 2015: 157). Lageira calls for vigilance regarding the political dimension of play, particularly through the question of fair play in relation to sport: Depending on the values that frame the game, it can very easily become a tool for manipulation or enslavement. It is at this point that Huizinga’s approach is criticized by the Dutch artist Constant Anton Nieuwenhuys, known as Constant, in his introductory text to New Babylon, a utopian urban planning project he developed from 1956 onwards. More than vigilance, he delivers a formal notice on the role of play in a utilitarian society: Play must be a moment of leisure and not entertainment.

Behind the enslaved *Homo faber*, there is “a potential Homo ludens in each of us. The liberation of man’s ludic potential is directly linked to his liberation as a social being” (Andreotti 2008: 223). Play can only be an emancipatory framework if it serves the mass of workers, and not the prerogative of the idle owning class. It is necessary to invest in the inscription of play in the daily lives of players, as a space-time for re-subjection – that is, a moment when players can once again think of themselves as subjects in control of their actions—because “play is a struggle for something or a representation” (Huizinga: 35). One must have control over one’s own time, as one might have control over public space to develop ludic-constructive urban situations whose transformative power extends beyond the framework of representation.

Text: Mathieu Tremblin

"ART IN AND WITHIN THE CITY"

The same applies to art if we believe the vision held by the Situationist International, of which he is a member. At the turn of the 1960s and in the pursuit of the avant-garde, art was transformed into instructions, performance, and documentation (Szeemann 1969). It is simultaneously information and a form of life – it manifests itself in daily life, like a newspaper. The aim now is to live art to intensify life, and even to surpass art so that life becomes more interesting than art (Berréby 2004; Filliou 1998). The motive for creation becomes an incentive to take action, to realize utopias, or to materialize power dynamics. The urban space is the fertile ground for all experiments, starting with the right to the city—the capacity of everyone to produce public space in service of the common good.

The individual who engages in creative urban practice is an amateur player. Like professionals – urban artists – they identify the grey areas of urbanism, rewrite the rules of conventional usage, and develop practical knowledge of desire paths. Through symbolic and pragmatic experience, they immerse us in novel sensible configurations that contribute, through empathy, to re-defining our habitus and encourage our ability to act on our immediate environment. Art in and within the city, if not solely the product of authority, can be perceived as a game, as much as an initiation into citizen participation practices. Reciprocally, play as urban creation activates a political reading of spaces.

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24 MAY – 8 JUNE 2025

MÜLHEIM AN DER RUHR



PL	Playground	G	Mathieu Tremblin	"Corner"
A	Asger Jorn	3	Maik & Dirk Löbbert	"FLUSS"
B	Yolanda Domínguez	7	Coco Berghom	"To Watch With Eyes Unclouded"
C	Démocratie Créative	8	Coco Berghom	"We Don't Stop Playing (...)"
D	The Wa	9	Coco Bergholm	"Play, Play, Play"
E	Brad Downey	11	OX	"Poster Interventions"
		12	OX	
		13	OX	
F	Aïda Gómez			
	"Three-Sided Football"			
	"Gym Win Session"			
	"Street Art for the People to Play"			
	"Playground"			
	"Un-Stitching Karl"			
	"House of Cards"			
	"Castles Beneath Cities"			
	"Massive Word Search Games"			

City of Play - Playing with Perspectives

Text: Stefanie Klingemann

With City of Play, Mülheim an der Ruhr became an urban experimental field for art in public space. The project transformed familiar locations into participatory, artistically designed environments and opened up new perspectives on the city. Historical structures such as the railway viaduct with its vacant arches, the high-speed cycle route RS1, and the Rathausmarkt became stages and playgrounds for a collective urban experience. Mülheim proved to be an ideal “playground”: Here, different layers – viaducts, bridges, façades, and billboards – overlap to form a spatial network where perspectives can be experienced horizontally, vertically, and three-dimensionally. Diverse artistic approaches – from temporary interventions and performative actions to participatory formats – turned public space itself into a medium of artistic research.

Local and international artists provided impulses at the intersections of everyday life and art. **Coco Bergholm** staged quotes on *Fair Play* and hospitality along the railway line between Duisburg, Mülheim, and Essen, drawing attention to the poetic dimension of everyday routes. **OX** transformed advertising spaces and façades through ad-busting into critical, visual arenas of discussion. **Maik and Dirk Löbbert**, with their mural *FLUSS*, visually extended the railway viaduct and opened up new lines of sight.

With *DIY Ping Pong*, **Markus Zimmermann** invited visitors to build and play with table tennis bats and tables made from donated materials – turning the Rathausmarkt into a studio, workshop, and playing field all at once. **Frank Bölter**, together with local residents, created life-sized origami sculptures that activated a dialogue between au-

dience, architecture, and community. The **unknown artists collective** transformed existing artworks in public space – such as *Faltung* by Peter Schwickerath, *Brücke*, or *Dröppelminna* by Ernst Rasche – into temporary playgrounds through performative interventions.

Katze und Krieg, in *playing around*, made public space itself a playground, exploring through performative spontaneity how urban hierarchies can be broken up and fleeting communities created. The **Contemporary Circus** program used the city's architecture as a stage in *Bridging Gaps*: Juggling, parkour, dance, and aerial acrobatics combined in a choreographed exploration of Rathausmarkt, viaduct, and railway bridge.

Numerous participatory formats strengthened local collaborations and enabled broad participation – from workshops and jam sessions to the *Public Dinner*, *Radio Residencies*, and *Climate Casino*, a climate game by **Sebastian Quack**.

In particular, the artist collective of **Makroscope e.V.** made a key contribution to connecting local actors through workshops, the creative market, and the sports market beneath the viaduct, fostering exchange between art, urban society, and urban practice. Musical contributions by **Arne Bunjes** (*Themes for Great Cities*) and **Mario Schoo** (*Fundament Schallplatten*), the band **Nassau** and DJs invited by **Call Shop Radio** added an atmospheric, sonic dimension to the artistic experience.

City of Play demonstrated impressively how art can activate public space as a laboratory for shifting perspectives. Through play – understood as a driving force for open action, collective exploration, and sensory experience – Mülheim was not only visibly transformed, but also reimaged.

B. BENKE Audience

>> At the opening of City of Play, I was completely surprised by how alive the square and the arches of the railway viaduct suddenly became. Dancers jumped, twirled, and spun to driving techno music, as if inviting the architecture itself to join in. For a moment, the city felt like a playground – and I couldn't stop marveling and laughing. <<

COCO BERGHOLM Artist

>> Culture and play bring people together. They create exchange. They build bridges. Prejudices can be broken down. Coming together in a space that is free from consumerism. <<



JANA HORTIAN Assistant Artistic Director

>> One evening, the local wine festival "*Schön hier*" took place on the town hall square, a well-known event that draws people from all over Mülheim / Ruhr. But this time, the visitors weren't met with the usual grey, monotonous, and partly car-covered square. Instead, they encountered a completely transformed space. Children were driving a life-sized, paper-folded car across the plaza. A huge, walkable play structure stood in the middle. Kids were playing and running around. And right in the centre: three small round ping-pong tables, designed by artist Markus Zimmermann, knee-high, flexible, and made from leftover materials.

Two colleagues, two artists and I spontaneously started playing on them. The paddles – colourful, different in size, made from all kinds of materials – had been crafted in workshops with local children. Each one played differently, which was exactly what made them so special. One by one, people stopped and joined us – without many words and without set rules. Children, older people, wine festival visitors, and passers-by came together. The groups changed constantly, and with each new player, the game evolved. At one point, for example, when the ball kept falling into the hole between the three tables, I suggested: Let's swap paddles each time that happens. Everyone laughed and agreed. Soon we were aiming for the hole just to try out a new paddle. Each exchange changed the rhythm of the game. Over time, new rules emerged: playing in pairs, switching directions, inventing new goals. What moved me most was how many different kinds of people came together, people who might never have met otherwise and connected through play. It didn't matter who you were, how old you were, or where you came from. Together they created a space where everyone could take part and give rise to something new: a game that hadn't existed before. <<











DIY Ping Pong is a participatory art project that focuses on found objects, used materials, and remnants. From what others no longer need, new forms of encounter and collective action emerge.

At its core lies the idea of building a ping pong table and rackets from scratch – using only locally available resources and material donations from Mülheim an der Ruhr. The project thus becomes both an artistic and social intervention, activating local materials, spaces, and people.

DIY Ping Pong invited children and young people from Mülheim to take part. Together they built, played, and created – discovering how something new and shared can arise from what was once considered leftover.

The work by Markus Zimmermann / Superfiliale is at once installation, workshop, and social experiment. It raises awareness for a thoughtful and sustainable use of materials and resources while offering low-threshold opportunities for people of different generations and social backgrounds.

At its centre stands play as a connecting element – a space for exchange, joy, and collective learning.

Text: Stefanie Klingemann







MARKUS ZIMMERMANN Artist

>> One moment touched me deeply: Two kids wanted to build a ramp all by themselves. They had hardly any experience with tools or materials – but they had absolute determination. With wood glue, tape, and a lot of improvisation, they joined the boards together. I watched them with a smile, sometimes with my hands over my face as they emptied half a tube of glue to fix a crooked spot. Of course, I knew how to do it "properly". But in the end, their ramp held – crooked, covered in glue, but stable. It carried every wheel and every jump. Then came a wave of shame – the awareness of my own timidity: how many things do I avoid because I tell myself they're "not realistic", too complicated, too expensive, too late. Meanwhile, those two just went ahead and did it. That small scene was a lesson in trust, playfulness, and determination – and a reminder that sometimes willpower matters more than skill.

My personal highlights were definitely the concerts and performances. I especially remember a jam session beneath the bridge arches: people standing around, listening to the musicians improvise, watching how they reacted to one another – and at the same time striking up conversations with other listeners. The audience that mild summer evening was marked by a rare openness. The absolute highlight, though, was the performance by Nausssau on the opening day. Under the roof of the vacant kiosk at the town square – where I had been sawing wood that very morning – they played a wild, immediate concert. The three guys stood with microphones in hand, face to face with their fans. No distance, no barrier – as close as a conversation.

It felt as if band and fans had just arranged to meet a few hours earlier: about thirty young people, each with their own distinctive style – pure youth culture. Everyone was completely into it, singing along to every line, like: "And you can tell by our noses that we're from the Pott." It was pure energy. What I loved most about City of Play was the openness and directness of the people on site. Many had a precise sense of what they needed in their urban space – a kind of "client competence" that I truly value. My initial idea was to build ping-pong tables from found or donated scrap materials – a kind of social sculpture that encourages movement, play, and encounters. But it soon became clear that the place and its dynamics called for something else. The square, the weather, the presence of the young people – all of that kept reshaping the project and forced me to stay flexible.

That, for me, was the true value of City of Play: There was no fixed format, but space for process, chance, and genuine participation. I learned that artistic work in public space means letting go of control and allowing resonance – even when the result turns out differently than planned. At the same time, it raised a question for me: Who am I in such contexts? An artist working with material and form – or someone who enables, organizes, and mediates social situations? City of Play allowed these roles to merge into one another. <<



Bridging Gaps

MÜLHEIM AN DER RUHR

CONTEMPORARY CIRCUS
FLYGUYS, KEVIN RUTKOWSKI, DUO SÜNE & THORSTEN,
BENJAMIN RICHTER & FRIENDS, UNSKREWED ENSEMBLE

During the contemporary circus parcours “Bridging Gaps” on the cycle highway, a spontaneous choreography emerged between the jugglers and urban dance artists, where dance and juggling playfully merged into one another. The sense of spontaneous joy that arose instantly carried over to the audience.

A particularly striking moment was the impromptu performance by parkour artists and jugglers at the City of Play container: Balls were tossed back and forth by climbing performers, even thrown across the square from high above, while someone played a beat on the container’s frame with drumsticks.

The transdisciplinary concept of City of Play is highly inspiring – as is the approach of involving the local community.



Text: Stefanie Klingemann











With FLUSS, the artists have realized a site-specific painting on the listed railway viaduct in the centre of Mülheim an der Ruhr. Known for their precise and minimal interventions in architecture and public space, Maik and Dirk Löbbert question habitual patterns of perception and open up new perspectives on everyday environments. Their artistic practice operates at the intersection of painting, sculpture, and spatial intervention, consistently emphasizing the relationship between space, movement, and the viewer.

The viaduct, part of a former railway line built in 1865, was in use for rail traffic until 2002 and later integrated into the RS1 cycle expressway. Today, it forms an important urban link between the Ruhr River and the city centre. Within the 39 brick arches of the structure, the work FLUSS unfolds – extending from the river toward the urban core and symbolically connecting nature and city, motion and stillness, history and the present.

The title refers to the Ruhr, the river that gives the region its name and has long been a carrier of economic, ecological, and cultural development. Here, the river also serves as a metaphor for change and transformation – key themes that have shaped the Ruhr Area from its industrial past to its post-industrial present. In this sense, FLUSS echoes Heraclitus' famous notion of *pántarheî* ("everything flows"), which describes constant change as the fundamental principle of all things.

The work consists of 39 monochrome colour fields integrated into the viaduct's arches, forming an imagined river course through their sequence. Depending on one's position and movement, perspectives, light, and colour effects shift continuously – creating an ever-changing image that sets the architectural space itself in motion. FLUSS is best experienced while walking or cycling along the viaduct: Only through movement within the urban space does the work fully unfold in its temporal and spatial dimensions, emerging as a sequence of painterly impressions that merge into a flowing whole.

In their use of colour, the artists reference the painting of Claude Monet, whose depictions of water were not aimed at naturalistic representation but at exploring colour, structure, and the effects of light. Likewise, Maik and Dirk Löbbert do not depict water as such, but translate it into a painterly conception that transforms perception itself.

FLUSS marks the historic viaduct as a place of transition and transformation – between past and future, movement and stillness, function and imagination. In turning a static architectural structure into a dynamic visual sequence, the project embodies its guiding principle: Everything is in flux.

Text: Stefanie Klingemann









DR. HANNA HINRICHS

Head of the Culture Department of
the City of Mülheim an der Ruhr

» FLUSS itself is static, a still image – an image that dissolves into its individual parts when the viewer stands still. FLUSS relies on the movement of its viewers: those who drive by in cars or look out from a bus, those who cycle from the Ruhr or towards the Ruhr, and those who gaze at the railway arches from the station or the town hall. For all these viewers, the flickering play of colours creates the image of a moving river, like a flip book in which we are both spectators and thumbs.

In my view, FLUSS is a work that makes use of the city – a work that would not function without the surrounding urban landscape and its people. Without its viewers, FLUSS would end up as a colorful design on individual walls.

But FLUSS is more than that: It not only needs the city, it also serves the city. Like water that cannot be stopped, FLUSS invades the niches and cavities of the urban fabric, nestles there, and creates beauty and the basis for new biotopes. In this context, the niches are the railway arches beneath the cycle highway. They form a permeable boundary between the city centre and the Rathausmarkt, an important city square. Yet the arches also describe “voids”: Since the fixtures and uses that once existed there have disappeared, the arches are open – both their role and their use for the city remain open to possibility.

FLUSS is making its mark here, claiming design, visibility, and appropriation; it dispels the invisibility that typically surrounds such niches and cavities. The many participants who transformed the railway arches into a lively part of the city during City of Play offer a first taste of the new life that is possible there. I am especially pleased that it is primarily Mülheim actors who have seized this opportunity. FLUSS is already making an impact – and Mülheim an der Ruhr can continue to adorn itself with this unique artistic work by Maik and Dirk Löbbert in the long term. «

Frank Bölter is a conceptual and performance artist whose practice operates at the intersection of art, everyday life, and social space. Central to his work are the participation of people, the activation of public spaces, and the poetic as well as political dimensions of the everyday.

Bölter became known for his large-scale, participatory paper projects: monumental folded objects – boats, houses, airplanes – made from ordinary cardboard or paper sheets, created collectively with passers-by, students, or local residents. These ephemeral sculptures challenge notions of permanence, value, and authorship, transforming the act of collective making itself into a work of art.

For the project City of Play in Mülheim an der Ruhr, Bölter spent several weeks on site, inviting people of all ages to collaboratively fold an oversized origami object. From a single large sheet of paper, an automobile first took shape – parked in front of the town hall, it became an unexpected eye-catcher among the elegant wedding cars stationed there daily. The following week, the paper car was refolded into an airplane. Participants decided to launch the paper plane from the Playground's container architecture – a symbolic flight ending in an abrupt crash. From the remains of this fallen object, Bölter and a new group of participants folded a ship, which was then launched on the River Ruhr. In the end, the artist himself boarded the paper boat and sailed away – to the next City of Play location in Duisburg.

With playful lightness, Bölter intertwines everyday actions with shared experience, transforming the urban environment into a playground for participatory art.

Text: Stefanie Klingemann













katze und krieg operate in the field of performance art, particularly through their interventions in public space. Their practice is situated at the threshold between play and subversion, everyday life and artistic action.

In their performance “playing around”, they deliberately draw on found objects, urban interstices, and spontaneous encounters. Barefoot and open to whatever may happen, they explore the parameters of children’s play and the rules governing urban spaces. The point of departure is transformation: Office workers in classic business attire begin to dance to music in the middle of the street, breathe loudly, and gradually undress until they stand barefoot in dresses or T-shirts – then set off to discover the city.

They play with everything they find: people, trash cans, flower beds, café furniture – transforming public space into a playground. The audience is invited to follow the performance via wireless transmission and headphones. They listen, observe, and become part of the event. The conventional codes of the urban environment are questioned: The city is no longer experienced as a controlled space, but as a field of shared possibilities.

With lightness and humour, katze und krieg extend an invitation – to play, to rethink, to encounter. The city ceases to be a static structure and becomes an open setting. The audience turns into fellow players – in the best sense of a performative togetherness.

Text: Stefanie Klingemann









The unknown artists collective is an open group of people who engage with and activate public spaces.

For City of Play in Mülheim an der Ruhr, the artists collective embarked on a multi-day exploration of the city to examine public artworks within the urban space. Through temporary interventions and short-term experiments, the existing works were explored and reinterpreted, revealing their diverse possibilities of use and meaning.

In dialogue with the artworks already present in public space, new artistic positions emerged that directly respond to and interact with their surroundings.

The project can be understood both as an artistic investigation and as a form of social practice – it activates existing places, opens new perspectives, and creates opportunities for shared experience and participation.

In Mülheim, Clara Heußer, Sina Sophie Ruge, Axsel Schmuck, and Ursula Strohwald worked in collaboration with the head of the Class of New Media and Performative Arts at the University of Applied Arts and Sciences, Ottersberg.

The following artworks were part of the artistic research: Peter Schwickerath: Faltung, Ernst Rasche: Brücke, Ernst Rasche: Dröppelminna, Jupp Rübsam: Fohlengruppe, Heinrich Adolfs: Lebensfreude, Lisa Merkel: Untitled (Metallplastik), Rolf Binder: Untitled (Rostvita), Otto Herbert Hajek: Stadtkonographie mit Stadtzeichen und Wasserflächen.

Text: Stefanie Klingemann



right: unknown artists collective interacting with "Stadtkonographie", Otto Herbert Hajek, 1977
left: unknown artists collective interacting with "Fohlengruppe", Jupp Rübsam, 1927



unknown artists collective interacting with
"Fohlengruppe", Jupp Rübsam, 1927



unknown artists collective interacting with
"Lebensfreude", Heinrich Adolfs, 1963



unknown artists collective interacting with
"Brücke", Ernst Rasche, 1991



Hanging Out - Situations Between Body and Space

MÜLHEIM AN DER RUHR

DÜSSELDORF UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES,
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND CULTURAL STUDIES

A one-week interdisciplinary workshop for students in art, social science, and cultural studies.

Based on the negotiation of public space through the body, using methods and strategies from urban practice, psychogeography, and aesthetic experience.





Poetry, Geometry, and Street Sign Vocabulary

MÜLHEIM AN DER RUHR

TEXT AND POSTER INTERVENTIONS
BY COCO BERGHOLM & OX

The train line linking Mülheim an der Ruhr, Duisburg, and Essen became a prime target for the City of Play. As a symbol of movement, connectivity, and interconnection, and as the main traffic corridor for the FISU World University Games, it was chosen as the spatial setting for a series of text-based interventions in public space.

In collaboration with Berlin-based artist Coco Bergholm, the framework narrative of “Fair Play” was established, blending sport and play while underscoring the Ruhr area’s welcoming culture. Architectural landmarks near the main train stations of the three cities served as backdrops and canvases for a series of four text interventions, rendered in black-and-white foil prints on façades and in human-scale letters mounted on scaffolding. Installed in mid-May 2025, the interventions marked the launch of the City of Play’s public programme and accompanied it to its conclusion.

Additionally, as a collaborative practice between the invited artists Coco Bergholm and Paris-based street artist OX, they prepared an additional series of text interventions, posters, flags, light installations, and ad-bustings for the local programme spaces in Mülheim an der Ruhr, Duisburg, and Essen.

While Coco Bergholm partially merged the themes of play, public space, and welcoming culture with site-specific twists, OX combined his site-specific approach to ad-bustings – the visual parasitizing of public space – with a series of posters focused on the broader topic of play. Following a recurring colour palette of black, white, yellow, blue, red, and green, he designed a range of motifs that invite viewers into a mind game of shapes, forms, and geometry, with allusions to classic board games and game theory. For the interventions in Essen, OX introduced a further approach that merged Coco’s text-based method with his own visual negotiation of street signs, creating a distinct vocabulary of street-sign – inspired letters.

Text: Georg Barringhaus





TO WATCH WITH EYES UNCLOUDED

COCO BERGHOLM

MÜLHEIM AN DER RUHR

Words have weight.

Words shape thoughts.

Thoughts shape actions.

If you imagine that your thoughts
are written on the city's skyscrapers
in letters five metres tall,
you will think twice
about what to write.

"Responsibility begins in dreams." (YEATS)

"What goes around comes around."

The Gorilla Girls are masters at weaving subtle humour into their messages,
which allows those addressed to accept the criticism.

Other poets such as Jenny Holzer use clear, straightforward language.

For a long time, I shied away from
incorporating language into my art.
Image titles took away my freedom
to think freely in all directions when interpreting them.

Then I had to walk past a wall every day
on which someone had written
"the only constant is change".
And every day I thought about it.

the words were like a seed
that someone had planted inside me
and it grew branches and leaves,
and blossoms and fruits

so I thought,
what if I could also make people's thoughts blossom?
I started collecting:
quotes that touched me,
that made me think.
I had my friends
translate them into different languages

I cut out stencils and made posters,
which I put up in different cities.

Sometimes I feel like thoughts fade away
even though they make such clear and unambiguous statements –
it seems as if everyone hears them but no one listens.

"THE ABUSE OF POWER COMES AS NO SURPRISE"

(Jenny Holzer)

How is it that we do not actively work
to curtail the power of the powerful
and eliminate the powerlessness of the powerless?
"(Art should) comfort the disturbed
and disturb the comfortable"

(Cesar A. Cruz)

For my invitation to City of Play,

I spoke to many people

and asked them what message would be important to them.

I remember that my psychologist said

she would share this sentence for everyone to read:

"Over the stones to the stars"

She was perhaps thinking
that it is worth walking stony paths -
originally a quote attributed to Seneca

"Per aspera ad astra"

I contributed many ideas as sketches for City of Play.

A small selection was then realised.

I would have liked to work in multiple languages,
but not everything you wish for is possible.

The quotes we finally chose
refer in the broadest sense
to a culture of welcome –
a light-footed, curious approach to one another
an openness to new experiences
the desire to get to know the unfamiliar
the desire to give and share
to expect good things

Text: Coco Bergholm



TO WATCH WITH EYES UNCLOUDED

SWB

Technisches Rathaus
Hans-Böckler-Platz 5



TO WATCH WITH EYES UNCLOSED

Mülheim (Ruhr) Hbf

13:46
Dortmund Hbf



13:48
Mülheim (Ruhr) Hbf

ABSURDO. ABSURDO.



WE DON'T STOP PLAYING CAUSE WE GROW OLD WE GROW OLD CAUSE WE STOP PLAYING

COCO BERGHOLM

MÜLHEIM AN DER RUHR



**PLAY
PLAY
PLAY**

COCO BERGHOLM



Poster Interventions

OX

MÜLHEIM AN DER RUHR



OX Artist

>> My collage work on billboards interacting with public spaces involves creating a visual tension between the existing environment and the image I add to it. In my interventions for City of Play, it was less a contextual approach than a play on the notion of play itself.

The research I usually conduct is already a form of play. Treasure hunts to find locations, games with shapes and colours. Finally, when the intervention is in place, games of hide-and-seek with the viewer, who will or will not be able to spot the diversion and discover the intention.

This particular approach was therefore very natural for me because I've always been passionate about the aesthetics of games and, more generally, everything related to educational learning. Creative games, cutouts, trace-shapes...

The posters and flags created for the event gave pride of place to this imagination: the geometric shapes of colouring books or arithmetic introductions, construction games, crossword puzzles, stickers.

They also incorporated the formal language of urban signage, particularly road signs. This other game consisted of creating as many versions as possible of the no stopping sign, formed by a circle and a red cross on a blue background, which are also the two letters that make up my signature

I also composed an alphabet based on road signs. Coco used it for some of her texts for the Litfass columns. <<











Round Table: Playful Cities - A Conversation on Art, Play, and Public Space

To launch the City of Play in Mülheim, the discussion "Playful Cities" invited artists, researchers, and cultural practitioners to explore the intersections between art, play, and urban life. The roundtable brought together voices from art, design, and urban research to reflect on how playful interventions can reshape public space and open new ways of experiencing the city.

JANA HORTIAN Assistant Artistic Director

» The City of Play embarks on a playful journey through the Ruhr Area. While offering new perspectives on public space the project highlights the transformative power of play – as a way to connect, to learn, and to test boundaries. It is not merely a spectacle of entertainment; the artistic process invites the audience to reflect on freedom, participation, and their stake in the city's ecosystem. «

The conversation, moderated by

Annekathrin Kohout, author and pop culture researcher, featured:

Dr. Jens Junge, professor and director of the Institute for Ludology, who studies what games reveal about human behaviour;

Sebastian Quack, artist, curator, and game designer working between performance, theatre, and urban play;

Stefanie Klingemann, artist and initiator of participatory art projects that animate public spaces; and

Sebastian Sowa, artist and landscape architect exploring the intersection of art, play, and landscape.

The discussion ranged from the fundamental question "Why do we play?" to the societal role of games and their potential as artistic and civic tools for transformation.

LEARNING FROM PLAY – JENS JUNGE ON THE MEANING OF PLAY

Jens Junge opens his talk with a thought that at first sounds paradoxical: Play is often considered a waste of time. It is not goal-oriented, not productive, and in our society frequently regarded as "unnecessary". For Junge, that is precisely the misconception:

"PLAY MAKES US HEALTHY, HAPPY, AND SMART."

"Even as children, we discover the world through play – by exploring materials, experimenting with things, and developing imagination. Play is a universal human drive, deeply rooted within us, as we can also observe in animals: Cats and dogs play to train their skills – to hunt, to hide, to fight. For humans, too, play is a way of practicing and learning."

With the development of language and culture came more complex forms of play. Jung points to examples such as the Lion Man from the Ulm Museum – a figurine more than 40,000 years old:

"When we work with imagination, when we visualize things and embed them in stories – that's play. Perhaps it's also art, but it is certainly an expression of play."

For Jung, toys are not necessarily material objects. Rather, he defines them as "object plus imagination."

"Everything we play with comes alive through our imagination. It is from imagination that rules emerge – and with them what in English we call a game. Board games from early civilizations like Egypt or Mesopotamia reflect the abstract play of culture and society – a simulation of life, where figures move across a field, guided by chance and strategy."

At its core, Jung describes play as a dialogue with the world:

"Play is always about exchange, about getting to know, about learning – literally grasping things. It's not just fun; it's a way of understanding the world."

He also speaks about the effects of play on people:

"When we want to be creative, when we imagine things that don't yet exist, we do it playfully. Play can help us relieve stress, question rules, and try out alternative paths. We don't always have to win or punish – we can also support, we can also bring joy."

Jung explains that different forms of play offer different kinds of experience:

“Explorative play lets us get to know our surroundings. Fantasy and role-play help us develop identity and find out who we want to be. Constructive play allows us to build, to change, even to break things and rebuild them. And rule-based play shows us how society functions – who gets to join, which rules apply, who is included, who is left out.”

Finally, Jung sums it all up:

“Play develops our capacity to handle being overwhelmed. It teaches us that life is diverse, that there are always several paths, and that we can respond flexibly. Play connects joy, learning, and social reflection. It lets us experiment, imagine, wonder – and prepares us for reality.”

GOOD AND BAD GAMES – BOUNDARIES BETWEEN PLAY AND REALITY

ANNEKATHRIN KOHOUT: Jens, you made a case for free, explorative play. But I'd like to ask the group: Are there good and bad games? Or where do you draw the line between play and reality? And why is that boundary important?

JENS JUNG: Yes, I've tried to show that we constantly act within systems of rules and games – consciously or unconsciously. Culture itself emerges from play. Then one might ask: Do the rules of reality still fit me? Are they natural laws? No, they're invented orders. Who created them? Do I want to keep playing with them, or can I think differently, so that more people can join and we can actually enjoy it?

My point is: You can look at your life as a kind of game. Which systems do I get along with? Which reference systems are good for me? How do I want to shape my life and my interaction with others? Play is a space of experience, an opportunity to try out how things could be different. To take play seriously means to understand yourself and the world better, to reflect on conflicts, and to find new ways forward.

SEBASTIAN SOWA: Well, the first question was about good games and bad games. I'd start with the good ones.

A few days ago, I had an experience with my daughters in the forest – an archetypal moment, really. A tree trunk had fallen across a stream, and immediately the game began: How do you get across? Will you fall into the water? Half a meter deep, so no real danger. It was an incredibly beau-

tiful, spontaneous moment of play that just emerged. There's something there and we respond to it, and suddenly, a game arises. We all found it quite exciting. Of course, I joined in too – it was a question of weight whether I'd make it across. I did.

As for the boundary between play and reality, I find it interesting that we often separate spaces for play – here we can play, there it's serious. I'd really question that distinction and rather see play as an inherent reality of urban life. Just as a starting point.

ANNEKATHRIN KOHOUT: That connects to what you said, Jens: that anything can become an object of play, theoretically even water. What do you think, Stefanie?

STEFANIE KLINGEMANN: I would say: play as necessity, as principle. "Reality", or "seriousness", can be questioned, too. When rules become too narrow or rigid, play can bring vitality back into them.

In art, everything is material, and that includes reality – for example, public space. It can be questioned, expanded, altered, playfully challenged – always with a wink, a smile, and the will to try something new.

SEBASTIAN QUACK: I can address the question of good and bad games. Of course they exist. Just as there are good and bad films, literature, or culture. The evaluation isn't absolute; it's part of an ongoing negotiation. It would be a mistake to assume that play is always good or valuable. Think of the "popular torture games" of children – bullying classmates, for instance. That can be experienced as play, even though it's deeply problematic.

I'd rather talk about specific moments of play that we want to encourage, and others we should reject.

A fascinating perspective comes from Aaron Trammell's "Repairing Play": He examines play through an anti-racist lens, discussing the cruel, torturous, and dangerous aspects of play, showing that the act of engaging with the world through play can be both enriching and problematic.

JENS JUNG: Power games are an important element here. I want to return briefly to the topic of good or bad games.

We've argued that play should be taken seriously and its positive aspects highlighted. But people who play power games also know how powerful play can be. There are countless examples – take some from my collection from World War II:

games used to train children to become soldiers, saturated with ideology.

Or the classic Monopoly: created in 1904 as a critique of capitalism. Chance determines who gets property, and we can see patterns of society reflected in it. Today, Monopoly is one of the most successful capitalist games in existence.

It shows how games transmit worldviews, which can be perceived as positive or negative depending on the frame of reference.

ANNEKATHRIN KOHOUT: I'd like to pick up on that idea of "frames of reference." I think it's important, as Sebastian mentioned, that the playful can also be misused. Children who say, "It was only a game," use play as a way to avoid responsibility.

The playful can become problematic – depending on how it's communicated and lived.

SAFETY AND PLAY

SEBASTIAN QUACK: Exactly. The question of safety is crucial, because it's so individual. Depending on your background, status, or environment, you feel more or less safe.

In the past, when I organized street games in different cities, safety was sometimes a real issue – fear of crime, or simply fear of being looked at strangely.

But safety is essential for play to happen. It can be created spatially, socially, legally, or through communities.

JENS JUNG: I'd add that animals only play when they're full and safe. When you're fighting for survival, there's no time for play.

Play is always an artificial challenge – we pretend it matters, and we're happy when we master it. That feeling of success releases happiness hormones.

For playful installations in public space, that means asking: How do we create moments where people feel curious, able to experiment, neither over- nor under-challenged?

FROM MONSTER HUNTS TO CLIMATE CONFERENCES – GAMES AS ARENAS FOR SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

ANNEKATHRIN KOHOUT: Sebastian Quack, let's talk about your current work. You're developing a game about climate change denial. How do you try to convey social conflicts through play?

SEBASTIAN QUACK: I've started a video

game project about climate denialism that creates a space of encounter. You meet people with (in my view) problematic positions on the climate crisis – from outright deniers to skeptics and techno optimists. The aim isn't to teach, but to provide a safe space where players can position themselves..

ANNEKATHRIN KOHOUT: So the game acts as a mirror of social reality?

SEBASTIAN QUACK: Exactly. You're at a conference, maybe giving a keynote, interacting with others. It's a video game you can play at home, accompanied by events and exhibitions.

ANNEKATHRIN KOHOUT: Fascinating – especially in a time when dialogue across differing opinions has become so difficult.

URBAN SPACES FOR ALL – BETWEEN MULTIFUNCTIONALITY, SELF-DETERMINED PLAY, AND PARTICIPATION

ANNEKATHRIN KOHOUT: Sebastian Sowa, how do you approach this in your work? What kind of invitation lies behind your projects?

SEBASTIAN SOWA: I wouldn't generalize, but in our work we try to create spaces that spark curiosity and invite people to make them their own.

We design landscapes that aren't mono-functional – if you place a swing somewhere, everyone knows you can swing on it, but soon people start using it differently: climbing, standing, testing balance.

We're interested in that openness, in inviting many people to become active participants.

For example, in Venice we transformed a park area by covering the ground with slightly wobbly mirrors. Whoever steps on them has to balance their body and constantly adjust their perspective – seeing themselves, the surroundings, the sky. People experience the city in a new, playful way.

It's not about setting rules, but about creating possibilities. Visitors decide for themselves how to use the space: jumping, running, climbing, or simply resting.

That way, the city isn't just observed – it's actively experienced.

ANNEKATHRIN KOHOUT: So it's a kind of open interpretation of space?

SEBASTIAN SOWA: Exactly. Whether you play, rest, or meet others – anything is possible. The key is openness: no rules, just invitation.

Many public squares today are designed under the label of "multifunctionality." In practice,

though, they're often dominated by events, Christmas markets, or wine festivals, that exclude large parts of the population.

We need the courage to occupy urban spaces differently again.

SEBASTIAN QUACK: Yes, permission procedures and commercial logic often prevent people from becoming active themselves. I want to see a civic culture where people take responsibility and create their own formats – barbecues, games, gatherings.

SEBASTIAN SOWA: Urban life happens in the everyday, not through constant events. Everyday use and spontaneous appropriation are the key to vibrant public spaces.

JENS JUNG: Let me give a playful example: Look at how skaters use public plazas. As soon as they discover rails or stairs for their hobby, a city official appears and says, "We need a fenced-off skate park – this can't stay like that."

So free play quickly becomes rule-bound play, showing how limited our spaces for play often are in daily life.

ANNEKATHRIN KOHOUT: Exactly – that's what's so interesting about your work. You create open invitations. People can use the space as they wish – as playground, meeting point, even as a place to rest. And that openness defines your approach.

In your work, Stefanie, it's not only about creating such offerings, right? You often address participation – sometimes you challenge participants, sometimes you look for more collaborative forms.

STEFANIE KLINGEMANN: Yes, exactly. It's always about use – and with that, about self-awareness and responsibility. Only those who are aware of themselves and feel secure can move freely in public space, can play and experiment.

The question is: How do we reach that state? Basic needs must be met before freedom in play can be experienced. That's a fundamental question, I think, that concerns us all.

I'll give you an example from my work at Kunsthaus NRW in Kornelimünster. The grounds are open to the public – people walk their dogs there, even if they don't enter the museum. I rolled up a strip of lawn – about forty meters long – and left it there for a year. Nature reclaimed it.

The following year, we organized herb walks with a foraging expert; participants collected plants and made bread, butter, and lemonade.

For me, it's about how people appropriate space – how playful experiences connect to basic needs, food diversity, and a sense of agency.

ANNEKATHRIN KOHOUT: So it's also about questioning habits of perception and stimulating imagination?

STEFANIE KLINGEMANN: Exactly. The rolled-up turf becomes a subject in itself. You ask: What am I supposed to do with it? How do I interact with it? The intervention invites you to pause, to think further, to use your imagination.

Humour plays a role, too – the social norm that lawns must be neatly maintained is playfully subverted.

So play becomes a form of appropriation and reflection that opens up new perspectives.

ANNEKATHRIN KOHOUT: So you're not creating finished offers, but rather spaces where people can become active themselves.

STEFANIE KLINGEMANN: Yes, exactly. It's about participation, self-initiative, and the freedom to rediscover space. Play, appropriation, and reflection come together here – artistic experience and social learning become one.



MÜLHEIM UNFOLD PART 3

FRANK BÖLTER



On 8 June 2025, to mark the City of Play finissage in Mülheim an der Ruhr, artist Frank Bölter embarked on a journey along the Ruhr and Rhine. Under the title Mülheim Unfold Part 3, Bölter, with a little help from local collaborators, prepared a final human-scale origami sculpture: a paper boat. The boat, over 10 meters in length, was meant to be sent like a message in a bottle to travel the waterways of the Ruhr Area – a symbolic journey to connect the programme cities of Mülheim an der Ruhr and Duisburg, and a gesture of connection and travel.

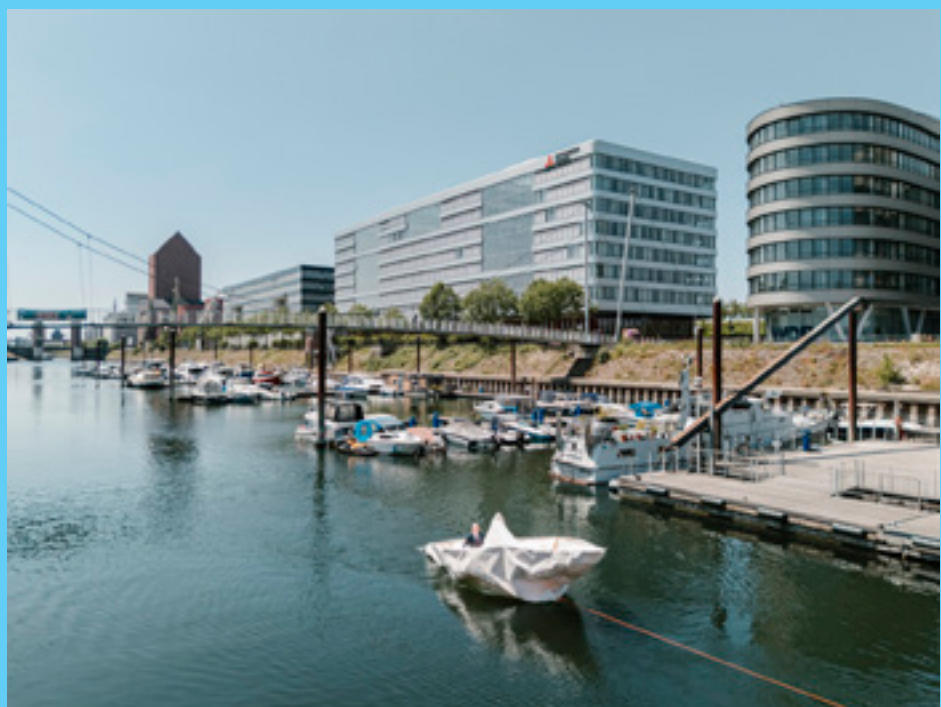
A public crowd gathered to witness the poetic, seemingly impossible adventure. People joined the procession, carrying the origami boat by hand from Rathausmarkt to the nearby riverside of the Ruhr. There, the boat was solemnly launched on the water with Bölter at the helm. Standing in a heroic posture, Frank and the boat drifted along in the boat, carried by the Ruhr currents, and slowly vanished on the horizon.

After nearly 14 days' sailing, Captain Frank and his boat were spotted by the lookout at Duisburg Inner Harbour on 21 June, the day the second chapter of the City of Play opened in Duisburg. Warmly welcomed and accompanied by the applause and shouts of the public, Bölter reached his destination. As the boat had traveled and drifted for two weeks, it had become soaked and was nearing the end of its life. A friendly skipper boarded to help and towed the boat to the shores of the Garten der Erinnerung.













DUISBURG



PL Playground

A Asger Jorn

B Yolanda Domínguez

C Démocratie Créative

D The Wa

E Brad Downey

F Aïda Gómez

"Three-sided football"

"Gym Win Session"

"Street Art for the People to Play"

"Playground"

"Un-Stitching Karl"

"House of Cards"

"Castles Beneath Cities"

"Massive Word Search Games"

G Mathieu Tremblin

19 Coco Berghom

20 Coco Berghom

21 Coco Berghom

22 Coco Berghom

23 Coco Berghom

24 OX

16 orizontale

"Corner"

"Smile at a Stranger"

"You Belong Here"

"I am Not Sending a Message (...)"

"Turn Me Into Something Else"

"To Be Like Water"

"Flags"

"DUISPOOL"

Swimmable Cities: A Urban Pool in Duisburg

DUISBURG

Moving from Mülheim an der Ruhr to Duisburg, along the Ruhr and Rhine waterways, the City of Play opened its second chapter in Duisburg's Inner Harbour. The former industrial harbour, defined by its brick walls and 19th-century architectural heritage, borders the city centre. During industrialization, the harbour served as a pivot for moving goods to and from the Ruhrgebiet. Coal, wood, and especially grain and corn were unloaded, loaded, and stored in massive warehouses and storage silos, making the harbor the region's granary. While it boomed in the late 19th century, the Inner Harbour lost its prominence as a transshipment hub in the 20th century.

In the early 21st century, the Inner Harbour underwent a substantial structural transformation as part of an urban renewal process. Most of the architectural heritage was preserved, and, in concert with new modern buildings, the Inner Harbour evolved into a district of offices, agencies, restaurants, and bars. Coupled with public-space design inviting leisure – highlighted by landscape architect Dani Caravan's "Garten der Erinnerung" – a recreational area was created close to the city centre by the City of Duisburg.

While the overall project was dedicated to the theme of play and playful public spaces, the vast water basins of the inner harbour – some of which remain unused – lent themselves to the idea of dedicating the City of Play's second chapter to the leitmotif of a water playground: a city swimming pool. The urban absurdity of a city-centre water basin fed by high-quality fresh water – with Duisburg pumping more than 100,000 gallons daily into the upper basin due to a leaking ground liner – being fenced off with railings and public signage declaring "Swimming forbidden" instantly inspired the vision of an urban pool set within a historically important architectural site to be used by swimmers and children alike.

The Rome-based studio orizzontale was fascinated by the idea of installing a city pool. After an initial exploration of the site, a location for the architectural intervention was identified, and the architectural concept was subsequently developed further.

The City of Play commenced on 21 June with a public programme centered around the so-called DUISPOOL, accessible publicly from Thursday to Sunday. Conceived as a public design-build process and energized by the presence of orizzontale's international team of architects and builders – who joined the City of Play for a three-week residency – the initiative celebrated the idea of playful public spaces. The architectural project, together with evolving discussions on the shared use of public waterways and surfaces and the related topics of climate adaptation, underscored the Inner Harbour's potential as a social space for neighbours, making a strong public statement in support of the "Swimmable Cities" initiative.

An event programme of music happenings, online radio sessions with local and regional DJs and radio stations, city talks, workshops, water-sport activities, and a DIY barbecue and pizza oven accompanied the DUISPOOL. The City of Play presented a parcours of artistic interventions and interactive positions inviting the public to play and to observe the Inner harbour's artistic transformation. The parcours connected the DUISPOOL in the upper basin of the inner harbor with the project's own "Playground" placed on the VIVAWEST terrace next to the "Garten der Erinnerung" and the marina in the lower basin. Based on a spatial analysis of the Inner Harbour's public space and the concept of active design, student groups from the Technical University of Dortmund (Department of Spatial Planning) and architecture students from the Fachhochschule Köln joined the parcours, installing a series of playful interventions and urban challenges.

Fueled by the summer sun and the buoyant spirit of Duisburg's inhabitants, who found delight in swimming and sunbathing within the City of Play, the Inner Harbor and its promenades awakened into a radiant stage, becoming a lively space for playful experiences and encounters.

Text: Georg Barringhaus

SEBASTIAN QUACK Artist

» I was very impressed by this extremely ambitious and wide-ranging project, especially how it brought together very different cultural formats and participants, creating moments of exhibition, moments of performance, moments of subversion, moments of reflection, and finally also just plain silliness and the goofy sides of play. All while grounding the programme in a historical perspective on play as a continuously evolving social and cultural practice with diverse traditions, parallel strands, and surprising intersections. «





JANA HORTIAN Assistant Artistic Director

» A cold, grey, monotonous, and lifeless space turned into a small holiday oasis in the middle of Duisburg. A neat and orderly harbour became a colourful, playful, and welcoming space full of encounters and exchange. People in business suits mingled with others in swim trunks and flip-flops. A completely new image of this place emerged – one that hardly anyone could have imagined before.

And the best part? It was truly for everyone. Because let's be honest – on a hot summer day, who doesn't enjoy cooling off in the open air?

The harbour basin became a meeting point where people of all ages and from very different backgrounds came together – playfully, casually, and as equals. A true space for connection right in the middle of the city. «









"Street Play", Martha Cooper, New York, 1977-80
photo installation:



photo installation:
Fountain Hacks, Like Architects &
Ricardo Dourado, Guimarães, 2012



Can you sense the room temperature with your fingertips? Do you sense fluctuations of the air humidity at the left earlobe? Do you notice immediately, when the proportion of CO₂ in the air rises above 500 ppm? Then join the Climate Casino and you will become rich!”

The Entry into the well-known Climate Casino game is always cost-free for all wherever possible. But instead of the iconic roulette ball the playing pieces at the Climate Casino rely on environmental data such as CO₂, temperature and humidity; the instruments live in an immovable environment measured accurately in real time. Yet instead of betting on the iconic roulette ball, players in Climate Casino bet on environmental data—such as CO₂, temperature, and humidity – measured live in the immediate surroundings with various instruments. Players who correctly predicted the measurements with their bodies and wagered accordingly collect their winnings. Before the table rolls again, a complex picture of the local microclimate emerges. Climate Casino playfully opens an ambivalent space that oscillates between measurement, sensual experience, speculation, the thrill of winning, and conversation. The game invites us to explore our physical and emotional entanglement with the climate crisis in a new way and to engage in public dialogue about it.

The mobile casino for City of Play was developed in collaboration with designer Mascha Fehse.



Text: Sebastian Quack





Sebastian Quack invited Maria Saridakis for a hands-on game design workshop during the City of Play in Duisburg. The aim of Offside Traps workshop was to invent new rules for the urban playground, involving site-specific games and playful interventions in public space and using local stories and a large pile of sports equipment.

Site-specific games are physical, social, embodied, and poetic games that take place beyond the fixed boundaries of screens, game boards, and dedicated playgrounds. Instead, their starting point for this collaborative and hands-on design process is the specific characteristics of the urban surroundings: the urban landscape, how people use it, their stories, discussions, hopes, and fears.



SEBASTIAN QUACK

Berlin-based Sebastian Quack explores the intersection of gaming, digital culture, and urban politics as an artist, game designer, and curator. His projects are process-oriented and collaborative.



DUISPOOL is an experimental architectural project aimed at creating a temporary public swimming facility in the city of Duisburg, active during the summer of 2025 in the Inner Harbour basin. It was conceived by the Rome-based architecture studio orizzontale, in collaboration with TRANSURBAN and with the support of the City of Duisburg.

DUISPOOL is inspired by the cultural movement of Swimmable Cities, which promotes the transformation of urban spaces through the rehabilitation of natural or artificial waterways, or through the temporary installation of infrastructure that makes them safer and more accessible for swimming and other recreational activities. This approach supports public health, urban regeneration, and the creation of new economic and social opportunities.

DUISPOOL was created in response to a shared desire among the citizens of Duisburg: to experience the Inner Harbour's basin as an integral part of the urban space, both for leisure and for sports activities.

The project was carried out during a three-week residency, as a collective experience of construction and cohabitation between orizzontale and TRANSURBAN. A wooden platform with stepped seating down to the water level allows direct access for swimming. The structure is built on top of a pre-existing concrete base, a remnant of Inner Harbour's industrial archaeology. The swimming area, 25 meters wide and approximately 80 meters long, is marked by safety buoys and enhanced by the presence of floating islands.

On the weekends throughout the summer of 2025, DUISPOOL was open for public swimming, with professional lifeguards on duty to ensure visitors' safety.

ORIZZONTALE

orizzontale is an architects' collective based in Rome, whose work crosses the fields of architecture, urbanism, public art and DIY practice. since 2010 orizzontale has been promoting projects of common relational spaces, giving form to both dismissed and unseen images of the city.

Text: orizzontale







SEBASTIAN QUACK Artist

>> I spent one day with the Climate Casino table close to the urban swimming project in Duisburg. It was very hot, and suddenly people began to go back and forth between playing the game, swimming in the city harbour and chatting with each other. I had never seen anyone play a casino game in a bathing suit, and really enjoyed how the different elements of air, heat, and water, but also the different embodied activities of swimming, thinking, measuring, and speculating began to blur together. Play and swimming can be equalising social forces. <<

JANA HORTIAN Assistant Artistic Director

>> I'd like to quote my colleague Ole here. While we stood together on the bathing pier, watching the colourful buzz of activity in the water, he said:

"I've lived in the Ruhr Area my whole life and know the Duisburg Inner Harbour and the people here in the 'Pott' very well. The Ruhr area is deeply shaped by its history and the former uses that still define many places today. Just like here – the Inner Harbour was long seen as a place of work and is still associated with its past as a timber port. Sometimes it takes an outside perspective to imagine something new for a place. And that's exactly what happened here. City of Play opened up a new way of seeing this space. The enclosed harbour basin was no longer seen as an empty or unused space but reimagined as a valuable resource – and made accessible to the people of Duisburg in a completely new, playful way." <<

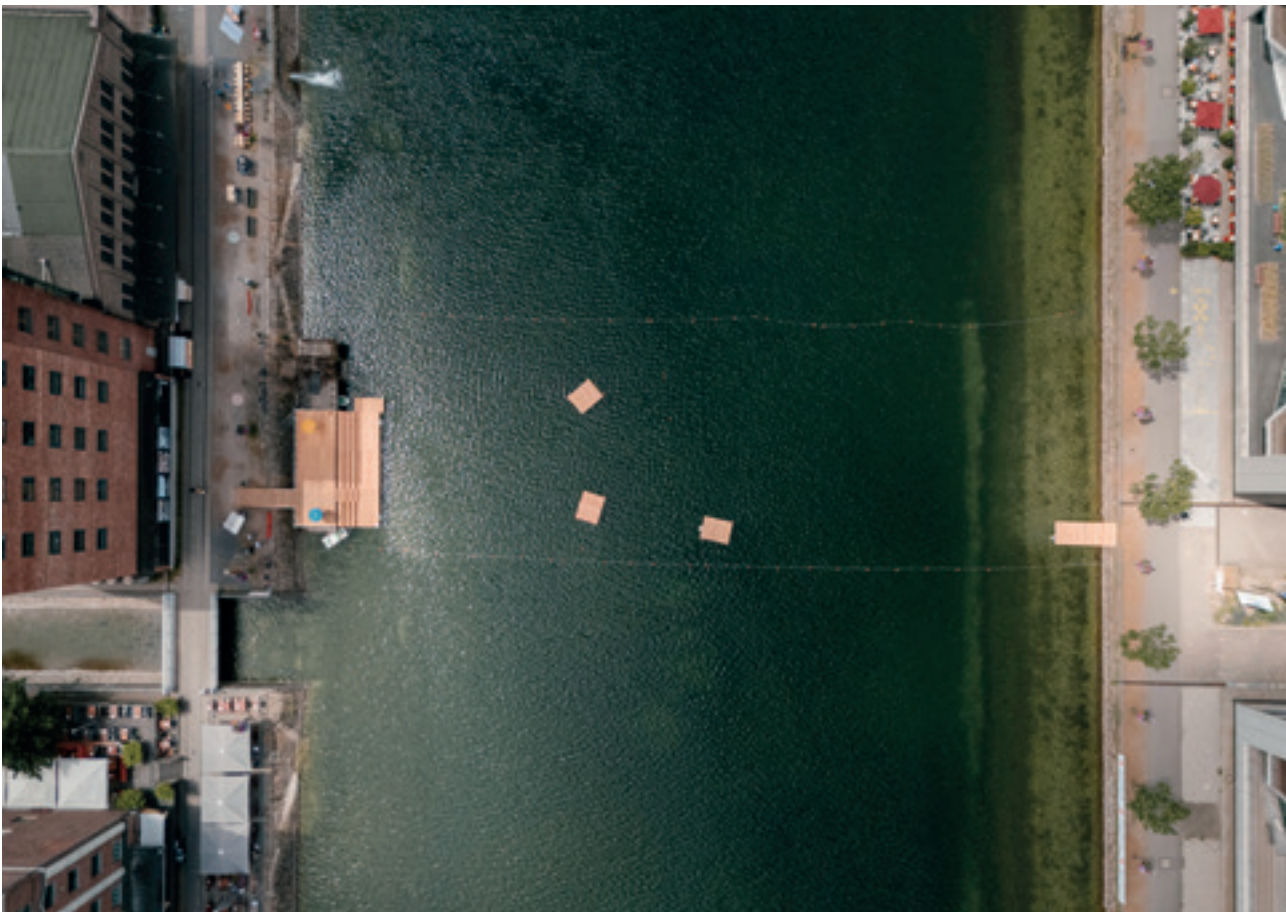




DAVID BIEGL Team orizzontale

>> My experience with City of Play was the process of crossing a boundary, from climbing over the fence and jumping into the water illegally to a public, communal city pool with everything that goes with it: children screaming, lifeguards, and rowboat races.

The surprising realization that this place could and should always have been used in this way. A wink in the urban sunshine. A salute to all city makers. How quickly a non-place, a sad, lonely sidewalk on the back side of the city, can be transformed into a social meeting place. For young and old, low-threshold and consumption-free. <<











Living the summer life with high temperatures and long days, swimming in the DUISPOOL, and joining sports activities while playfully engaging with the City of Play exhibition parcours left everyone hungry. Cologne's architecture and design studio Quack had an idea for how to fill people's stomachs while adding a playful approach to cooking and gathering.

The PIZZA RAZZO is a mobile installation comprising a pizza oven and a barbecue station, complemented by utensils and kitchen towels. Partially built from recycled materials and aligned with the visual language of The City of Play, Studio Quack presented the 5th edition of an ongoing series in Duisburg. On site, the PIZZA RAZZO became an integral part of the City of Play experience. Visitors, residents, passersby, and swimmers were invited to light the oven, roll out pizza dough, craft the pizzas to their liking, and place them in the oven. Once taken out and sliced, the pizzas were shared with everyone nearby. Based on upcycling design, the PIZZA RAZZO fuelled the programme with a relational-aesthetics performance and became a welcoming gathering point for the entire neighborhood.

STUDIO QUACK

The collaborative work structure Studio Quack operates at the intersection of art, design, and architecture. Their practice encompasses temporary installations, public-space interventions, graphic design, and exhibition design. They are focused on experimentation and the sustainable use of materials.

Text: Georg Barringhaus



PIZZA
RAZZO





Tag Your Flag

OBISK 93 & BOBBI-BIANCHI-230

DUISBURG

The workshop Tag Your Flag was led by Obisk and Bobbi-Bianchi-230, both artists and graffiti writers. It focused on collectively creating banners and flags to be mounted on bicycles during the Bike Parade from Duisburg to Essen.

The connection between banners and biking makes more sense when you look at how the graffiti scene has evolved in Europe. At its core, graffiti is about going “all city” with your name – finding new places to express yourself in urban space. While American graffiti grew out of using vehicles to spread names – first freight trains in the early 20th century, then subway trains in the 1970s – the European movement that took off in the 1980s developed along different lines, centered on slower mobility. Writers approached urban landscape as pedestrians or used the rail network to travel from one city to another.

European contemporary graffiti culture has always been closely linked to DIY practices and social activism rather than strictly to the hip-hop scene. Many writers began using bikes as a cheap, discreet way to move around the city. In recent years, Obisk, Bobbi-Bianchi-230, and many others have taken this idea further with “graffiti biking tours” across the country – echoing the famous Tour de France – where their custom bikes and handmade flags have become distinctive parts of their artistic identities.

“Burn Fat, Not Oil”, the ecological motto of the parade, inspired the duo to create a framework for participants. Pieces of colourful fabric were sewn together into heraldic-style banners, which were hand-painted with slogans drawing attention to social and environmental issues. The approach follows the tradition of homemade folk banners once used by unions and activists – like those documented by British artists Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane in their book *Folk Archive* (2005).

This style of banner ties into the idea of “communal luxury” – a concept from the Paris Commune of 1871 – a vision of art serving the common good rather than the interests of the powerful. In the context of the Bike Parade, the goal was to invite a playful and creative form of resistance to the dominance of car-centred cities.



Text: Mathieu Tremblin





DUISBURG





Level Up - Active Design for the Inner Harbour

DUISBURG

TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY DORTMUND,
DEPARTMENT OF SPATIAL PLANNING &
COLOGNE UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES,
MASTER PROGRAMME STÄDTEBAU NRW

Two universities and two seminars joined forces around the topic of public space's Active Design. Based on spatial analysis of the Inner harbour's public space, students of architecture and urban planning developed a parcours of sport challenges and playful interventions.





SMILE AT A STRANGER

COCO BERGHOLM

DUISBURG

COCO BERGHOLM Artist

>> I'm riding the underground. Two young white men are talking about a black man sitting next to them. I have the feeling they are making fun of him. I'm too far away to understand what they're saying. I have a feeling they're going to talk to him and harass him.

I'm afraid of what will happen. I know I'll get up and intervene if they threaten him. In the neighbouring compartment, which is only separated by a glass pane, a family with two little girls gets on. They wave over to our compartment. They hide under the window.

The two young men feel addressed. They laugh at them and respond to the game of hide-and-seek. Everything relaxes. It's nice to watch strangers play. <<



YOU BELONG HERE

COCO BERGHOLM



COCO BERGHOLM Artist

>> Imagine: your words written in huge letters on the city's skyscrapers.

Everyone can read your thoughts!
Everyone is listening to you!
What would you say? <<



SMILE AT A STRANGER



I'M NOT SENDING A MESSAGE I'M CREATING A PROCESS FOR LOOKING

COCO BERGHOLM

DUISBURG



TURN ME INTO SOMETHING ELSE / TO BE LIKE WATER

COCO BERGHOLM







Swimmable Cities - A Round Table on Water, the Public, and Urban Imagination

DUISBURG

As part of the City of Play, Duisburg's Inner Harbour was transformed for several weeks into a public city pool – the DUISPOOL. The city talk “Swimmable Cities” brought together voices from architecture, urban research, and culture to discuss access to urban waters, the role of art and architecture in this context, and the vision of a floating city.

The temporarily opened DUISPOOL thus became the starting point for a broader debate: How can we understand water as part of the urban community – as a resource, a site of encounter, and a space of possibility?

GEORG BARRINGHAUS

Initiator, City of Play

>> While negotiating public space we are giving impulses. And especially with water, of course, we've kicked the doors wide open. Because that's what art does: It places an idea into urban space and then observes how people respond to it.

And today you can already see it quite clearly – suddenly there's movement on the water, you hear voices on the water. The space, the whole situation, has completely changed.

Before, you read the signs “Baden Verboten” (english “swimming forbidden”).

We anchored a strong idea in people's minds, a commonly shared experience, a memory, an impulse to take action, for the Duispool and for a city that keeps moving. <<

KAY VON KEITZ, curator and moderator, led the conversation with

JAN EDLER, co-initiator of the Flussbad Berlin project and representative of the international Swimmable Cities network;

PROF. DR.-ING. AMELIE ROST, architect and urban researcher whose dissertation “The Seduction of Water” explores urban water spaces and **ANDREAS RUBY**, director of the Swiss Architecture Museum and curator of the Swim City exhibition in Basel.

The conversation spanned a wide arc from historical bathing cultures to contemporary questions of climate change, from the sensory experience of water to political issues of ownership, access, and public space. The following quotes are excerpts from this city discussion. They provide insights into the different perspectives of those involved and show how water can be reimagined as a medium of the city – as a space for connection, participation, and transformation. In doing so, they offer impulses and learning that may prove decisive for the further course of DUISPOOL.

FROM A SLEEPING BEAUTY TO RIVER SWIMMING – JAN EDLER ON THE ORIGINS OF FLUSSBAD BERLIN

Jan Edler talks about the beginnings of the Flussbad Berlin project, which he initiated together with his brother. The idea was born right on the River Spree, where the two of them had their office:

“My brother started thinking about the Spree Canal – simply because it was an unused urban space. A bit like the Inner Harbour here in Duisburg. The impulse was to take a closer look at this space: a huge public area right in the middle of the city, but without any real use. And swimming is one of the uses that might come to mind.”

Historically, the Spree Canal was Berlin's main shipping route.

“Then, shipping traffic was moved to the main Spree, and the canal gradually fell into a kind of Sleeping Beauty slumber. Today it's no longer navigable along its entire length, even though it's still officially a federal waterway. Which means: you're not allowed to swim there – it's an urban space still reserved for shipping.”

In the late 1990s, Berlin was in the midst of a heated debate about what the city centre should look like in the future. At that time, water surfaces didn't play a role at all:

"Interestingly, the waterways weren't part of that discussion back then. Klaus Töpfer, as a federal politician, strongly argued that Berlin's waterways should be seen as part of urban planning – and not as a bothersome relic from another time."

Over many years, Flussbad Berlin received support and funding, but it ran into numerous bureaucratic obstacles:

"It's incredibly difficult to realize such a project, even if it seems simple – because so many different bodies are involved: the city, the districts, and the federal government, which owns the river. The legal aspects are extremely complex."

That's why we adjusted the project and, together with the Berlin Centre of Competence for Water (KWB), developed a 'bathing traffic light' – a forecast system that shows the current water quality on a daily basis. The hope is that one day people will be allowed to swim when the city gives permission. Because so far, swimming is still prohibited."

Edler points to international examples that show how urban waters can be successfully reclaimed:

"In Switzerland, you can swim anywhere – river swimming is even recognized as intangible world cultural heritage. But it wasn't always like that. In Basel, the movement started after a major chemical accident in the 1980s – when the Rhine turned red, people took to the streets to demand their right to use the river again. Today, river swimming has once more become part of urban life."

Similar initiatives are emerging in Germany as well:

"Along the Ruhr, there are two bathing sites managed with a bathing traffic light – swimming is allowed only when the water quality is good. In Berlin, on the other hand, there's a general swimming ban, with the argument: 'Too dirty, too dangerous. Period.'"

Hamburg takes a different approach – swimming there is permitted at your own risk, because they say: This is such a valuable right, we can't take it away from people."

Finally, Edler looks at other international models:

"In Oslo, sauna culture and swimming in the fjords are simply part of everyday life – we'd love

to have that here too. And in New York, there's the New York Swims programme, which creates new swimming sites to help the city prepare for climate change. The city keeps getting hotter – and water becomes a vital resource."

Moderator Kay adds a closing thought:

"And I really like that this gives us a sense of how far some places have already come, and how much knowledge and experience we can now draw from. So that, for instance, in Duisburg we can say: We're not starting from zero – we can see that the same questions keep coming up again and again."

THE HISTORY OF URBAN SWIMMING – FROM RIVER BATHING TO THE PUBLIC POOL

KAY VON KEITZ: Let's go back to the history for a moment: the question of water in the city and in different cultures is a fundamental one. Water has always been a central theme in global culture.

I'd like to come back later to how the relationship between cities and this element – water – has shifted over time. I looked it up: the first organized river bath was established in Paris in 1761. In the 19th century it became very popular, but then disappeared again at the beginning of the 20th century. Can you explain why it lost its popularity?

ANDREAS RUBY: It didn't really become less popular. On the contrary – people still wanted to swim. The problem was industrialization: We produced so much waste that the urban waters were no longer hygienically acceptable. The rivers were full of pathogens; people got sick. Rivers were used as sewers and had to be closed.

That meant that this great public resource simply dried up. It was a major trauma for many European cities. By the early 1930s, urban environments were so polluted, the streets so contaminated, that swimming bans became necessary almost everywhere – for reasons of hygiene.

Eventually it became essential to build public outdoor and indoor pools – a task taken up by municipalities in very different ways. So the reason rivers became inaccessible is quite simple: because we humans polluted our environment without restraint.

WATER CULTURE AND RESPONSIBILITY – WHY RIVER SWIMMING BECAME POSSIBLE IN SWITZERLAND

KAY VON KEITZ: And do you have an explanation for why river swimming became so deeply rooted specifically in Switzerland?

ANDREAS RUBY: Because Switzerland is Europe's water tower. There's no other country where more rivers have their source and more lakes exist in relation to the land area than in Switzerland. That also means the water quality in Swiss rivers is simply better. They have a natural advantage – the water hasn't yet had the chance to get spoiled.

And secondly, swimming in rivers was actually banned in Switzerland in 1930 – officially due to a lack of swimming safety. At that time there were around 400 fatal accidents a year, and that led the chief of police in Basel to say: "We have to forbid this now – to protect the population."

But then something interesting happened: Many people who were passionate about river swimming said, "If safety is the problem, then we'll solve it." That's how the SLRG – the Swiss Life-saving Society – was founded, which later became the model for the DLRG in Germany.

And this association said to the politicians: "We'll take care of safety – you give us legalization." The politicians agreed, and swimming was allowed again – on the condition that no one got hurt. That was the decisive turning point: Prohibition turned into responsibility."

THE SEDUCTION OF WATER AND THE SEEMINGLY EMPTY URBAN SPACES – THE WATER

KAY VON KEITZ: I find it really interesting to also look at the question of safety – because there's always a shifting relationship between urban situations and water.

Amelie, perhaps you can say a bit more about this changing relationship. You called your dissertation "The Seduction of Water." At the moment, we're experiencing very extreme perceptions of water: On the one hand, it's a threat – we have to deal with heat and heavy rain – and on the other hand, there's this romanticization, this idealization of all open waters. How did you see that in your research?

AMELIE ROST: The term "seduction" operates on several levels. First, there is the historical use of water. To return to the theme of danger: During my research, I conducted many interviews, and one anecdote has particularly stayed with me – while

bathing was still socially frowned upon, almost taboo, even a provocation during the Baroque period, Goethe was soon allowing himself to swim naked in Swiss lakes and recognized that this brought a certain pleasure.

This tension between danger and delight still exists today. When we swim in a river within the city, it's a different kind of swimming than in a pool. There's another kind of risk – and that's precisely what creates the attraction: to claim that space, to expose yourself to that risk, and then to enjoy it.

The second level is about how water spaces are used in urban development. For a long time, they were defined functionally – as shipping routes, ports, or transport corridors. With the expansion of container harbours in the 1960s, so-called "voids" emerged. But these spaces were never truly empty – neither physically nor materially. They were spaces of social life, of movement, of habitat. Even today, when they appear empty, they are structurally occupied.

To perceive that emptiness – that's the moment of seduction. It suddenly opens up a space to imagine something new, even though that space was never really empty to begin with.

That's the other side of seduction – and at the same time an argument for saying: Stop leaving these spaces unused. They are not empty. Allow them to be used. The use might simply be a different one than thirty years ago.

KAY VON KEITZ: I find that a very interesting point – this openness within the city. There's also maybe a more artistic gaze here: engaging with so-called voids, with neglected spaces, with their potential. We all know this from artistic contexts, Artists often seek out such spaces, sometimes in search of the social, sometimes in search of other kinds of spaces where new things can be discovered. Would you see it that way too?

AMELIE ROST: Maybe just a small note – because I'm always a bit afraid of being misunderstood: of course, it's seductive, and it's important to allow for emptiness – but not always. It's about not automatically filling every apparent gap. Allowing emptiness can be crucial.

But what's fascinating about water is that through swimming, you can physically fill that existing material space. The emptiness then returns – but for a brief moment, the two sides of the harbor basin come together. Today, for example, I've never felt the two banks of Duisburg's Inner Harbour so close, so connected. And that – allowing for that moment – that's what it's about.

JAN EDLER: And maybe that's exactly the point

– to fill the space with functions rather than with buildings. The Flussbad project doesn't see itself as a classical construction project, but as a minimal intervention in the city. The goal is simply to make an existing resource usable. In that sense, it's the result of a long process of learning.

OVERCOMING FUNCTIONAL SEPARATION: WATER AS A LIVING, TRANSPORT, AND CULTURAL SPACE

KAY VON KEITZ: Mostly because then we're back to assigning functions, separating functions, and beyond that: who controls it and who decides that.

AMELIE ROST: I'd jump right in with the separations. This ties into urban planning debates: overcoming functional separation. Water used to be seen very functionally – transport, industry – and its role as a living space, a recreational space, or a cultural space got lost. In Hamburg, for example, you can see that already in the 1960s. Only after the 1962 flood did it become clear that people had forgotten how to interact with water in all its dimensions. Today, there are initiatives trying to break down these separations. We need to develop a new way of looking at water spaces.

KAY VON KEITZ: In Hamburg, the HafenCity was a huge topic: How can a formerly closed-off port area be opened up? At the same time, it's about control and ownership: Who owns the water? Who can plan, who can access it? That has to be democratically negotiable.

JAN EDLER: The use of waterways in Berlin is interesting: 95% of ships carry people – tourists or private yachts – only about 5% transport goods. The waterways have long been recreational spaces, yet they're still managed like infrastructure... We need a rethink, to reassess infrastructural spaces and align interests.

KAY VON KEITZ: In Cologne, there are the ports and the transport authority; in Hamburg, of course, it's even bigger – port and transport infrastructure are powerful and often disconnected from other urban processes. Creating a connection is a tough nut to crack. Andreas, maybe you can explain from a Swiss perspective how rivers can be used more publicly and democratically.

ANDREAS RUBY: Yes, I think in Switzerland, river or water spaces are fundamentally seen as public space, not just infrastructure. And if you use water infrastructure, you combine that with public access. For example, something that's impossible in Germany: swimming in a river that's used for shipping. That works in Switzerland, in Basel where

I live, with buoys in the river. They divide it into one-third for swimming and two-thirds for ships.

I think that's the thing that's just completely off in Germany: the right to water... here, it still has to be fought for, to understand the river as part of the commons. "Commons" comes from an old Alpine tradition. It's a kind of proto-communism, where not all land is private property; there's communal property. It's accessible to everyone living there. Our concept of the commons comes from that. And this idea: It's a space that can't be privately claimed. No one can buy it; not even the federal water authority can claim it as theirs and say only we can access it – everyone can. And I think that's something Germany really still needs to recognize: Who is this space actually for? And if this space, like in Duisburg for example, is no longer used industrially, there's no reason it can't be used by the urban community.

That's where we need to say, this is just as much a public space as a square. The Rhine is Basel's best public space. And it's such a good public space because it's totally inclusive. Everyone goes there, regardless of income, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. It's a space equally accessible to all, and it's free of commercial pressures – you don't have to pay to use it like a swimming pool. That makes it socially extremely accessible. And it's a space that really fosters community.

We have to imagine that in our societies today, mainly due to social media, loneliness has become a kind of medium in urban life. And if our societies can do something today, it's to reactivate the function of public spaces. We see how hard this is in city centres, because they're mono-functional, focused on shopping – but shopping itself has moved back into the digital sphere. These shopping streets are dying off. There are so many reasons to genuinely restore public space. And rivers can play a crucial role in helping us reconnect, to meet each other, and really get to know one another again.

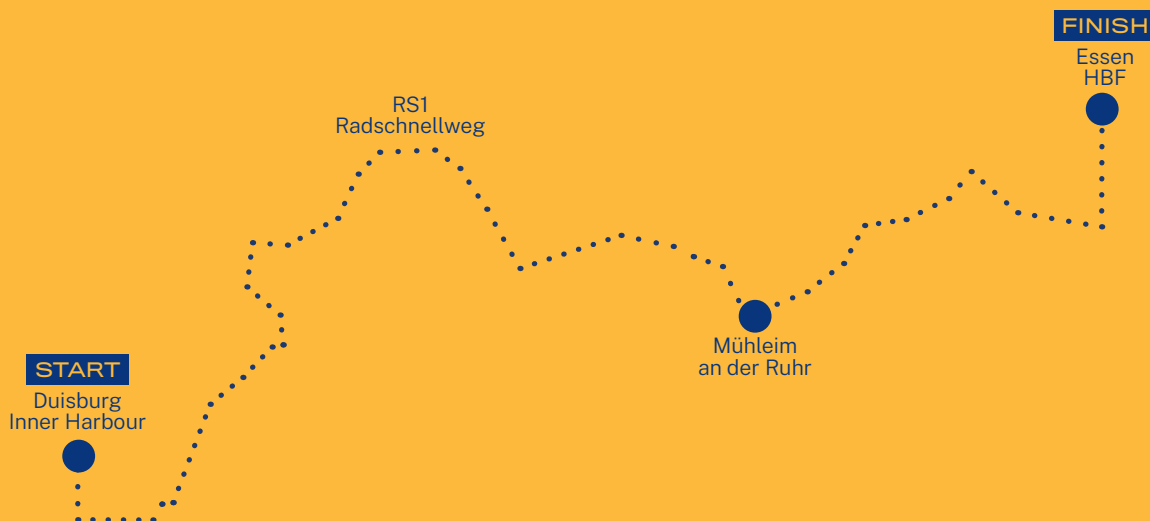


BURN FAT NOT OIL

OBISK & BOBBI-BIANCHI-230



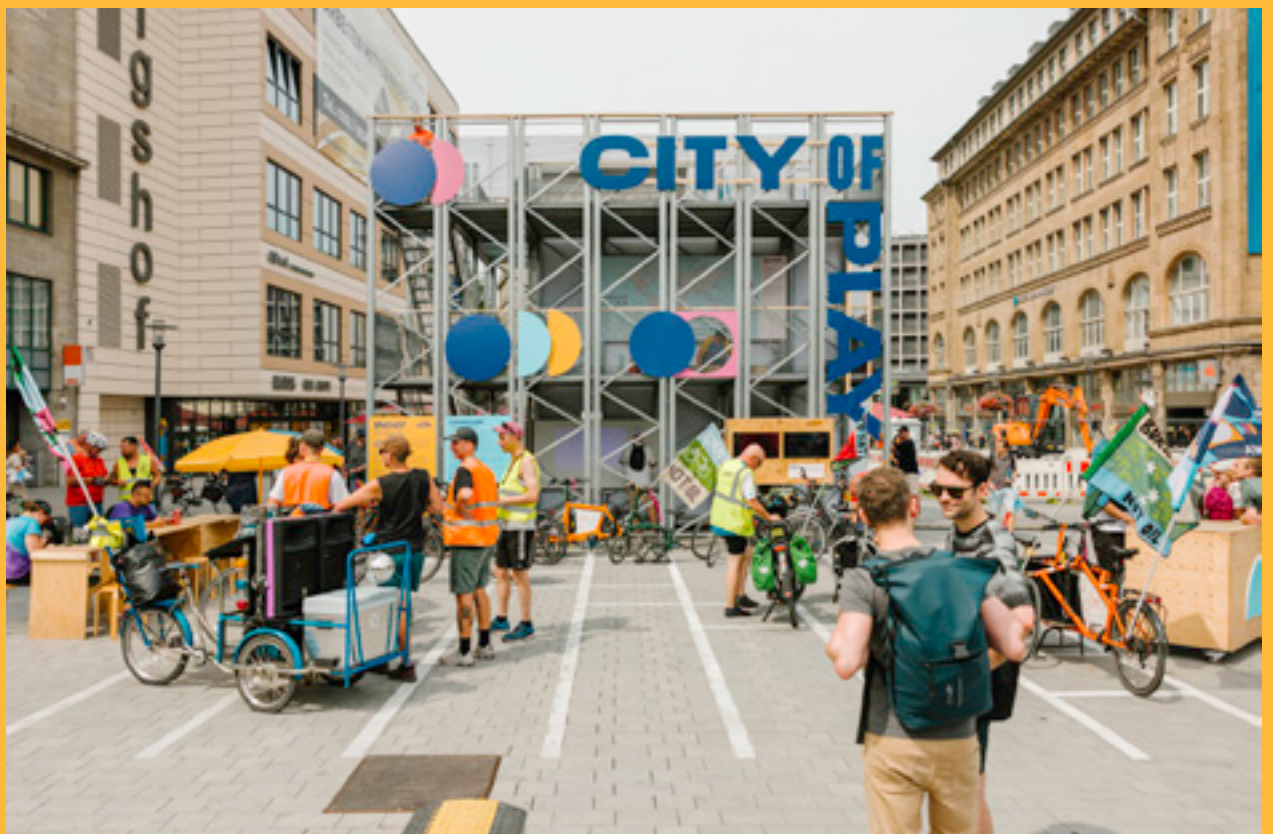
On 19 July 2025, the *City of Play* Bike Parade connected Duisburg and Essen through artful, playful movement. Under the motto “**Burn Fat Not Oil!**”, the RS1 cycle highway became a vibrant stage for collective action. Hundreds of cyclists, joined by artist Aaron’s mobile sound system, soap bubbles, high-bikes, and handmade flags from the *Tag Your Flag* workshop, turned the route into a moving performance across industrial heritage, cityscapes, and green landscapes. The parade sent a bold signal for climate awareness, diversity, and the playful reclaiming of public space – loud, colourful, and collective.













ESSEN



PL Playground

HQ Headquarter Summer School, St. Gertrud Kirche

- A** Asger Jorn "Three-Sided Football"
- B** Yolanda Domínguez "Gym Win Session"
- C** Démocratie Créative „Street Art for the People to Play“
- D** The Wa „Playground“
- E** Brad Downey "Un-Stitching Karl"

- F** Aïda Gómez "Massive Word Search Games"
- G** Mathieu Tremblin "Corner"
- 35** Coco Berghom "Opening Doors For All", "Smile At A Stranger", "Where I End & You Begin"
- 36** OX & Coco Berghom "Sign Language"
- 37** OX
- 38** OX
- 39** OX

Introduction to Political and Playful Education

ESSEN

In Essen, City of Play unfolded from the beautiful site of the deconsecrated Sankt Gertrud Church at Rottstraße 36 and extending into the streets and subway system of Essen with emphasis on the connection between Essen's main train station and the venues of the FISU Games around the exhibition halls namely the Ruhrbahn Line 11.

As a symbol of the metropolis the subway is deeply embedded in our visual memory and has become an essential feature of urban atmospheres. It is a place of fleeting encounters that turns those waiting and those hurrying past, moving in rhythm with the arriving and departing subways, into a place of in-between. Marc Augé, the French anthropologist, also called such places "non-places" – as residual spaces produced by hypermodernity, thus exempt from producing any feeling of belonging. Nonetheless, their transitory character creates a special atmosphere in which concepts such as moment, encounter, anonymity, and mixture come into play. The fact remains, however, that the subway is also a highly organized, socially regulated space in which surveillance cameras, rules, and prohibitions define the use of the underground network. Precisely in this dynamic tension lies the magic of the subway systems. A place where neither day nor night can be recognized and where time blurs in the glaring neon light.

The City of Play Summer School for Political and Playful Education, curated by Margrit Miebach and Mathieu Tremblin, immersed itself in Essen's spaces of in-betweenness. From 17 to 23 July 2025, it hosted a programme of workshops aimed at students and other participants. It also collaborated with partners like ENSAS – Strasbourg School of Architecture for a one-week workshop entitled "City of Play. The Great Urban Game to Come" tutored by German artist Coco Bergholm, French artist Laurent Lacotte and teacher-researchers Mathieu Tremblin and Jeremy Hawkins. This formed part of the "Pratique manifeste intensive art week" for students on the master's degree course at Dortmund University of Applied Sciences and Arts (Faculty of Design), which culminated in a seminar tutored by Prof. Ulrike Brückner, Prof. Achim Mohné, and teacher-researcher Claudia Mai.

The programme brought together twenty participants spread around five workshops conceived and tutored by international artists: Sara Leghissa with "Between Action and Words"; Brad Downey and Igor Ponosov with "The Art of Between"; Evan Roth and Rachel Uwa with "Systems of Misuse" workshop; Ann Messner with "Imagining a social contract. A performance based interrogation of public space"; Adam Kraft with "The Unruly City: Mapping Urban Resistance".

Text: Mathieu Tremblin & Margrit Miebach

Each workshop was designed to encourage participants to examine the current state of the right to the city through creative interactions. They explored how play can contribute to the discovery, understanding, and transformation of our living spaces or raise awareness, and make visible power dynamics, potentially contributing to their rebalancing through the implementation of contextual, creative, and playful urban interventions.

As a start, Miebach and Tremblin opened the summer school with a quartet card game so that the artists could share previous artistic experiences and examine their relationship with public space. The urban surveys conducted by the artists led to a series of collective interventions and actions that spread along the route from the main station – where the Playground was installed – towards Messe Ost/Gruga station, where the FISU Games were taking place. In the end, Miebach and Tremblin organised a guided tour where each workshop group presented or performed the creative processes and results they had developed during six intense days of experimentation, shared between artists and participants alike.

Starting at the Playground, American urban hacker Evan Roth and maker Rachel Uwa, along with participants of their "Systems of Misuse" workshop, introduced a series of small interventions and observations related to the use and control of urban development and information networks. These included: a poetic, experimental video essay viewing public space from the perspective of a pigeon, tape markings charting a non-utilitarian path through the metro, a series of vibrant fountains, and DIY swings attached to public sculptures.

One collective action addressed current political topics by creating a series of garden sculptures – gnomes, robots, and cat miniatures, all typical forms of everyday ornamentation – bearing small signs with slogans and forming a path along the bushes next to a roundabout. This miniature sculpture park echoed Roth and Uwa's personal interventions: one highlighting Germany's complex relationship with the guilt of the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis, using a flag; the other "reviving" a deceased local pastor to share a message about the geopolitical context.

At the side entrance hall of platforms 2 and 4 in the subway of the main station, Italian artist and activist Sara Leghissa and her group staged a collective public lecture as part of "the Between Action and Words: From Observation Practice to 'Queer Vandalism'" workshop. It took the form of a series of statements and questions displayed on overlapping black-and-white A0 posters. The lecture reflected on the body and its agency, moving from a global to an intimate scale. Layer by layer, posters were installed along the tracks and corridors, culminating in a final question to passers-by: "What am I missing?"

On Kennedyplatz, the audience joined Ann Messner's group. They recounted their collective action "I Drop My Shield", performed earlier that day as part of the "Imagining a Social Contract" workshop. Each of the four participants held a riot shield with a large sticker featuring a phrase and a QR code. Standing still or lying down in a public square, they invited onlookers to scan the code and watch videos of each performer discussing their personal relationship to violence, before engaging in conversation with them.

Next, the group followed American artist Brad Downey and Russian artist Igor Ponosov for "The Art of Between" workshop. Dressed in custom-made outfits, they led the crowd to the Rathaus Galerie mall and into a Decathlon store for a brief playful intervention documented by a store employee. Afterwards, everyone gathered at the ice-cream café in the shopping mall's basement for the launch of a series of intercultural goods created during the week. Fanzines documenting the creative process were handed out along with selected ice creams. Three collaboratively written, composed, and recorded songs were played on a ghetto blaster, with the audience joining in with the chorus.

A few minutes later, seated on the steps near Sankt Gertrud Church, Adam Kraft's group shared the process of "The Unruly City" workshop. Introducing his research on accessing urban spaces, Kraft taught the group lock-picking techniques. They then explored the city until they discovered a hidden spot, where they built a secret space accessible only to them.

At the end of the guided tour, the local artist Gigo, who has been working in Essen since the early 1990s, invited participants to create a "portrait of love" on a wall in the Stadtgarten. Each person in the group spray-painted a phrase, and altogether these formed an empowering collective statement.



Summer School for Political and Playful Education

ESSEN

MATHIEU TREMBLIN & MARGRIT MIEBACH

INVITE EVAN & RACHEL, SARA LEGHISSA, ANN MESSNER,
BRAD DOWNEY & IGOR PONOSOV AND ADAM KRAFT



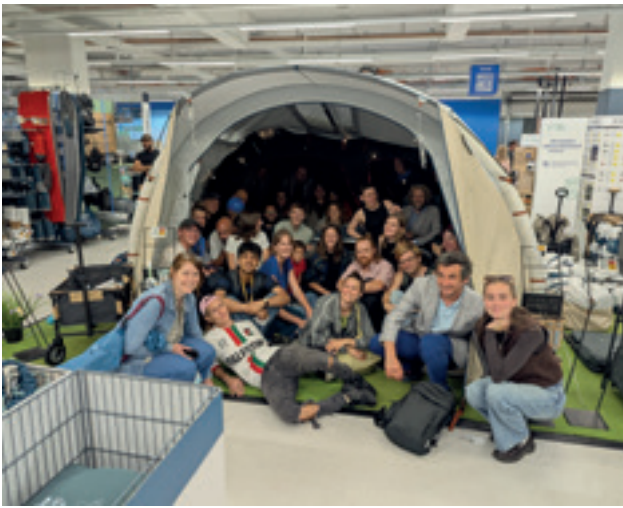
Summer School participant

>> Summer schools are wonderful opportunities to handle creativity and get to know amazing people. The City of Play's summer school was no exception, balancing its official agenda – stimulating workshops, city walks, parties, and movie nights – with the elicited interactions that emerge out of the time we spent doing everyday things together – playing games, cooking meals, and cleaning the facilities. It is through experiences like this that "teachers" and "classmates" turn into friends and lifeless materials into vivid memories. <<

ANN MESSNER Artist

>> Working in public space creatively and engaging in a meaningful way within a constrained time frame of one week is perhaps impossible. You might have the best of intentions, but the social sphere is tricky and at times destructive. And it's not always a nice place to be in. It's a bit like trying to dance with strangers; you can't know from looking at them who might be a good dance partner. The process simply demands time to develop in relationship. So perhaps the best way to look at our week together is to embrace the idea of a sketch. Within a week we can sketch, within a week we can experiment, we can take risks when we have no intention to hold onto what does not feel solid. When we sketch, we are not invested in a production of success, but rather focused on what we can learn from what doesn't work. <<





Summer School participant

»» The atmosphere of the summer school encouraged risk-taking, continuous learning, experimentation, and exchange. Each day brought something new. The work emerging from the workshops, the lectures, debates, and presentations that fueled the process, as well as the informal conversations, moments of laughter, friendship, and shared leisure, all strengthened the bonds among participants, broadening perspectives and diversifying approaches to working with public space and the urban context. This transformed the week's events into a series of unexpectedly creative moments. A testament to the openness of the process and the positive energy of everyone involved. ««

Summer School participant

»» Being in this kind of creative and collective environment, I literally felt relieved. I started to trust the flow, to see how things can grow from coincidence, from gestures, from being open, curious, and most importantly playful. This experience reminded me that the best things happen when you stop trying to design them. ««



Summer School participant

»» City of Play became a place where I felt safe, maybe for the first time since starting my journey as a migrant. It gave me a sense of belonging that I had been missing for a long time. ««

Summer School participant

»» City of Play gave me space to exist – not just to function, but to be. As a person with a disability, I often feel interrupted. But this summer school offered something rare: a frame where pauses were allowed. Where speech didn't have to be perfect to be meaningful. It was the moment where I stopped waiting to be invited. And instead, began to speak. ««

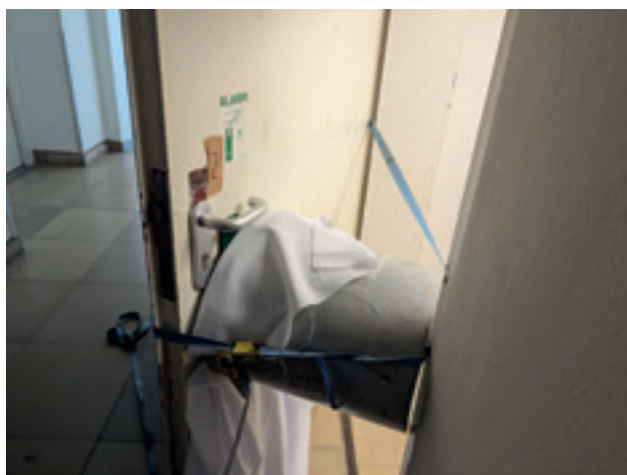


Summer School participant

>> The relationship with the community beyond the workshop space reinforced the feeling that the strong sense of connection within the group naturally overflowed into the city. This bond between artists and the local community remained constant, from curious questions to spontaneous participation in activities, or even in simple moments when someone knocked at on the door of St. Gertrud Church and was welcomed inside for a conversation or a warm meal. <<

Summer School participant

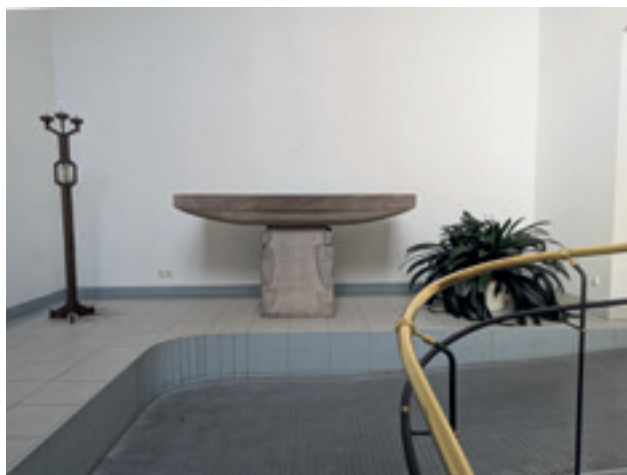
>> I unintentionally triggered the church alarm during the night. What began as embarrassment quickly turned into a moment of connection, opening a space that continued to unfold throughout the week. <<



Sankt Gertrud Kirche, headquarter of the summer school

Summer School participant

>> The indoor camping inside the former church created a special atmosphere that connected us as participants in a deeper way than separate hotel rooms ever could. <<





Summer School participant

»» The Essen Quartet was a manner to present the artists' creative process. Margrit and Mathieu asked each workshop's tutors to share some images based on constraints so to produce a series of quartet of cards. The game was introduced to the participants as an ice breaker and consisted in a collective conversation about the interventions and documents the artists selected, and about what it told about their relationship to a political and playful city. ««



"Portrait of Love", community intervention by Gigo, electrical substation, Stadgarten, Essen

Movie screening, "Urban Disobedience Toolkit", Vladimir Turner, Czech Republic, 2025, 80 min.



photo print from Ann Messners performance series
Subway Stories, New York, 1977-79



Summer School, opening event, metro station Essen Central Station, Essen



OX Artist

>> The highlight was definitely taking advantage of a magical workshop to work in. On the roof of the playground, outdoors, amidst the hustle and bustle of Essen Central Station, and for the first time with my daughter Béryl. <<





CITY OF PLAY

**WILLKOMMEN IM
PLAYGROUND!**
WELCOME TO
THE PLAYGROUND!

INFO

interactive exhibition parkour:
Brad Downey, "Un-stitching Karl",
Berlin, 2007



BRAD DOWNEY Artist

>> At first, we thought Essen might feel too small, but its compactness became an advantage. We had access to almost every part of the city, which felt open and welcoming. What interested us most were the in-between spaces – the overlooked corners and leftover sites that carried traces of both industry and daily life. These became our playgrounds and meeting points. <<

ESSEN

interactive exhibition parkour:
reenactment of Brad Downey's work "House of Cards"





IGOR PONOSOV Artist

»» Our experience demonstrated that play is not a trivial escape from serious issues, but a powerful methodology to approach them. The city itself transformed through this lens. A shopping mall ceased to be just a temple of consumption and became a stage for surreal social interactions. A café became a gallery and scene. This fluidity is the core strength of City of Play. It empowers participants to become active agents in their urban environment, to re-imagine and re-purpose the familiar spaces of everyday life. <<





interactive exhibition parkour:
reenactment of The Wa's work „Playground“

interactive exhibition parkour:
Aida Gómez, "Massive Word Search Game", various cities, 2015 - ongoing



Between Actions And Words. From Observation Practice to "Queer Vandalism"

ESSEN

SARA LEGHISSA & ANJA COMMER, ANNE KURR, FARINA SEIGER,
KATHARINA ENGELKE, LORÈNE FRANCHETTO



SARA LEGHISSA Artist

>> The invitation gave me the chance to research and explore a group dynamic through mutual exchange and collaboration. We started by sharing personal thoughts and opening conversations about our relationship with the public space and how we engage our own bodies in it. We talked about the relationships and perceptions we have with public versus private and we tried to answer a series of questions as a way to create suggestions for new narrations:

How does my perception of public space change?
Do I have a sense of being part of a community?
How does my body feel when I am in public?
What is a hostile space to me?
When and how do I perceive my privileges?
Do I have the desire to act out of norms?
What am I defending? - What do I fight for?
Has my relationship with public space changed since the start of the Palestinian genocide?
What is the relationship between struggle and care? <<





Summer School participant

>> We took our first steps into public space by doing a mixture of dance and workout movements together. It was unexpected to suddenly improvise dance in the middle of downtown Essen with a group of people who had until then been almost complete strangers and to observe how such an action could transform the space, usually defined by its ordinary users like shoppers and pedestrians, through an event that was both hard to classify and surprisingly affecting. <<

Summer School participant

>> We tried to imagine how our surroundings might look from the perspective of a camera. If we were to present our perception as a film, what would we focus on? What catches our attention, where do our eyes go? And what remains "unseen", even though it sits right at the centre of the city? What corners and niches exist, not dark, but simply unused? It was striking how much happens when attention shifts toward something as "banal" as the urban pedestrian zone and its components. Or rather, how much becomes visible that was always there. <<

Summer School participant

>> The "What am I missing?" poster invited viewers to participate. Written over it, "I am missing playful adults" my personal contribution from the perspective of being autistic, was a call to carry forward the playful perspective and break free from the emotionally cold, functional confinement of public space. <<





The Art of Between

ESSEN

BRAD DOWNEY & IGOR PONOSOV
& EYLEM EYLÜL ACARSOY, JÜRGEN DECHERT,
LAURA BEYA, PAULO SILVA, EUGENIE HOFF

BRAD DOWNEY Artist

>> The highlight of the workshop was watching how quickly our team became unified. We encouraged everyone to share their differences and speak openly about topics such as religion, politics, national stereotypes, and cultural background. This openness allowed us to connect on a deeper level—we laughed together, made jokes about sensitive subjects, and in doing so, seemed to overcome the most difficult barriers almost immediately. It created a sense of trust and ease that made our bond strong and genuine. What surprised us most was how fast the atmosphere shifted from polite distance to real familiarity. Conversations that could have been tense instead became playful and revealing. We could talk about things that are usually avoided, and by doing so, we discovered a shared sense of humor and understanding. We ended up enjoying what we had in common rather than constantly navigating our differences. <<

IGOR PONOSOV Artist

>> One of the most unexpectedly playful situations unfolded during our "collective photo" expeditions in Essen's shopping malls. The concept itself – a multicultural group donning identical, often absurd outfits – was already a disruption of the commercial norm. However, the true magic happened in a large store. Our group, now a "family" in matching suits, approached a store employee to ask for the quintessential family photo. Instead of the expected confusion or refusal, the employee, a man in his fifties, completely embraced the fiction. With a deadpan seriousness, he began directing us as if we were a genuine team. He spent a good few minutes meticulously arranging us. The situation was a beautiful, unscripted piece of performance art. <<



IGOR PONOSOV Artist

>> The undeniable highlight was the final presentation in the ice-cream cafe, which felt less like a formal showcase and more like the birth of a temporary, rebellious micro-society. The entire week of building collective identity through Cadavre Exquis drawings, lyrics, and shared interventions culminated in this single event. The moment that encapsulated everything was the performance of our manifesto song, "We don't want to sleep in the streets." Standing together in that unlikely venue, surrounded by participants who had started as strangers but were now co-conspirators, the song transformed from a collection of absurdist lyrics into a powerful, shared declaration. It was a chant of unity, born from the "in-between" spaces we had occupied all week – between our nationalities, between art and life, between the serious and the silly. <<



Summer School participant

» The performance we did in the shopping mall really affected me. Nothing was perfectly prepared, yet everything started to make sense together. It felt like reclaiming the city, reclaiming the public space as ours again, as a place where play, absurdity, and togetherness can exist. «

Summer School participant

» There were many things I would never have dared to do alone, but through the collective energy, everything became possible. Carrying a certain fragility and social anxiety lately in Germany, being surrounded by people from different cultures who felt safe and open gave me a deep sense of belonging. It reminded me that play can also heal, that being part of a group can make courage grow quietly inside you. «

Summer School participant

» "Are you a good photographer? We're sure you are!" It started as a provocation, but also as an invitation. A gentle push toward interaction with passersby, dissolving distance and prompting spontaneous improvisation. «







i drop my shield

ESSEN

ANN MESSNER
& CLAUDIA SAAR, ELS FEYTONS, RALF D'ATRI

Summer School participant

>> Our group had decided to use the police shield as a body-identified device with which to engage the imagination of the public. Each "performer" had their own shield on which was written their individual "intention", along with a QR code linked to a short video of each addressing the viewer intimately on the subject of that "intention". On my shield was the intention "I am not violent". The shields were not used defensively, rather they were down, a gesture intended to be interpreted metaphorically as "I put down my shield". Still, we understood, that although we were disarmed by putting them down, the shields were provocative. <<

Summer School participant

>> I stood in the square behind a transparent police shield. It had once been a symbol of exclusion and control. That day, it became a space of invitation. On the shield, in large letters, stood the word "Inclusion". A QR code invited passersby to scan it and watch a short video of me speaking. People walked past. Some stared. Some ignored me. Some said they had no time. A few stopped. I stuttered. I forgot words. But I kept speaking. I said: "I want to belong – not just by law, but with dignity". The situation became unexpectedly playful – not in a light-hearted way, but because the roles had shifted. The shield, meant to keep people out, now invited them in. My presence became the question: "Do you want to see me?" It was a small performance, but it revealed something big: that even the tools of control can be transformed. That even silence can speak. That playfulness, in its deepest sense, includes risk. <<

Summer School participant

>> After the performance, someone wrote me a letter. She had seen me in the square – and later watched the video. Her words reflected something back to me: that the performance had made her feel seen, too. She spoke about not feeling "normal enough" to belong – even though she looked like everyone else. Her response reminded me that inclusion isn't just about disability. It's about the hidden distances between us – and how fragile it feels to cross them. That quiet letter became my highlight. Not the moment I stood there – but the moment someone answered. That taught me: Inclusion begins when someone dares to be visible, and someone else dares to respond. Not as law. Not as policy. But as recognition – across fear, silence, or habit. <<





Systems of Misuse

ESSEN

EVAN ROTH & RACHEL UWA
& TYMKE TON, DIEGO ALATORRE GUZMÁN,
FRANCESCA FARINA, SOPHIA LORENA GAMBOA

EVAN ROTH & RACHEL UWA Artists

>> Watching our group transition from initial trepidation to complete independence was uplifting. We started off together in the workroom brainstorming and discussing ideas, but in the end, everyone ended up out in the city installing self-directed projects. It was inspiring to witness how quickly they took things in hand and ran with them in the city. <<









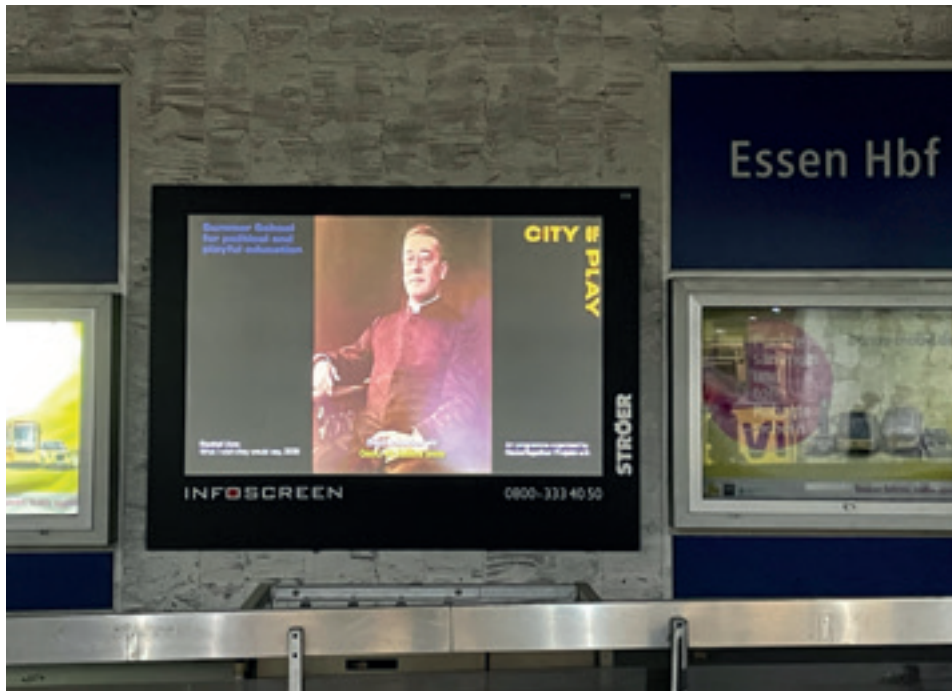
What I Wish They Would Say

RACHEL UWA

ESSEN

RACHEL UWA Artist

>> Our silence haunts me. Once we looked away while our neighbours were dehumanized, starved and erased. We told ourselves it was complicated. "Never again" we vowed. But "never again" - for whom? <<





RACHEL UWA Artist

>> I was watching the swings hanging from the Stadtzeichen Stahl sculpture by Ulli Dratz when they were first put up. At first kids were shy, but once a few started to play on the swings and kick the ball everyone was surrounding it. It brought together neighbourhood kids and families and everyone was smiling and laughing. All communities should have more opportunities for joy and happiness like this. <<

EVAN ROTH Artist

>> Every time I passed it, there were kids playing and screaming. I was nervous at first about the project from a safety perspective, but in the end it was a real gift to the city, producing the most engagement with locals. <<

Summer School participant

>> Children were immediately keen to join in and to start playing because they tend to be eager to play in the public space. An unexpected situation happened when one adult brought his own plastic seat to add to the swing. <<





Space for Softness

SOPHIA LORENA GAMBOA



The Unruly City: Mapping Urban Resistance

ESSEN

ADAM KRAFT & DILAN KURULTAY, NELE NITHACK, THERESA
GEBHARDT, PHILIPP UNGER, SUSAN HANSEN,
ERIK HANNERZ, ANTON WIREAUS, ABHAY CHETAN
NARASIMHAN

Summer School participant

>> With his group, Adam Kraft took care of the integrity of the chosen locations, with secrecy, crafting mystery as an element of wonder. <<





OPENING DOORS FOR ALL / SMILE AT A STRANGER / WHERE I END & YOU BEGIN

ESSEN

COCO BERGHOLM









Poster Interventions

OX

ESSEN



OX Artist

»» Not a situation I witnessed – I was actually the protagonist. I was Pasting Coco's texts onto the column provided for this purpose. Pasting was made particularly complicated by unsuitable equipment, lack of time, and apocalyptic weather. A nearby store was playing music, which gave an epic feel to our chaotic action. ««











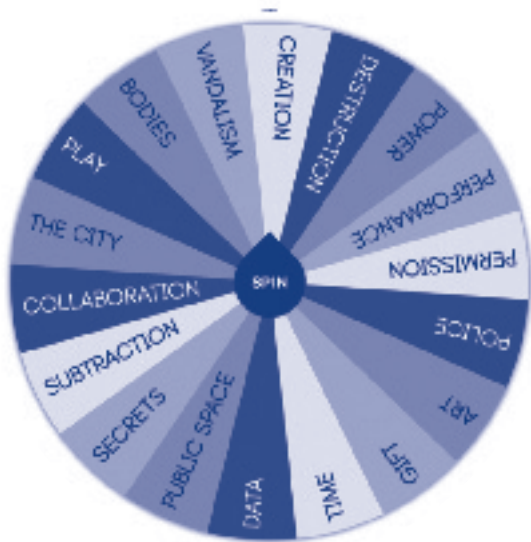
Round Table Roulette about Playful Cities

ESSEN

WITH SARA LEGHISSA, IGOR PONOSOV,
EVAN ROTH, AND RACHEL UWA
MODERATED BY ERIK HANNERZ AND SUSAN HANSEN

SUSAN HANSEN: In our day jobs (Erik and I are) professors, so roundtables often become very serious and intense, and they are not always that much fun at the end of a long day. So, tonight we wanted to mix seriousness with fun.

Accordingly, for this roundtable, we created an experiment: a game called Round Table Roulette. This ties in with the Climate Casino (presented by Sebastian Quack) outside. Each word on the spinning wheel links to a question.



SPIN – VANDALISM

ERIK HANNERZ: We'd like you to consider mischief versus deliberate vandalism – the playful, childish aspect of mischievous interventions versus malicious damage to property. How would you describe that more playful form of vandalism in relation to your work?

IGOR PONOSOV: My practice has always been based on playfulness. Everything is connected to that feeling. At the same time, I try to be serious and train my craft. So, there's an aspect of making trouble – but not vandalism for the sake of it.

SPIN – PLAY

SUSAN HANSEN: When does play become work?

EVAN ROTH: As an artist, keeping play in your practice is part of the job. Studio time should re-

main fun, even as practical demands creep in. The trick is finding a threshold where that play never fully disappears, while still making sure the rent gets paid. You try to keep the play alive as long as possible.

SPIN – EXCUSES

SUSAN HANSEN: What's the most creative or implausible excuse you've given when police or the public have stopped you working in public space?

SARA LEGHISSA: We used to say that we were shooting a movie – even without a camera. It frames the activity so people understand what you are doing. Another approach is just to describe plainly what you're doing and let your actions explain it.

SPIN – AUDIENCE

ERIK HANNERZ: What about the role of the audience in performance? How important is the audience? Is it always necessary?

RACHEL UWA: I run an independent art-technology school in Berlin, and I believe that people should create work that matters to them – that reflects who they are. If you care deeply about what you're making, the magic happens regardless of how people react.

EVAN ROTH: I'm experimenting with smaller audiences and longer interactions – fewer people but deeper engagement rather than lots of people with fleeting attention. When you're working in public spaces, the audience is often ambient and unpredictable. I value keeping the work open to unexpected reactions – those interactions can be transformative.

A QUESTION FROM THE AUDIENCE: Should you announce a public action as performance, or does that spoil it by making the audience a circus?

EVAN ROTH: It depends on what you mean by audience. If you mean an invited, captive audience, that can change the dynamic. Many public works benefit from ambient, non-invited audiences. It's a different relationship.

SPIN – INTERVENTION

SUSAN HANSEN: Can you share any stories of interventions going wrong?

EVAN ROTH: The biggest fail in my street art career was along these lines of audience expectations of what's happening in public space. I was working on this project Laser Tag where I was using software, and it was about meeting with graffiti writers, and we would capture the motions of graffiti, and I would project that back. It was always meant to be something you would do, and set out anew, for whoever happened to stumble across it. But the organizers at this particular event in Russia said, you know, we want to promote this intervention – and I was like, no, you're going to ruin it because it should not be advertised, it's going to suck, you know, if people are going to passively sit there with their popcorn and watch it, it's just not going to be fun.

And so then I showed up at the venue, and the local radio station was there, and they had this huge \$10,000 projector on the side of the building, and I was like, oh no, this isn't going to go well. And then the whole town showed up, like more people than I probably have ever had looking at my work; they must have advertised it, and of course it went terribly. It almost turned into a riot.

So many people showed up, so then they quickly put me in the car and drove me away, and I was like, did it go well? And they were like, we have to get out of here!

The next morning, I translated the review from Russian to English. There is one line in my head that still sticks. I'm described as, the "American artist unzipped, only to reveal his limp phallus." Like, that was the actual review. So, this was a lesson that I learned about this idea of audience and expectation, that these pieces that weren't meant to have a captive audience – versus more of a passive audience – can go very, very wrong in situ. That was a hard but brilliant lesson.

SPIN – EXCUSES

SARA LEGHISSA: I was doing a work called Drive-in. To create this work, we were spending a lot of time at night in a car. And we would always get in trouble with the police while doing it. Once we were in Cádiz, in Sardinia, and we were passing through this neighbourhood, and I was crouching

behind the car, waiting in the night. Then I heard the sound of the police. And then they stopped. They asked, what are you doing? I'm like, I'm doing a performance. And they're like, okay, come with us, and they put me in the police car. Then I tried to call someone, but they were laughing at me. But I had my phone to document all this – and I needed to demonstrate what I was doing, so I was like, I don't care, bring it on! I was trapped in this police car, but I was also playing and performing. I had to demonstrate the work while being detained. It was surreal. So, one of my key experiences is being lost in a comfortable police car.

SPIN – COLLABORATION

SUSAN HANSEN: Tell us about a collaboration that failed. Note that we are asking this question as a kind of a provocation. Obviously, we recognize the power of collective and collaborative projects. But we tend to only hear about collaborations that worked, and we tend to forget that at times some things fail. But sometimes when things fail, we find out something we didn't know before, and we accidentally create something that we weren't anticipating.

RACHEL UWA: Collaboration can be risky, but failure can also lead to unexpected discoveries. I've changed how I relate to failure – it's not a binary pass-or-fail. Things go wrong all the time, and that's part of learning. This hinges on failing as not necessarily always being a bad thing, and sometimes we bump into something new, or we accidentally spontaneously create something we would never have done otherwise.

SPIN – MISUSE

SUSAN HANSEN: The stage that we are sitting on right now is actually made up of the tables that we were dining on earlier, it's a kind of misuse. I wonder whether you have any similar examples of your own work being misused or reappropriated in unexpected ways?

EVAN ROTH: A lot of the work that I still make today is couched in older ideals of open source and free culture – ideals that were about sharing access to knowledge. A lot of the tools I was making back when I was first working with graffiti writers, part of the whole idea then was about sharing

these tools and giving access to them and then being free of copyright. But not just that, there was always an express invitation to join this project and to be able to do this thing that we were doing.

The idealistic version of me back then thought that this could raise the bar of who had access, who was communicating about space. But part of giving it all away for free is you also do away with this control over it, which felt really good.

We were doing this project Laser Tag that involved software where we made a laser that creative writers could use in real time to write on a building. This attracted a certain amount of popularity at the time. People started copying it really quickly, which was great. Advertisers, of course, are always copying everybody's stuff. We were mentally prepared for that. But then one time we saw it was used in Rotterdam. Lucky Strike cigarettes had set up a version of our installation. And they would let you come and use the laser to write on the building, which was fun. Kids wanted to do it. But you could only do it if you agreed that you were 18 or over and that you were a smoker!

SPIN – PLAY

ERIK HANNERZ: What do you associate with “play”? How do you balance play and seriousness in the current moment?

RACHEL UWA: I struggle with play. The world feels so serious – especially now with the crisis in Gaza – that it can feel wrong to treat things playfully. But play can be a mode of engagement with serious subjects; it doesn't mean ignoring suffering.

SPIN – WORK

SUSAN HANSEN: As artists, how do you differentiate between work and play?

RACHEL UWA: There's a privilege to being able to call creative activity “play.” In many places, artists don't have that luxury – they need to earn a living and are often told to “be grateful” for the work they get. The conversation about play versus work changes depending on context. For me, it's kind of the same thing - playing, working, and being serious. I always feel a responsibility, an urgency, to talk about serious things. When I'm into my practice, I always have this feeling of pain. But I work with the passion of feeling this pain and responding creatively whenever something bad is happening in the world.

EVAN ROTH: We should differentiate between play and work by protecting space for playful practices. We should keep some projects intentionally unprofessionalized so they remain playful. That boundary helps preserve joy in creative practice.

SUSAN HANSEN: A final thought: Let's all spend time playfully imagining the world as it could be, not just reacting to what is. Dreaming of better ways to live and organize is incredibly important and offers us all hope for the future.



Dortmund University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Faculty of Design

ESSEN

DORTMUND UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES AND ARTS
FACULTY OF DESIGN

Students from the Faculty of Design at Dortmund University of Applied Sciences and Arts developed four interventions along Rüttenscheider Straße in Essen as part of the Summer School. With UTOPIA, the symbiosis between humans and plants was made tangible through a wearable greenhouse and a 3D-AI media installation. The performance *Forms over Function / Bürokratieblockade* playfully allowed passers-by to experience the absurdity of bureaucracy in the migration process. Another interactive, game-like project, *Are We Still Going in Circles?*, featured a spinning wheel of fortune that critically and sarcastically addressed the family and social policies of the current federal government. The fourth installation took the form of a military recruitment booth in a public space, visualizing Germany's arms deliveries to war zones such as the Gaza region.



Forms over Function / Bürokratieblockade
Ramon Park, Joline Wolf, Jette Woelk, Lina Scherfke,
Rebecca Jahn, Jeronimo Latz, Christian Tacuk

UTOPIA, Serafin Palme, Jan Schenke, Steve Thiele, Sophie Kuhlenkamp,
Iris Sabbioni, Sara Rabet; right: Are we still Going in Circles? Lena Bocklage,
Julia Limburger und Juliane Spula



Wills and Weapons
Nadia Juneidi and Joshua Martin



Are we still Going in Circles? Lena Bocklage,
Julia Limburger und Juliane Spula





01

"DIY Ping Pong", Markus Zimmermann / Superfiliale, Rathausmarkt, Mülheim an der Ruhr; also Playground Duisburg & Essen



02

"Bridging Gaps", FLYGUYS, Kevin Rutkowski, Duo Süne & Thorsten, Benjamin Richter & Friends, Unskewed Ensemble, Rathausmarkt - railway viaduct - Ruhrbrücke, Mülheim an der Ruhr



03

"FLUSS", Maik & Dirk Löbber, railway viaduct, Mülheim an der Ruhr



04

"Mülheim Unfold", Frank Bölter, Rathausmarkt, Mülheim an der Ruhr



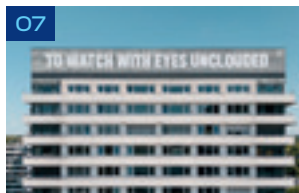
05

"playing around", katze und krieg, Rathausmarkt - Löhberg - Schloßstraße - Friedrich-Ebert-Straße, Mülheim an der Ruhr



06

Unknown Artists Collective, various spots city centre, Mülheim an der Ruhr



07

"To Watch With Eyes Unclosed", Coco Bergholm, Hans-Böckler-Platz, Mülheim an der Ruhr



08

"We Don't Stop Playing (...)", Coco Bergholm, Friedrich-Ebert-Straße, Mülheim an der Ruhr



09

"Play Play Play", Coco Bergholm, Bahnstraße/ Löhberg, Mülheim an der Ruhr



10

OX, Löhstraße 22, Mülheim an der Ruhr



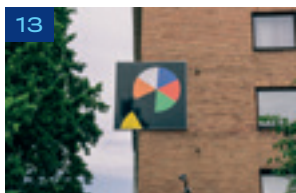
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OX, Bahnstraße 24, Mülheim an der Ruhr



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OX, Eppinghoferstraße / Bf Mülheim, Mülheim an der Ruhr



13

OX, Löhberg 70, Mülheim an der Ruhr



14

"Climate Casino", Sebastian Quack, promenade Duisburg Inner Harbour / Philosophenweg, Duisburg; also Playground Mülheim an der Ruhr & Essen



"Offside Traps",
Sebastian Quack,
VIVAWEST Terasse, Duisburg



"DUISPOOL",
orizzontale,
upper basin Duisburg Inner
Harbour, Duisburg



"PIZZA RAZZO",
Studio Quack,
promenade Duisburg Inner
Harbour/ Philosophenweg,
Duisburg



"Tag Your Flag",
Obisk-93 &
Bobbi-Bianchi-230,
promenade Duisburg Inner
Harbour/ Philosophenweg,
Duisburg



"Smile At A Stranger",
Coco Bergholm,
Duisburger Dünen,
Duisburg



"You Belong Here",
Coco Bergholm,
Am Silberpalais, Duisburg



"I am Not Sending a
Message (...)",
Coco Bergholm,
Am Unkelstein, Duisburg



"Turn Me Into Something
Else", Coco Bergholm,
promenade Duisburg Inner
Harbour/ Philosophenweg,
Duisburg



"To Be Like Water",
Coco Bergholm,
promenade Duisburg Inner
Harbour/ Philosophenweg,
Duisburg



OX,
Philosophenweg 25,
Duisburg



"Between Actions and
Words",
Sara Leghissa et al,
metro station Essen Central
Station, Essen



"The Art of Between",
Brad Downey, Igor Ponosov
et al, various spots, city
centre, Essen



"i drop my shield",
Ann Messner et al,
Kennedyplatz, Essen



"Gnomes (Systems of
Misuse)", Rachel Uwa &
Evan Roth, Huyssenallee/
Kruppstraße, Essen



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"Schuld",
Evan Roth,
Kruppstraße, Essen



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"What I Wish They Would Say", Rachel Uwa,
metro station Essen Central Station, Essen



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"Pink Leaks",
Francesca Farina,
Europaplatz, Essen



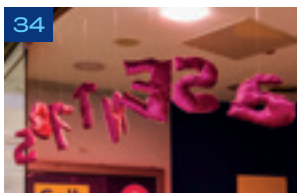
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"Swing-Zoig",
Diego Alatorre Guzmán,
Pferdemarkt, Essen



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"The Line",
Tymke Ton,
metro station Essen Central Station, Essen



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"Space for Softness",
Sophia Lorena Gamboa,
metro station Essen Central Station, Essen



35

"Opening Doors For All",
"Smile At A Stranger",
"Where I End & You Begin",
Coco Bergholm, *metro station Essen Central Station, Essen*



36

"Sign Language",
Coco Bergholm & OX,
Huyssenallee/ Baedekerstraße, Essen



37

OX,
track 6 Essen central station, Essen



38

OX,
track 2 & 4, Essen central station, Essen



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OX,
Huyssenallee/ Kruppstraße, Essen



40

"Portrait of Love",
Gigo,
Stadtgarten, Essen

Interactive Exhibition Parkour

(SEE PLAYBOOK)



"Three-Sided-Football",
Asger Jorn, 1964



"Gym Win Sessions",
Yolanda Domínguez,
Castellón, 2017



"Street Art for the
People to Play",
Démocratie Créative,
France, 2011



"Playground",
The Wa,
Marseille, 2011



"Un-Stitching Karl",
Brad Downey,
Berlin, 2007



"Massive Word Search
Game", Aïda Gómez
Berlin, Köln, Bonn, Madrid,
Utrecht, 2015 - ongoing



"Corner",
Mathieu Tremblin,
Rennes, 2014

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- Katze & Krieg (*Julia Dick & Katharina Jej*)
- Markus Zimmermann / Superfiliale
- Unknown Artist
- Collective: Clara Heußer, Sina Sophie Ruge, , Axel Schmuck, Ursula Strohwald
- Neuer Zirkus
- FLYGUYS (*director: Sebastian Gies*)
- Kevin Rutkowski
- Benjamin Richter & Friends
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