

Reflexive essay

## **Friends with Benefits: On Working with Ambiguity in Artistic Friendship-Collaborations**

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## Friends with Benefits: On Working with Ambiguity in Artistic Friendship-Collaborations

Angela Stiegler

*Friends with benefits* was the title by which we—a group of three artist friends, Samuel Fischer-Glaser and Yulia Lokshina as well as this essay's author—were invited to an exhibition in an artist-run space in Munich, Germany. The result was a 20-minute video installation that we framed as a music video for our imaginary vegan punk band by the same name: *friends with benefits* (2018/2023). We used this title as a name for our collaboration addressing the entanglements and sexual connotations that go along with it and expanded it to a diverse understanding of artistic collaboration. In this essay, we deal with what it means to be artists working in capitalist times and during multiple crises. We suggest a method for artistic collaborative work in Germany today. We embrace our working and living together, maneuvering continuously through problems and conflicts that emerge with the proximity of both work and life, friendship and love. Our common artistic strategies of collaboration include methods such as reading our own or others' writings to each other, producing videos and re-using material already produced, a procedure we call 'arte povera,' and adding new layers of interpretation to it, thus exercising what in German is popularly known as 'Verfremdungseffekt' (literally: defamiliarizing effect). By reading and speaking in different registers, we gave the video material from 2018 a 2023 sound layer, in which we used our voices to perform different ideas of authorship and artishood. By confronting ourselves with popular and problematic positions and by embodying them, we claim this as an 'inconvenient' method to develop critical thinking. Some of these voices that resound lead back to Munich as a site of avantgarde cultural production of New German Cinema as well as of two legendary and controversial figures of that movement, the director and actor Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1945–1982) and the actor Klaus Kinski (1926–1991). We also present ourselves as fictional musician characters that go on tour with their latest hit: *Nie wieder Tier* (*Animal Never Again*). Through this setup, we 'hope' to approach 'problematic' situations in the present and address the symptoms of a still post-war German culture and the continuities of fascism.

**Keywords:** artishood, autofiction, cohabitation, collaboration, critique, friends, New German Cinema, Munich, shared authorship

The essay starts with a transcription of the first words spoken in a collaborative video work entitled *friends with benefits* (Fischer-Glaser, Lokshina and Stiegler, 2018/2023). These bits of text are translated from German into English and

Chinese.<sup>1</sup> This polyphony of voices is connected to the question of how to solve problems. It is based on an encounter in a street in Munich, Germany. Are we actually able to formulate problems that we encounter? Who do we talk to about these problems? And who will actually listen to or understand them? The three languages—German, English and Chinese—are representative of a political set of Western power structures and its supposed antagonists. So, the very casual encounter on the streets of Munich with Ting, a Chinese woman living between the UK and Germany (so, very much in the West), raised for us the political question of how these different languages resonate and speak to different people in the world. We explained to her in English what we had done in the video and why we had done this. To continue this discussion, we agreed to exchange contacts and provide English subtitles to the video that she would then use to create Chinese subtitles. They form an additional layer of reflection on top of the ephemeral relationships between text and image, voices and speakers, personae and impersonators. These subtitles are therefore a continuation of the organic and socially contingent production process of the entire piece. In the first seconds of the video, you see a scene at night: An underpass and a parked van on the right side and then three figures coming slowly into the picture from the left, crawling down a hill. They are wearing safety vests. All you really see is reflecting stripes from the safety vests, as the video is shot in night view. After some seconds, an offscreen voice starts speaking:

[00:00:39:15 – 00:00:58:23]

[in Bairischem Dialekt]<sup>2</sup>

[in Bavarian accent]

[用德国巴伐利亚州地方口音]

*Ihr seid geil, ihr seid so richtig geil.*

*You're awesome, you're really awesome.*

你们真棒，你们真的很棒。

*Ihr habt's drauf.*

*You've got what it takes.*

你们拥有成名所需的一切。

*Stars, Stars mach ich noch aus euch.*

*Stars, I'll make stars out of you.*

我会让你们成为明星。

*Ihr seid wirklich—*

*You really are—*

你们真的有

*ihr habt Starpotential!*

*you have star potential!*

有明星的潜力！

*Des habt ihr.*

*You have it.*

真的

*Nächst's Jahr, ich bring euch ganz groß raus.*

*Next year, I'll make you really big.*

明年，我会让你们真正大红大紫。

*Nächst's Jahr spielt ihr in der Olympiaarena!*

*Next year you'll be playing in the Olympic Arena!*

明年你们会在奥林匹克体育馆演出！

Cut. The three figures walk underneath the underpass, with their vests shining into the camera, but now there is enough light to recognize their faces looking into the camera.



Image 1: Samuel Fischer-Glaser, Yulia Lokshina, Angela Stiegler, *friends with benefits* (2018/2023), an installation view from outside through the window, with magazine collages, red foil, books, red lamp, skull money box, microphone, one of two screens saying 'STARS' in the foreground, and acoustic panels and foam in the background, Galerie von Empfangshalle / Projects 154, Theresienstraße 154, Munich, Foto: Constanza Meléndez, © VG-Bild Kunst Bonn, 2024. Courtesy of the author.

In this essay, I want to speak about taking up space, occupying space, and using time as an artistic practice. From my experience in artistic and interdisciplinary collaborations, it is key to develop strategies that, within self-organized structures, can be reproduced and applied by using space and time outside the logics of capital, ever-present as it is in our daily lives. Therefore, I am focusing on local practices and community-related work. I am writing from a practice-based perspective as a visual artist, working freelance in multiple roles, as an art educator and art mediator as well as a curator and, moreover, someone who is doing voluntary work in these contexts. I live and work in Munich, Germany. Being an artist in a capitalist 'arte povera'<sup>3</sup> world today means that (some) artists can exhibit but (most) do not get paid. Most recently, cultural production has been negotiated along the lines of antisemitism and anti-antisemitism, which has become a central point of discussion, first within a postcolonial discourse during documenta 15 curated by the Indonesian artist collective ruangrupa<sup>4</sup> and then as a result of the Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the Israel-Gaza war that followed, on a wider scale. *The February Journal*, for which I am writing

this text, has been reconceptualized and renamed following Russia's latest full-scale invasion of Ukraine, ongoing since February 2022. The specific artworks I am going to discuss in my text for this journal reference a post-war German culture that I believe to be stretching into the present and to contain continuities of fascism. I have been asking myself how these continuities have been dealt with culturally and artistically in the past and present and will therefore trace specific times and places, especially local spaces and practices in Munich, Germany, today and in the post-war era, specifically the late 1970s and early 1980s. Munich, the National Socialist 'Capital of the Movement,' had by that point assumed the role of an ideological center of West German conservatism. I want to talk about practices of friendship as important emotional and economic relations, using as a case study the recent collaboration with my artist friends Samuel Fischer-Glaser and Yulia Lokshina on a video installation and an exhibition of the same title as this contribution, *friends with benefits*. This title, chosen by the curator Maria Justus and presented to us as part of the invitation, became the name of our autofictional vegan punk band which appears in a video made on that occasion. Expanding our way of working together with shared authorship, I want to claim watching films together, reading texts to each other, or reading books in a group as potential methods of creating discursive spaces and formulating critique. This expansion of artistic practice into the 'private' realm is not new, but I use this approach to think about 'solving problems.' Being in a small, intimate circle and confronting each other with difficult, problematic content is key to this strategy, as it is through these practices that we learn to speak, feel, and think about problems that are relevant to not only ourselves, but possibly a wider group of people. I do not claim that this method will necessarily solve any problems; my wish is to find a way of bringing problems onto the table. In my argument, artistic practices are (artistic) actions in relation to specific problems. Programmatically, these actions consist in working in 'inconvenient' ways—which is to say, ways that stand apart from the more convenient modes of affirmation or rejection. This inconvenience allows for experiment, but it also creates confusion and further discussion, which emphasizes once more the difficulty of 'solving problems.'

This essay uses the structure of the video *friends with benefits* (2018/2023) as well as fragments of the text from it, in German with translations into English and Chinese. One afternoon during the run of our exhibition and installation *friends with benefits* in an artist-run space called Projects 154 or Galerie von Empfangshalle<sup>5</sup>, located in 154 Theresienstraße in Munich, a passerby stopped to see what was going on. The gallery was in disguise. In an effort to alter its white-cube character, we had covered the showcase window with magazine cutouts and placed a carpet and old bits of foam on the floor to hang out on. It had become a kind of stylized hovel reminiscent of a band rehearsal space. We started chatting. She introduced herself as Ting Zhu, an urban planner based in the UK and an occasional visitor to Munich. Ting kindly offered to support our work by translating the video's English subtitles into Chinese.



Image 2: Samuel Fischer-Glaser, Yulia Lokshina, Angela Stiegler, *friends with benefits* (2018/2023), an installation view inside the gallery with a carpet, acoustic panels, and foam boards, Theresienstraße 154 (Empfangshalle Gallery/Projects 154), Munich, Foto: Constanza Meléndez, © VG-Bild Kunst Bonn, 2024. Courtesy of the author.



Image 3: Samuel Fischer-Glaser, Yulia Lokshina, Angela Stiegler, *friends with benefits* (2018/2023), an installation view inside the gallery with the second screen and collages, books, a red lamp, a skull money box, and a microphone, Theresienstraße 154 (Empfangshalle Gallery/Projects 154), Munich, Foto: Constanza Meléndez, © VG-Bild Kunst Bonn, 2024. Courtesy of the author.

[00:01:56:10]

*'Wenn mein Herz gesund wär', spräng ich zuerst aus dem Fenster; dann ging ich in den Kintopp und käm' nie wieder heraus' (Lasker-Schüler 1982 [1913]).<sup>6</sup>*

*If my heart was healthy, I'd jump out of the window first; then I'd go to the cinema and never come out again.*

如果我心脏健康，我会先跳出窗户；然后去电影院再也不出来了。

As we were working on the video *friends with benefits*, I became aware of the piece's connection to the ongoing screening series that we as a group of artist friends started in our apartment during the early nights of the Covid-19

pandemic. The three of us used to share a small apartment with two bedrooms, a living room, a bathroom, a balcony, and a kitchen. We tried to kill time and change the mood by confronting ourselves with a complex film program. All this took place mainly in the so-called Lounge, an alternative home cinema in our apartment, which is a real and an ideal space that continues to exist and which became our chat group name. It is definitely a place of trust and comfort. In this case, a locally bound space starts to exist also outside of its local boundaries and is extended into a common virtual space in our minds and phone chat histories. I thought I would list the films we have watched so far (in the remembered order of screening them). I want to think of this as part of a method of dealing with 'problems' by confronting them, on both artistic and structural levels alongside our artistic collaboration, as implemented in the recent video *friends with benefits* (2018/2023). The 'problems' in the following list of films are related to Germany after the Second World War. They include being a son of a Nazi filmmaker, group dynamics within leftist terror cells, or heritage within the Richard Wagner clan. The films are trying to deal with these problems artistically. To us as people born long after the immediate post-war period, they make specific problems and struggles of the times accessible through the experiences of the filmmakers, who often have a direct relation to the content:

*Wundkanal* (Germany, France 1984 / Thomas Harlan); *Notre Nazi* (France, Germany 1984 / Robert Kramer); *Herbstmilch* (Germany 1989 / Joseph Vilsmaier); *Une Jeunesse Allemande* (France, Switzerland, Germany 2015) / Jean-Gabriel Périot); *Wintermärchen* (Germany 2018 / Jan Bonny); *Swastika* (United Kingdom 1973 / Philippe Mora); *Winifred Wagner und die Geschichte des Hauses Wahnfried, 1917–1975* (Germany 1975 / Hans-Jürgen Syberberg); *Der Anständige* (*The Decent One*) (Germany, Austria, Israel 2014 / Vanessa Lapa); *Die dritte Generation* (Germany 1979 / Rainer Werner Fassbinder); *Das Meisterspiel* (Germany 1998 / Lutz Dambeck); *Zeit der Götter* (Germany 1992 / Lutz Dambeck); *The Zone of Interest* (US, UK, Poland 2023 / Jonathan Glazer).

We watched these films over a period of almost four years. All of them address issues arising from the aftermath of the Second World War and the Holocaust; a lot of them were produced in Germany or deal with German protagonists; all of them were created after the Second World War, between 1973 and 2018. Some of the films are controversial or provocative, confused or confusing. So, having someone to share the experience with and talk to after the film is almost a necessity. For us, or at least for me, this ongoing film series was initially a way to cope with pandemic life by focusing on the much deeper collective wound of Nazism. This allowed us to understand that something which has been accepted as collective guilt still needs to be dealt with on a personal level. Watching this specific series of films brought together our three perspectives as viewers and gave us insight into the knowledge that each of us has. We were able to discuss things that we might not have said out loud if we had watched these films on our own. Moreover, we might not even have watched them at all, as we might have found them

too complex to deal with; we might have felt too scared to watch them alone. (The same could be said about reading a text or book together and discussing its contents.) I want to emphasize here that the screening series has built a foundation and base for our thinking and working together as friends, artists, and filmmakers. It has given an insight into the method of my work in collaboration with others that I refer to as 'economies of friendship' and that constitutes the ground for interdisciplinary or a-disciplinary' work. Such an 'economy of friendship' does not try to overlook unpaid labor but thinks about strategies of collaboration that sometimes are not thought of as labor. I see a parallel to housework here: for decades, the importance of housework to communities and society-at-large has been minimized and undermined. As in other economies, friendship demands investment and desires securities. In economies of friendship, time is invested without monetary exchange or real securities. There are unpredictable (though foreseeable) interruptions to such economies as a result of conflict or emotional fracture. What kind of friendships are we able to afford? When I graduated (from art school) ten years ago, I found a great so-called network of friends and collaborators. This network has changed over the years, some friendships ended, others continued. Through these conflicts, pre-existing class differences have become deciding factors in our relationships and careers. As the upholding of the singular artist subject becomes an increasingly tenuous project, what these friendship economies produce is not value, but meaning.

Samuel, Yulia and I, Angela, have different backgrounds that set the horizon of multiple perspectives. We met in Munich in pre-pandemic times, between 2014 and 2018. We graduated from art and film schools between 2014 and 2022. All of us are born between the mid-1980s and early 1990s, in Germany and Russia, and grew up in different parts of West Germany: Hannover, Bremen, and smaller towns and cities in Swabia and Bavaria. I feel myself sticking out as the only 'Bavarian' among the three of us in this constellation, as I was born in Munich and grew up in different parts of Upper and Lower Bavaria. Some of us have grandparents with a 'Nazi background',<sup>8</sup> one of us grew up in the Jewish tradition, and none of us is part of any religious congregation.

The invitation to do an exhibition with an already set title made us think of (mutually) beneficial relationships of capitalized sexuality that go along with that title—*friends with benefits* profiting from each other in an expanded friendship and erotic economy. We definitely agree that artistic collaboration takes place on different levels and often makes the separation of the private and public or the intimate and business-related obsolete. And yes, we are 'friends with benefits' in a literal sense, reaping the rewards of the friendship economy. As three close friends, two of us now in a married partnership, we have lived together in different constellations, sharing apartments in Munich and Berlin. We share our lives. And by sharing these lives we also share our problems and conflicts, sorrow and grief, happiness and joy. The private is stated as political<sup>9</sup>, in the first-wave-leftist-feminist understanding of the phrase. Personal problems are detected as political problems. "There are no





Image 4, from left to right: Angela Stiegler, Samuel Fischer-Glaser, Yulia Lokshina, and their work *Kochshow: Wer wählt, wählt verkehrt* (2022), a performance in a public space with reading, live cooking of Chili sin carne and a Djane set, in realm of *Young Rebellion*, A.K.T; Pforzheim, Foto: Indigo Pictures © VG-Bild Kunst Bonn, 2024. Courtesy of the author.

personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective



Image 5: Samuel Fischer-Glaser, Yulia Lokshina, Angela Stiegler, *Kochshow: Wer wählt, wählt verkehrt* (2022), a video still from a performance in a public space with reading, live cooking of Chili sin carne and a Djane set, in realm of *Young Rebellion*, A.K.T; Pforzheim © VG-Bild Kunst Bonn, 2024. Courtesy of the author.

solution. [...] Women are smart not to struggle alone [...] (Hanisch 1969: 4). Within our relationship, private problems include and exceed those of nuclear families and family values. Our relationship expands to the space that I referred to earlier as the 'Lounge.'<sup>10</sup> In this example, the 'Lounge' as a place of trust and comfort becomes part of a professional workspace. Our working methods vary from time to time: we try to keep them open for unknown practices, possibly also practices that are not defined as professional. In a way, we work as dilettantes, with the term 'dilettante' problematizing the differentiation between professional and amateur techniques of working. One of our strategies is to reuse material several times and recontextualize it.

The personal and the political thus become intertwined. Instead of calling it 'new' or 'neo-something,' we started calling this approach 'arte povera,' after the Italian art movement of the 1960s–1970s, when artists began attacking the values of the established institutions of government, industry, and culture. When we use this term as a familiar quotation around 50 years later, we appropriate it to denote a working method by which we frame and address working conditions that offer us possibilities to show our work but rarely open the channels to send an invoice. It also could be thought in line with the so-called *Verfremdungseffekt*<sup>11</sup> (Brecht 1967), after Bertolt Brecht's experimental theatre technique of the 1920s, where elements interrupted or disturbed a closed narration. Out of a mix of artistic and economic reasons, for *friends with benefits* (2018/2023) we decided to start working with the video material shot in 2018 in an open space called Theresienwiese. For two weeks in late September each year, Theresienwiese becomes the official ground for the Munich Oktoberfest; throughout the rest of the year, it is used for different communal actions, exercises, and test scenarios, as well as for marches and demonstrations, for instance, the 'Hygiene-Demos' (2020, literally: 'hygiene demonstrations') or 'Lichtermeer für Demokratie' (2023, literally: 'sea of light for democracy'). On this ground, the three of us and two other friends filmed each other crawling and occupying the 'empty' asphalt space, hovering like security guards or nocturnal construction workers.

How do we use time and space in general, as friends, artists, and citizens here? And what do we use it for? This crawling as well as our 'arte povera' method pay tribute to a way of making art as dilettantes or amateurs, a term used for non-professionalized lovers of the arts, rather than 'geniuses.' When I think of crawling today, I think of the US-American visual artist William Pope.L (1955–2023), who has performed 30-plus 'crawls' over more than three decades of work as an artist. This combines artistic labor with something not considered labor at all: moving on all fours in the street. For *The Great White Way*, Pope.L crawled 22 miles within nine years from the beginning to the end of Broadway—Manhattan's longest street—wearing a capeless Superman outfit with a skateboard strapped to his back.<sup>12</sup> Each part of the performance took as long and went as far as Pope.L could endure. It is important to mention that these crawls were conceived as a group performance. 'Unfortunately for me, at that time, I was the only volunteer,' Pope.L said (Simoni 2013). I did not know his work in 2018.

From my own crawling experience, I can confirm that even a very short crawl of approximately one minute feels very long and costs a lot of energy. The 2023 sound layer that we added to our 2018 crawling video shot in night view gave us the chance to face different West German artist figures and especially some artist 'heroes' from Munich in the 1970s. We did so by impersonating them in their own words and our own voices. We challenged the audience of this video with several ambiguous voices. On the one hand, the three of us (named as Angela, Yulia and Samuel) formed a vegan punk band and released our first three songs: *Nie wieder Tier* ('Animal Never Again'); *Nie wieder Brecht* ('Brecht Never Again'), and *Ich esse Fleisch—nicht*

(‘I Eat Meat—Not’), interrupted by an obscene voice talking openly about their hedonistic art and lifestyle. I understand this way of work as a method to develop critical thinking. Hereby, we do not try to silence the voices of our ‘problematic faves’ or ignore them, even though we might not find them appropriate anymore; instead, we give space to the idea that we are very much shaped by these ideas of artishood and authorship. We try to develop our own voices in continuation of these previous voices and sometimes in opposition to them. Therefore, it felt necessary to embody them (temporarily) with our own voices of today in order to understand what these voices felt like and stood for—basically, to hear what they wanted to say. As friends, artists, and citizens, we are confronted with the legends that make us think that being an artist means performing a certain lifestyle or being a genius. We came across these voices during various spontaneous actions starting with a simple act of taking a book from the shelf and reading out loud to the others in the room. The books from which we read to each other were books by different artists and authors that we had at hand. It turned out to be a mix of artists and authors we liked and disliked, all of them German (in alphabetic order): Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Klaus Kinski, Christian Kracht, Else Lasker-Schüler, and others. We decided not to censor our spontaneous selection but expose ourselves to its content. We put focus on positions related to artistic practices in Munich. Here, I read from Klaus Kinski’s (1975) autobiography:

[00:01:01:04 – 00:01:25:20]

*‘Unsere Truppe ist inzwischen nach Amerika eingeladen und Tatjana plant eine Tournee bis nach Japan und Australien. Aber nachdem in unserer Truppe jeder mit jedem oder alle zusammen geschlafen haben und wir uns in Venedig noch um die Gage zanken, die sich ein deutscher Reiseleiter zur Hälfte unter den Nagel gerissen hat, entsteht eine derart geladene Atmosphäre, dass dieses herrliche Ensemble auseinanderbricht.’*

*In the meantime, our troupe has been invited to America, and Tatjana is planning a tour to Japan and Australia. But after everyone in our troupe has slept with everyone or all together and we are still squabbling in Venice over the fee, half of which a German tour guide has snatched, the atmosphere becomes so charged that this marvelous ensemble breaks apart.*

与此同时，我们的乐团受邀前往美国，Tatjana正计划到日本和澳大利亚进行巡回演出。但是即便我们团员都互相发生性关系或多人性关系，我们还是在威尼斯因为费用的争执而激烈对峙，其中一半费用被一名德国导游抢走。氛围变得如此紧张，以至于这个奇妙的乐团分崩离析了。

[00:01:26:10 – 00:05:11:13]

*‘Ich fahre von Venedig nicht direkt nach Paris, wo Jasmin auf mich wartet, sondern fliege mit einer Tänzerin nach New York, wo sie im New York City Ballett auftreten soll. Sechs Wochen später fliege ich von New York nach Paris’ (Kinski 1975).<sup>13</sup>*

*I don't travel directly from Venice to Paris, where Yasmin is waiting for me, but fly with a dancer to New York, where she is due to perform at the New York City Ballet. Six weeks later, I fly from New York to Paris.*

虽然Yasmin在巴黎等我，我并没有直接从威尼斯飞往巴黎，而是和一位舞蹈演员一起飞往纽约，她将在纽约市芭蕾舞团表演。六周后，我从纽约飞往巴黎。

This idea of an artist—international, on the move, traveling from here to there, living a superstar lifestyle—is still present and popular today. The passage above is not as shocking as others from Kinski's (1975) autobiography. In it, Kinski specifically writes about incestuous relationships with his mother and sister, and the abuse of his daughter. An abusive male actor is showing off about his lifestyle as an artist, about his artistic and sexual power. Tragically, some decades after Kinski published this autobiography, at least the abuse of his daughter turned out to be true, according to Pola Kinski's own writings (Kinski P 2014). Filmmakers like Werner Herzog seemed not to believe this truth about Kinski or, as I speculate, worked with it as a transgressive power beyond biographical realities.

The method of speaking in another artist's or another author's voice that I started to describe earlier continues in the rest of the video. After reading to each other, we walk outdoors on the streets, sitting down on a park bench and improvising dialogue with our 'authentic' voices which by that time are informed by all the fragments of text that we listened to and read to each other earlier. The search for an authenticity of our own voices here becomes performative in the sense that we start to consider ourselves as artists performing certain roles and trying to express their thoughts and beliefs. We are still Angela, Samuel, and Yulia. This is a playful way to distance ourselves from each other in order to find a funny, even ironic way to think of ourselves. By improvising, we search for our voices set in a dialogue, listening to one another, responding, conflicting, or agreeing while speaking. This dialogical dynamic is embedded within our relationship as friends that encounter each other in an intimate set-up that is the condition of our working and experimenting together. Sitting there and talking made us realize that we could embrace this wide spectrum of voices by 'becoming' a vegan punk band. A plan we had conceived some years earlier now came to fruition. Therefore, the consequence was to come back to the apartment and record our first three songs (with each of us singing a separate voice layer into our phones). In that sense, the text spoken and read in the video is rather a transcript of how we spent our time together instead of being a planned artistic production. In this particular text, it could be read as a 'solution' to problems. But to be more precise, it rather helps to detect and understand 'problems' of collaborative production by analyzing its specific dynamics and conditions of artistic collaboration today.

Another example of a 'friends with benefits' community is the group around the Munich filmmaker, director, and actor Rainer Werner Fassbinder. In the case of Fassbinder, 'community' was never something out of control but strictly controlled and directed by filmmaking. In the first place, they started

working within the so-called Munich Antiteater—an anti-Bourgeois, counter-state theatre ensemble—and shot their first fiction film *Love Is Colder Than Death* ('Liebe ist kälter als der Tod' in German) (1969). 'For me, it's about the exploitability of feelings, whoever exploits them.'<sup>14</sup> Fassbinder's characters are indeed constantly exploited, oppressed, and used. Most of the time he worked with the same people, his surrogate family, and at times he even lived with them. The group was an artists' collective in the beginning and became more and more of a 'Fassbindertruppe' ('Fassbinder troop'). They used their apartments to work and, at the beginning, lived together in a villa outside of Munich. Work and private life mixed up more and more, brought empathy, conflict, envy, fancy cars, debt. Fassbinder's mother took over bookkeeping at some point. They became an incredibly specialized team that produced films at a rapid speed. Nevertheless, only Fassbinder—and not the whole group—is later described as a 'Chronist of the Federal Republic of Germany' and the 'most productive post-war filmmaker of Germany.' He and his team made 40 feature-length fiction films, two television series, and three short movies. Fassbinder died at the age of 37 in 1982. His last film *Querelle* (1982) features the song *Each Man Kills the Thing He Loves*.

[00:21:11:04 – 00:21:39:18]

*'Ich bin der Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Ich erkläre, dass wir das dahinten als Requisiten für unseren Film brauchen. Wir haben alle in der letzten Zeit ganz schnell gelernt: Bewege dich nur, wenn es dir die Bullen erlauben, sonst kann es deine letzte Bewegung sein. Und frag lieber zweimal nach, bevor du deine Papiere aus der Jackentasche ziehst. Mitten auf der Ingolstädter Straße komme ich mir vor wie in New York' (Baer 1982).<sup>15</sup>*

*I am Rainer Werner Fassbinder. I explain that we need that back there as a prop for our film. We've all learnt very quickly recently—only move if the cops allow you to, otherwise it could be your last move. And better ask twice before you pull your papers out of your inside jacket pocket. In the middle of Ingolstädter Straße, I feel like I'm in New York.*

我是莱纳·沃纳·法斯宾德。我解释说我们需要把那个要回来作为我们电影的道具。我们最近都很快掌握了 - 只有警察允许你动你才动，否则你一动可能就是你的最后一步。而且在你从内衣口袋里拿出身份证之前，最好问两遍。在Ingolstädter Straße大道，我觉得自己就像在纽约。

In the post-war German culture, the protagonists of the so-called Young German Film, later known as New German Cinema, are known for dealing with the aftermath of the Holocaust and with post-war West Germany in their films. I looked into their manifesto from 1962, published in the West German journal *Filmstudio* and reprinted in *Artforum* in 2013 on their 50th anniversary.<sup>16</sup> I am trying to understand the initial drive that birthed the now 61-year-old manifesto. Wondering who and what is left of that 'original' group and New German Cinema, I have collected some names of those active and alive today: Alexander Kluge, Margarethe von Trotta, Werner Herzog, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, Rosa von Praunheim, Wim Wenders.

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disaster' (Oberhausen Manifesto 1962)

And it ends with a very popular quote: 'The old film is dead. We believe in the new one' (Oberhausen Manifesto 1962). This promise mirrors the wishful thinking of the 'Stunde Null' ('zero hour' in English) rhetoric that circulated in Germany directly after the Second World War, with its tacit belief that one might start from scratch, and that needs to be contextualized with the 1950s German television industry. 'We don't believe in the distinction between art and entertainment. Something that doesn't also entertain can't be art because it doesn't concern people. And something that is good entertainment will always betray artistry. So, a ghetto for art and a broad mass base for entertainment, that's a basis we don't believe in,'<sup>17</sup> Alexander Kluge declared in 1966 (Steinbeißer 2023).

In search of what it means to be or work as an artist today, I have difficulties to continue the narration of a world of making art and film that is told through manifestos, excess, geniuses, or low rents. We live in a time of high rents and lack of space in post-pandemic times, and we are still fighting for the basic payment for artistic work as well as the recognition of collective practices. We live at a time when, in Germany at least, culture is driven by cuts and bureaucratic discourse. Dilettantes were declared to be geniuses, 'Geniale Dilletanten' in the 1980s: another dichotomy that might be outdated now. Apparently, each generation of artists needs to redefine their relation to 'new' or 'genius' over and over again. Isn't the initial moment of something like that 'Oberhausen moment' very similar to the one in which I am finding myself right here right now, the impression that we are driven by the search for solutions to problems? I do not believe in manifestos. It is through practice that we define the conditions and expectations of working as an artist. For me, they are dependent on others, on those with whom I can think, share ideas, and work, with whom I can spend time in our 'Lounge,' watching and debating films, reading and re-reading texts. All this while waiting for the 80th anniversary of 'Stunde Null' to be celebrated this year, days before the re-elections in Germany. I want to conclude this text by once again impersonating one of the characters of *friends with benefits*, the expressionist poet Else Lasker-Schüler (1982 [1913]), and wear her persona as she wears her cat fur, meow-meow-meow-meow-meow-meowing with fear:

*'Es ist mir genau so, als ob ich das große Los gewonnen hab' und noch nicht ausgezahlt bin, oder auf einer Pferdelotterie einen Gaul gewonnen hab und keinen Stall "umsonst" auftreiben kann. Das Leben ist doch eigentlich ein Wendeltreppendrama, immer so rund herauf und wieder herunter, immer um sich selbst bis zu den Sternen. Ich bin in freudiger Verzweiflung, in verzweifelter Freudigkeit; am liebsten machte ich einen Todessprung oder einen Lux. Meine Freundin Laurentia zecht wie ein Fuchs. Aber*

*was geht mich das alles an; ich will nichts wissen, nichts. Wenn es nur nicht klopfen würde! Das Gehirn wird rein aufgewühlt, es klopft nicht allein unten jeden Freitag und Sonnabend, jedes Stäubchen wird aufgewirbelt, es klopft auch an den anderen Wochentagen, denn ich wohne zwischen Haus und Haus und muß die Brutalität aller Höfe ertragen. Ich sitze immer bei geschlossenen Fenstern und werde gar nichts von dem Sommer haben; ausgehen kann ich nicht, ich schreibe Geistergeschichten; ich habe Schulden. Dabei zieht's, wenn ich die Türen rechts und links und hinter mir auflasse. Ich trage seit dieser Wohnung ein Katzenfell; wenn ich abends wo eingeladen bin, überkommt mich eine furchtbare Angst, ich könnte anfangen zu miauen.<sup>18</sup>*

*It's as if I've won the jackpot and haven't been paid out yet, or won a horse in a lottery and can't find a stable 'for free.' Life is actually a spiral staircase drama, always going up and down, always round and round until it reaches the stars. I am in joyful despair, in desperate joy; I would prefer to take a death leap or a joke. My friend Laurentia is carousing like a fox. But what is all this to me; I want to know nothing, nothing. If only it weren't knocking! The brain is purely stirred up, it's not only downstairs every Friday and Saturday that it knocks, every bit of dust is stirred up, it knocks on the other days of the week too, because I live between house and house and have to endure the brutality of all the yards. I always sit with the windows closed and won't get anything out of the summer; I can't go out, I write ghost stories; I'm in debt. There's a draught when I leave the doors open to the right and left and behind me. I've been wearing cat fur since this flat; when I'm invited somewhere in the evening, I'm overcome with a terrible fear that I might start meowing.*

这就好像我中了头彩但还没有兑现，或者在彩票中赢得了一匹马，却找不到免费的马厩。生活实际上就如同一个螺旋式楼梯戏剧，总是上上下下，兜兜转转，直达到宇宙尽头。我活在欢乐的绝望中，在绝望的欢乐中；我宁愿纵身跃亡或者游戏人间。我的朋友Laurentia像狐狸一样发骚。但这对我来说有什么意义；我什么也不想知道。要是没人来敲门该多好！思绪完全被打扰了，不仅在每周五和周六有人来楼下敲门，每一点灰尘都被搅动起来，每周的其他日子也有人来敲门。因为我轮流住在不同公寓，必须忍受其他后院住户的动静。我总是闭窗而坐，夏天也闭户不出；我不能出去，我写鬼故事；我负债累累。当我把门打开时，四面八方都是冷风。自从住在这个公寓以来，我就一直穿着猫毛；当我晚上被邀请去别处参加活动时，我会突然感到一种可怕的恐惧，怕自己会开始喵喵叫。

1. The Chinese language throughout this text refers to the official Chinese dialect: Mandarin.
2. Improvised dialogue from *friends with benefits* (2018/2023), 26 Min., two-channel-video installation by and with Samuel Fischer-Glaser, Yulia Lokshina, Angela Stiegler; in other roles: Leo van Kann, camera: Julia Swoboda, further texts by Klaus Kinski, Else Lasker-Schüler, Christian Kracht, Harry Baer, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Ulrich Becher. One-channel online with English subtitles: <https://vimeo.com/917594333/92daa60ecf?share=copy> (last viewed on 25 January 2025).
3. 'Arte povera' is used here as both a term literally referring to 'poor art' and the historic episode of art-making in the 1960–80s in Italy.
4. See the website of documenta fifteen: <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/about/> (last viewed on 25 January 2025).
5. See the website of Galerie von Empfangshalle: <https://www.salon.io/empfangshalle/galerie-von-empfangshalle> (last viewed on 25 January 2025).

6. Translated by the author into English and from English into Chinese by Ting Zhu.
7. A term shaped by a group of artists and thinkers I used to work with between 2013 and 2020 under the name 'K Hybrid,' see also Bredenbröker et al. 2021.
8. The term 'Nazi background' ('Nazihintergrund' in German) came to my attention through a discussion started by the artist Moshtari Hilal and the political geographer Sinthujan Varatharajah. They speak about a Nazi heritage by reversing the German term 'Migrationshintergrund' ('Migration background'), see Monecke 2021.
9. Also quoted as 'The Personal Is Political.' See Hanisch's (1969) essay.
10. In capitalist terms, 'Lounge' is a space to hang out, listen to chill-out music, relax, and do nothing at all.
11. Also called 'V-Effekt' in German (alienation or distancing effect), see Brecht 1967.
12. A description of the work is available on the MoMA website: Pope.L, *The Great White Way: 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street* (2001–2009). See <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/287704> (last viewed 25 January 2025).
13. Here and above, translation by the author into English and from English into Chinese by Ting Zhu.
14. 'Bei mir geht es um die Ausbeutbarkeit von Gefühlen, von wem auch immer sie ausgebeutet werden.' Translated into English by the author. The quotation as well as the information in this paragraph comes from the documentary *Deutsche Lebensläufe: Rainer Werner Fassbinder—Der Rastlose*. The episode was directed by Dagmar Wittmers and aired on German television on 10 February 2005. See: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1365531/> (last viewed on 25 January 2025) This is one of many documentaries about Fassbinder.
15. Translation into English by the author and from English into Chinese by Ting Zhu.
16. See <https://www.artforum.com/features/declaration-of-independents-the-50th-anniversary-of-the-oberhausen-manifesto-200259/> (last viewed on 25 January 2025).
17. 'Wir glauben ja nicht an die Unterscheidung von Kunst und Unterhaltung. Etwas, was nicht auch unterhält, kann gar nicht Kunst sein, weil es die Menschen gar nicht angeht. Und etwas was gute Unterhaltung ist, wird immer auch an Kunstfertigkeit verraten. Also ein Ghetto für die Kunst und eine breite Massenbasis für die Unterhaltung, das ist eine Basis, woran wir nicht glauben.' Translation into English by the author.
18. Translation by the author into English and from English into Chinese by Ting Zhu.



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## Author's bio

Angela Stiegler is a visual artist and art educator negotiating sculptural practices, performative forms, and the artist's role as mediator. Her work focuses on shared authorship in collective contexts, collaborating with artists, neighbors, and academic institutions within and beyond traditional exhibition

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