

Mischa Leinkauf

Selected Press

signs and symbols

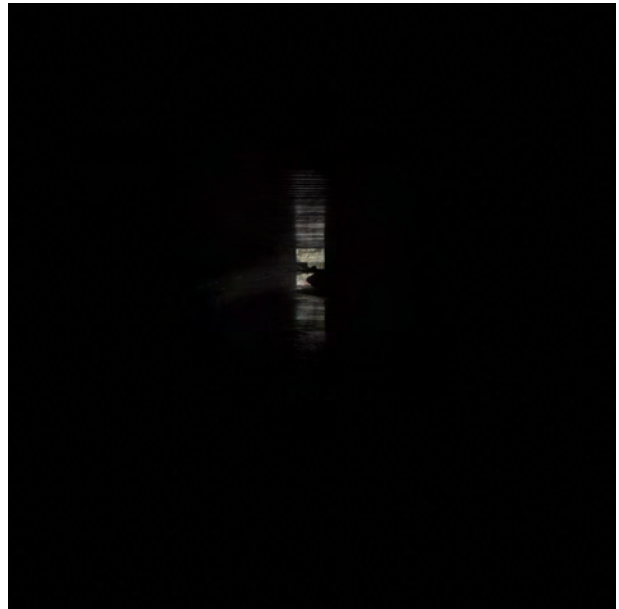
New York, New York | www.signsandsymbols.art

MUSÉE

VANGUARD OF PHOTOGRAPHY CULTURE

Sep 10 Mischa Leinkauf: Endogenous Error Terms

FEATURES



© Mischa Leinkauf; Courtesy of the artist and signs and symbols, New York.

Written by **Karl Emil Koch**

We often neglect what is dark and mysterious; it remains obscured from us in our daily lives. In his project *Endogenous Error Terms*, Mischa Leinkauf reveals those spaces that are hidden below us—spaces that come as a byproduct of what they serve but that nonetheless are filled with poetry. As modern caves, they invite us to contemplate the idea of shelter, both now and in the past, and they represent the fundamental human longing of moving from darkness into light.

Endogenous Error Terms emerged from a seven-year research and exploration of underground water canals all over the world, starting in Tokyo in 2011 right after the big Tohoku Earthquake (Fukushima disaster). For centuries, people have been trying to tame rivers and tides by drilling the subsoil beyond the ground on which they live. These architectural remains, hostile to humans and most animals, form a kind of invisible road system directly under the ground of our cities. By definition, a shelter is a basic architectural structure that provides protection from the local environment. Having a place of refuge, safety, and retreat is generally regarded as a basic physiological human need, which is the basis for the development of higher human motivations.

From this origin, Mischa Leinkauf began an intensive exploration of lifeless architectural structures that lie underground. While he stayed in these upside-down areas of the city, Leinkauf's perspective changed from exo- to endogenous, a process that originates from within an organism or a cell. *Endogenous Error Terms* captures moments of being inside these left alone architectural spaces in Japan, Mongolia, Russia, Germany, Greece, Austria, and Italy.



© Mischa Leinkauf; Courtesy of the artist and signs and symbols, New York.

Berlin-born and based artist Mischa Leinkauf deals with the hidden possibilities of urban environments and various kinds of limitations of spaces through borders, rules, and architecture.

Leinkauf is part of the artist duo Wermke/Leinkauf and has received numerous awards worldwide and exhibited internationally at venues such as Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo Japan, Helsinki Art Museum, Moderna Museet Stockholm, ZKM Karlsruhe, Kunstmuseum Bonn, and Manifesta 11.

See more of Mischa Leinkauf on his website (<http://www.wermke-leinkauf.com/en>).

ADMINISTRATOR

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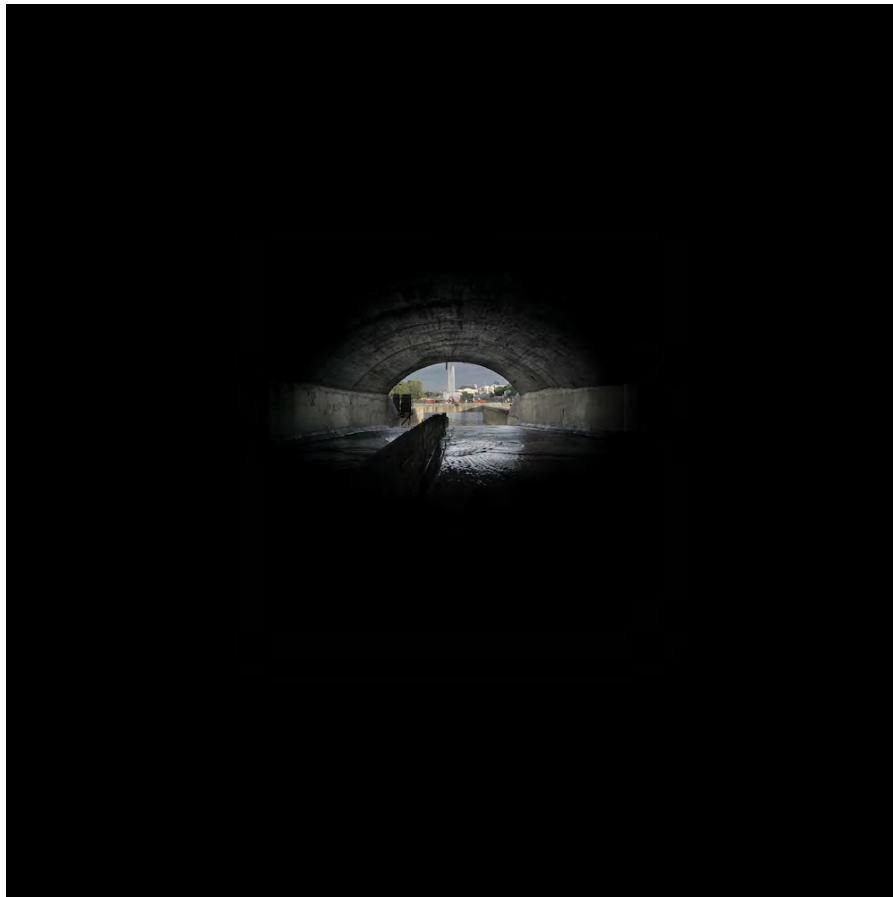
Editors' Picks: 21 Events for Your Art Calendar This Week, From Aspen's Online Fair to a How-to for Remote Art-Job Hunters

As New York emerges from lockdown, Storm King is opening to the public this week.

Artnet News (<https://news.artnet.com/about/artnet-news-39>), July 13, 2020

Each week, we search New York City for the most exciting and thought-provoking shows, screenings, and events. In light of the global health crisis, we are currently highlighting events and digitally, as well as in-person exhibitions open in the New York area. See our picks from around the world below. (Times are all EST unless otherwise noted.)

Opening Thursday, July 16



Film still from "Mischa Leinkauf: Endogenous Error Terms". Image courtesy the artist and Signs and Symbols Gallery.

20. "Mischa Leinkauf: Endogenous Error Terms" at [Signs and Symbols](http://www.signsandsymbols.art/) (<http://www.signsandsymbols.art/>)

This solo online video exhibition emerged from a seven-year research and exploration of underground water canals all over the world. Beginning in Tokyo in 2011 immediately following the Tohoku Earthquake (Fukushima disaster), Leinkauf began an intensive exploration of lifeless architectural structures that lie underground. The video features underground systems in Japan, Mongolia, Russia, Germany, Greece, Austria and Italy—bringing the viewer into a typically unexplored area of bustling metropolises.

Price: Free

Time: Opening 6 p.m.

—Eileen Kinsella

HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

A German Artist's Notes From Underground

Mischa Leinkauf's images of subterranean urban worlds are formally arresting and packed with metaphorical meaning.



Edward M. Gómez July 6, 2019



Mischa Leinkauf, "Endogenous Error Terms/Tokyo," digital photo, dimensions variable (photo © 2011–2018 Mischa Leinkauf, courtesy of The Container, Tokyo)

TOKYO — Some of the most interesting places in the world cannot be seen — even though, in many cities, they lie right beneath our feet.

Technically, these peculiar places are at once architectural and public, although usually they are not easily accessible and often may be closed to everyone except authorized personnel. Admirers of the 1949 film *The Third Man*, with its classic chase scene through the sewers of Vienna, and subway-history aficionados familiar with photos of the Romanesque, vaulted ceilings of New York's grand City Hall Loop subway station, which was closed in 1945, know that there are complex designs and sophisticated feats of engineering that most city-dwellers will never see.

Now, through *Endogenous Error Terms*, a relatively straightforward but compelling photography-based project, the German artist [Mischa Leinkauf](#) has literally brought to light a vivid record of such subterranean places in several cities around the world. An exhibition bearing the same title is on view through tomorrow at [The Container](#), an alternative space in Tokyo that was founded in 2011 by Shai Ohayon, an Israeli-born curator and teacher. Ohayon's imaginative programming has made The Container's exhibitions must-see presentations on the Japanese capital's contemporary art scene.



Mischa Leinkauf, "Endogenous Error Terms/Yekaterinburg, Russia," digital photo, dimensions variable (photo © 2011-2018 Mischa Leinkauf, courtesy of The Container, Tokyo)

Leinkauf's latest is a gem of a small — very small, for the gallery is only half the size of a standard freight container — and concentrated show. The sole, roughly 22-minute-long video that constitutes the exhibition is presented on a small screen at one end of the gallery's darkened, single room, drawing visitors into the jet-black chamber and subtly but effectively evoking the mystery of an unfamiliar underground passageway.

Speaking from his studio in Berlin, where he is based, Leinkauf told me during a recent telephone interview that the video images he shot "of sewer tunnels and other underground spaces look simple — but they were not easy to shoot." The artist is perhaps better known as one half of the duo Wermke/Leinkauf, but in recent years, as with the work now being featured in Tokyo, he has pursued numerous projects on his own.

With his partner, Matthias Wermke, he gained notoriety for site-specific works of an interventionist nature that called attention to social-political or historical issues, or which, as Leinkauf says, explored "personal instances of freedom." Most famously, one night in 2014, the duo climbed the Brooklyn Bridge and managed to place an all-white American flag atop each of its two arched towers, stunning the police and the public with their confounding action — and ending up facing serious criminal charges.



Mischa Leinkauf, "Endogenous Error Terms/Tokyo," digital photo, dimensions variable (photo © 2011-2018 Mischa Leinkauf, courtesy of The Container, Tokyo)

"I started shooting the footage that became my current series when I spent time in Japan starting half a year after the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear power-plant disasters of March 2011," Leinkauf explained. He added, "At that time, many people were still fearful of radiation in food, the soil, and playgrounds. It seemed to me that many were looking for some kind of shelter, and this made me wonder: Exactly what and where is a 'safe' place?"

In a written note, Leinkauf described his approach as one of "creating temporary irritations that allow new perspectives on everyday situations" and of "crossing the boundaries" of prescribed individual freedom in order to "question common standards and constraints," as he and Wermke did in their Brooklyn Bridge art-action piece.

As he explained, he usually works where there are "limits on spaces — architectural limits, something blocking me from freely moving, or systemic limits, like not being allowed to pass a security barrier." Thinking about the mood in post-disasters Japan and also about his work's thematic interests, it struck him that "shelter" might be found underground, which led him to Tokyo's network of subterranean structures.

He went on to research them and then, boldly, without any permission from city officials, to venture into various parts of the city's extensive system of underground tunnels and chambers, many of which, besides serving the metropolis's vast sewage flow, were built decades ago over the terrain carved out by natural streams or rivers — creating unencumbered terra firma that was all the better for the construction of roads and urban infrastructure. Tokyo lost its historic character as a "water city."



Mischa Leinkauf, "Endogenous Error Terms/Moscow, Russia," digital photo, dimensions variable (photo © 2011-2018 Mischa Leinkauf, courtesy of The Container, Tokyo)

“In the past, Tokyo routinely faced springtime flooding,” Leinkauf noted, “so city planners decided that it would be practical to control overflowing waterways by covering them over — in effect, by sending them underground. Tokyo created a huge drainage system.”

Leinkauf discovered that he could enter and make his way out of many of Tokyo’s underground tunnels at access points that were not security-controlled or gated — after all, he pointed out, the water or sewage that passes through them has to empty out somewhere. He wore special waterproof clothing and hauled his video gear down into them, setting up his tripod and camera near light-revealing openings to shoot long, steady takes of currents endlessly flowing. In the years since his Japan sojourn, he made similar forays into the subterranean zones of such cities as Moscow, Munich, and Vienna, among others.

With each shoot, Leinkauf perfected his site-specific working methods. He recalled, for example, “I became aware that, in sewage tunnels, a low water level could suddenly change when a current of water was unexpectedly released.”



Mischa Leinkauf, "Endogenous Error Terms/Tokyo," digital photo, dimensions variable (photo © 2011-2018 Mischa Leinkauf, courtesy of The Container, Tokyo)

The word “endogenous” in the title of Leinkauf’s series of videos, several of which he has edited down into the compendium that is the subject of the current show, refers to something that grows from inside an organism or system. His phrase “error terms” is more ambiguous, but he explained it by saying, “Being in the underground canals felt like being in a hatchery or in the womb of a city. When I imagined myself living in such spaces and only looking outside to daily life, situations, and people [from such a vantage point], I thought: I might become a complete failure in life, or the life outside could become a complete failure — an error.”

Watching his collection of images of unfamiliar, mysterious urban spaces, it becomes hard to pull away from the rhythmic hum of the water currents or from the mellow glow of the light that slips into the openings of the tunnels. As documents of unusual and rarely seen architectural spaces, some of which are quite large, Leinkauf’s videos are visually informative in a quizzical way, provoking more questions than they answer. It’s one thing to discover that such places exist, but who takes care of them? Who designed them, and when were they built? How far do some of them extend, and who else knows about them — and might use them for who knows what purposes?

The serene, unpeopled places in Leinkauf’s footage ooze a tranquil, meditative vibe; neatly geometric, their architectural forms and the play of light upon their surfaces create uncluttered, abstract images. Sewage systems like these appear to harness the communicative power of modernist pure form — the makers of Leinkauf’s underground monuments to technologically processed poo probably never imagined how sculpturally captivating some of their creations would turn out to be.



Mischa Leinkauf, "Endogenous Error Terms/Tokyo," digital photo, dimensions variable (photo © 2011-2018 Mischa Leinkauf, courtesy of The Container, Tokyo)

"It may sound a bit cheesy," he told me, "but I find that many of these places are really beautiful."

One of his images from Tokyo depicts a large, round tunnel opening up to face a stone wall. A leafy vine creeping inside seems to link this hermetic subterranean world with nature's external forces. Another Tokyo picture shows a rectangularly shaped passageway containing a narrow river as it opens to the outside, connecting with the city, in which a single pedestrian crosses a bridge in the near distance. A dot of bright red from the passerby's open umbrella infuses a relatively monochromatic, geometric composition with a diminutive shot of vibrant color.

"These strange places attract me and prompt me to try to figure out how we might use them for other purposes," Leinkauf noted, alluding to his penchant for seeking access to off-limits spaces in the name of personal freedom. "They're places where one cannot normally be."

Somewhat unexpectedly, the freedom the artist exercised — and seized — in exploring the darkness of such places becomes a rewarding metaphor for the examination and expansion of the meaning of freedom, in a broader sense, against the backdrop of these dark and menacing times.

Mischa Leinkauf: Endogenous Error Terms continues at The Container (1F Hills Daikanyama, 1-8-30 Kami-Meguro, Meguro-ku, Tokyo, Japan) through July 7. The exhibition's catalog is available from Amazon.com.

Künstlerduo hinter Brooklyn-Bridge-Flaggen mit Ausstellung in USA

Das deutsche Künstlerduo Wermke Leinkauf, das im Sommer 2014 auf der New Yorker Brooklyn Bridge statt des Sternenbanners zwei weiße Flaggen hisste, zeigt seine Arbeit dort nun in einer Ausstellung. Es ist bekannt für seine Flaggen auf der Brooklyn Bridge.

DPA · September 29, 2018



Besucherin der Ausstellung "I Think It's Safe To Say" der deutschen Künstler Wermke und Leinkauf

Zu sehen ist unter anderem ein Foto der Flaggen, die am Morgen des 22. Juli auf den beiden Türmen der berühmten Brücke wehten. Mit ihrer spektakulären Nacht-Aktion hatten Mischa Leinkauf und Matthias Wermke die Polizei der US-Metropole reichlich in Verlegenheit gebracht. Die Aktion hatten sie über rund fünf Jahre geplant und vorbereitet.

"Wie eine leere Leinwand erlaubte 'White American Flags' viele Lesarten, mehrere Interpretationen und Projektionen und wurde zu einer Sensation, die jetzt in der kollektiven Erinnerung aller New Yorker fortlebt", heißt es zur Ausstellung.

Ob den beiden für das Projekt strafrechtliche Konsequenzen drohen, ist weiterhin offen. Bis zuletzt war deshalb auch un-

klar, ob Leinkauf und Wermke zur Eröffnung in der Galerie Signs and Symbols erscheinen würden. Im Gespräch waren auch zwei Schauspieler, die maskiert als die Künstler auftreten sollten. Sie sprangen wegen rechtlicher Bedenken aber in letzter Minute ab. Während der Eröffnung seien dann ungewöhnlich viele Polizeiautos an der Galerie vorbeigefahren, sagte eine Sprecherin der Deutschen Presse-Agentur.

In ihren Filmen, Installationen und Performances stellen Wermke und Leinkauf Konzepte von künstlerischer Freiheit und Grenzen im öffentlichen Raum infrage. Bei der Suche nach "Schwachstellen im System" gehe es darum, "das gefühlt Unmögliche zu erreichen". Die Ausstellung "I Think It's Safe To Say" ("Man kann, denke ich, mit Sicherheit sagen") ist noch bis 21. Oktober zu sehen.

ARTNEWS

Morning Links: Blue Boy Edition

The Editors of Artnews • September 17, 2018

News

The Flemish ministry of culture is launching an investigation into the dance company Troubleyn following allegations of sexual misconduct and harassment against its founder, choreographer and artist Jan Fabre. [The Art Newspaper]

The Knight Foundation has established a \$5 million Art and Technology Fund, which will support tech-related initiatives at the Barnes Foundation and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. [ARTnews]

Exhibitions

As part of a year-long exhibition at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, senior paintings conservator Christina O'Connell will work to restore Thomas Gainsborough's *The Blue Boy* (ca. 1770). She will perform some of her conservation efforts in front of visitors in a temporary lab situated in the museum's Thornton Portrait Gallery. [Los Angeles Times]

Artists Mischa Leinkauf and Matthias Wermke, who famously replaced American flags on the Brooklyn Bridge with all white banners in 2014, have their first solo exhibition in New York at Signs & Symbols gallery. [Artnet News]

Photography

One native of Berkeley, California, spent two years photographing the many murals painted on garages around the city. [The Guardian]

Photojournalist Raghu Rai's new book *A God in Exile* features portraits of the 14th Dalai Lama, taken in public and private settings over the course of 40 years. "He left an indelible impression on me—gentle, gracious, humble, and full of wonder," Rai said. "It is peculiar to say such a thing, but I got the strange yet pleasant feeling of being equals, despite his position." [Quartz]



Thomas Gainsborough, *The Blue Boy*, ca. 1770, oil on canvas.

Market

Christie's will auction Edward Hopper's *Chop Suey* (1929), estimated at \$70 million, in November. The painting has been described by the auction house as "the most important work by the artist in private hands"—though the work's former owner, the late Barney Ebsworth, promised it to the Seattle Art Museum in 2007. [The Art Newspaper]

To the mountains! Hauser & Wirth will open a new gallery in St. Moritz, Switzerland. [ARTnews]

Miscellaneous

Here's a piece on gender demographics in the architecture field accompanied by a round-up of 14 international building projects led by women. [The New York Times]

On the history of Volta Jazz and its impact on the music and art scenes in Burkina Faso and beyond. Nicolas Niarchos writes that the music is "infectious and filled with joy." [The New Yorker]

Take a journey beyond the art worlds of New York and London to the vibrant scenes in Santa Fe, Palm Springs, Aspen, and elsewhere. [The Wall Street Journal]

A look at the age-old art of making Windsor chairs by hand, and how the craft has been passed down through generations in the Sawyer family of Woodbury, Vermont. [T: The New York Times Style Magazine]

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The German Artists Who Put White Flags on the Brooklyn Bridge Are Still Facing Criminal Charges—But Their First New York Show Is Opening Anyway

Will the artist duo make an appearance at their show?

Henri Neuendorf • September 14, 2018



Wermke/Leinkauf White American Flags (2014-18). Photo courtesy of Signs & Symbols.

The German artist duo that clandestinely planted white flags on New York's Brooklyn Bridge four years ago are coming back to New York. Mischa Leinkauf and Matthias Wermke are still facing criminal charges in the US for the July 2014 stunt, in which they scaled the bridge under cover of darkness and replaced the two American flags with hand-sewn star-spangled banners in all white.

Although the artists insist they treated the bridge respectfully and followed US flag code, the incident prompted a media frenzy, embarrassed police, and spurred fear and bewilderment among New Yorkers—as well as serious legal ramifications for the Berlin-based artists. Nonetheless, their debut solo exhibition in New York, "I THINK IT'S SAFE TO SAY," opens today, September 14, at Signs & Symbols gallery. But will the artists be in attendance?



Installation view of Wermke/Leinkauf "I THINK IT'S SAFE TO SAY" at Signs & Symbols. Photo courtesy of Signs & Symbols.

"I wouldn't rule it out," Leinkauf told artnet News, "but legally it's not so easy."

The show features a photographic edition, titled Landmarks, that questions limitations of space, artistic freedom, and boundaries within the public sphere. As part of the ongoing series, the duo draws attention to otherwise mundane buildings and architectural sites by planting flags sewn from high-visibility construction vests in order to assign significance to overlooked spaces. The interventions themselves often go unseen until they appear in an artistic context. "At first they exist only for ourselves until it is captured by the camera and finds an audience in the exhibition space, if at all," Leinkauf said.

A newly released photographic edition of White American Flags (2014–18) will also be on view. The work encapsulates the core of Wermke and Leinkauf's practice, which revolves around architectural interventions, finding loopholes in established systems, and occupying a space in the collective memory of populations. (They've cited Gordon Matta-Clark as an inspiration.)



Installation view of Wermke/Leinkauf "I THINK IT'S SAFE TO SAY" at Signs & Symbols. Photo courtesy of Signs & Symbols.

"The huge number of interpretations the [white flag] piece provoked was exactly what we hoped for," Leinkauf said. "It moved people in one way or another, there were even a number of people who were frightened by it. I don't think they will forget their emotional reaction to that experience."

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/stunted>

THE NEW YORKER

CULTURAL COMMENT

STUNTED: THE WHITE FLAGS ON THE BROOKLYN BRIDGE



By Peter Schjeldahl August 25, 2014



Photograph by Richard Drew / AP

Illegal public art is in the news. The most notorious instance this summer was the switch of flags on the Brooklyn Bridge, by two German artists, from the Stars and Stripes to all-white versions of the same. Others include a Canadian artist's scrawls, partly in blood, on a wall in the Jeff Koons retrospective at the Whitney Museum and, in Moscow,

the painting of a star ornament atop a Stalin-era tower, in Ukrainian national colors. Internationally, the British midnight muralist Banksy continues his waggish depredations, rivalled of late by a female upstart called Bambi, who likewise stencils images, only with a sexy-feminist spin. The over-all phenomenon could use a name—I propose Stunt art—and some analysis, starting with distinctions.

As a category of volunteer art, Stunt art borders the genres of spray-can graffiti and spectacular illegal sport, such as scaling or parachuting from tall buildings. I would set both apart as pursuits undertaken rather strictly for the personal satisfaction or the in-group competition of the performers, although each presents hard cases: glorious graffiti murals like the ones that now, deplorably, are being demolished along with the famed 5 Pointz warehouse building in Long Island City and—return with me to the New York dark age of 1974—Philippe Petit’s breathtaking stroll on a rope between the Twin Towers. Any illicit work or action bids to be Stuntist if its beholders pause in unwilling wonderment.

Stuntists may have explicit political aims, like those of the pro-Ukrainian Muscovites, or the protesters who recently hung a Palestinian flag from the Manhattan Bridge. But all Stunt art at least impinges on politics by exposing the fragility of certain rules and customs that govern civic order. And all Stuntists are—say it—vandals, in no matter how benign descent from the sackers of Rome, in the year 455. (One account of that occasion tells that Pope Leo the Great, modelling official flexibility in face of unruly expression, persuaded the Vandal chief to forbear destroying the city and, instead, to be content with mere pillage.) Stuntists usurp physical sites that they don’t own, as well as the time of people—police, cleanup workers—whom they don’t employ. Are we mad yet?

Common reactions range from citizenly umbrage to anarchic empathy, at alternate effects of disruption and charm. We may be of both minds at once, as I’ve been about the Brooklyn Bridge flag team of Matthias Wermke and Mischa Leinkauf, who fled to Berlin after savoring the immediate aftermath of their feat. Our indelible post-9/11 dread, often centered on bridges and tunnels, doesn’t conduce to indulgent humor, and the fillip of an infraction in full view of N.Y.P.D. headquarters doesn’t purely thrill. (Let

them vex their own cops.) But, then, the thing was so neatly done, a balm to the eye and delicately ambiguous in the mind.

Wermke and Leinkauf [told](#) a *Guardian* reporter, Philip Oltermann, of regretting that they may never again be admitted to the United States. They are consoled by their memories of the dawn hours of July 22nd, a Tuesday. Leinkauf poetically recalls, “Everything was really peaceful. Life in the streets slowly awoke: people walked their dogs, the first tourists popped up, people made their way to work.” They spoke with passers-by. Says Leinkauf, “A burly American with a cowboy hat” remarked, “ ‘Did Brooklyn surrender to Manhattan? I mean what else do white flags mean?’ ” The artist continues, “ ‘I don’t know,’ I answered, ‘White also means peace.’ He laughed and said: ‘Oh yes, New York surrendered and America is the most peaceful country in the world.’ ”

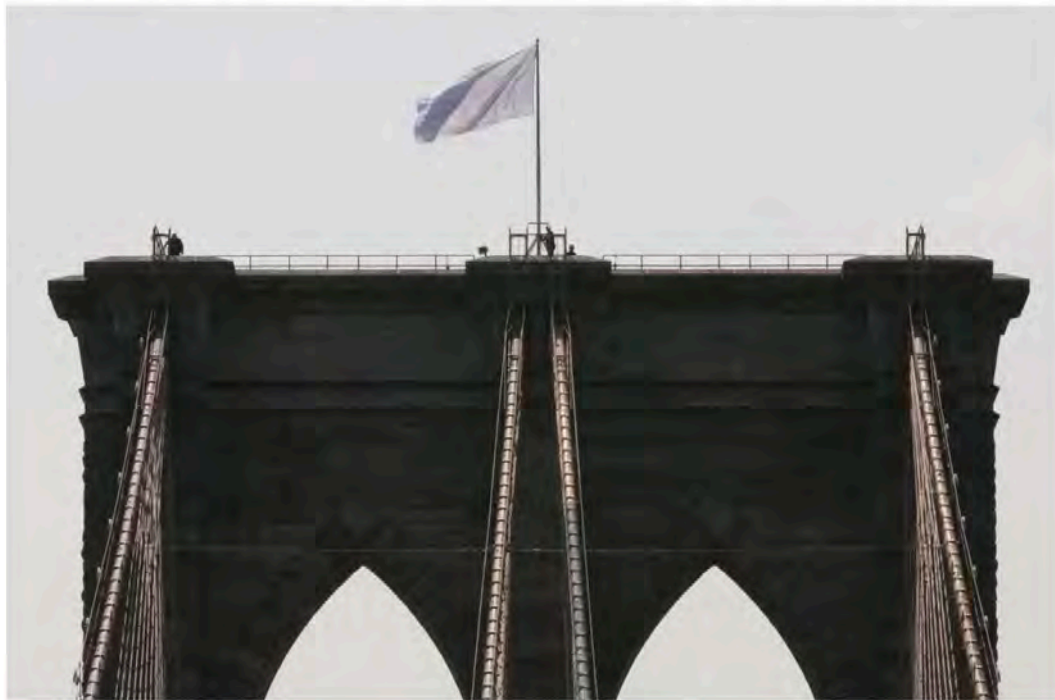
That’s a little acrid and a lot fun. The prospect of a direct response, rippling through a populace, inspires Stunt art, which pointedly evades the commercial and institutional rat mazes that channel careers in art today. Imagine that you’re an artist driven by the primal will to make a mark on the world. You have the phone numbers and e-addresses of dealers and curators. What they represent depresses you. Rejecting it, might you start to scheme?

Stuntism is to art as weeds are to horticulture: plants in the wrong place. Authorities, social or botanical, define the wrongness, which becomes more arbitrary the more you think about it. Some weeds are as lovely as tulips. A superb gardener I know welcomes the sceptered majesty of common mullein (distinct from the mannerly hybrid varieties) wherever it opts to sprout. So may it be with Stunt art, in a time given to fanatical constraints on human-natural cussedness.

The New York Times

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

German Artists Say They Put White Flags on Brooklyn Bridge



Police officers atop the west tower of the Brooklyn Bridge, where last month two American flags were mysteriously replaced overnight with white ones. Richard Drew/Associated Press

By **Michael Kimmelman**

Aug. 12, 2014



Mystery solved? A pair of artists in Berlin said they were the ones who pulled off the stunt of the summer, [hoisting two big all-white flags](#) atop the Brooklyn Bridge last month, swapping them for the usual red, white and blue.

When the flags appeared, rumors flapped: It was a prank or a grave security breach.

But the artists, Mischa Leinkauf and Matthias Wermke, say the flags — with hand-stitched stars and stripes, all white — had nothing to do with terrorism. In a series of phone interviews, they explained that they only wanted to celebrate “the beauty of public space” and the great American bridge whose German-born engineer, [John Roebling](#), died in 1869 on July 22, the day the white flags appeared.

[The artists](#) decided recently to explain themselves, and provided slightly cryptic pictures and videos of the flags, seemingly shot at night from atop the bridge. They point to other such projects they've done in far-flung places that haven't made waves, and they claimed to be somewhat taken aback by the reception here.

Among other things, the incident, as they describe it, suggests an abiding cultural gap, even in this era of globalization.

That morning the reaction, both silly and serious, was swift. New York magazine's blog, "The Daily Intelligencer," under the headline "Brooklyn Surrenders," culled a bunch of borough-mocking tweets ("Now Completely Gluten-Free" tweeted @KDonhoops). An embarrassed New York City Police Department started an investigation. Informed of the artists' statements on Tuesday, the department said the inquiry was continuing.

For its part, the Manhattan district attorney's office [subpoenaed Twitter](#) to identify the jokesters using the handle @BicycleLobby, who [claimed to be](#) the culprits. Toward the end of July, a self-proclaimed founder of the so-called Pot Party also took credit from California. ("Put that in your pipe and smoke it Fox News," he blogged.)

Nobody believed him, either.

But with the photographs and short videos, the German artists have what looks like credible evidence. "This was not an anti-American statement," Mr. Wermke insisted. Mr. Leinkauf added: "From our Berlin background, we were a little surprised that it got the reaction it did. We really didn't intend to embarrass the police."

Speaking by telephone from Germany, the artists cited Gordon Matta-Clark, who famously [climbed the Clocktower Building](#) in Lower Manhattan in 1974, among other American artists whose uncommissioned actions in and around the streets of New York inspired them. "We saw the bridge, which was designed by a German, trained in Berlin, who came to America because it was the place to fulfill his dreams, as the most beautiful expression of a great public space," Mr. Leinkauf said. "That beauty was what we were trying to capture." They volunteered that the flag project transpired roughly between 3 and 5 a.m. on July 22. They said they carried the white flags in backpacks up the climbing cables that workers and the police use to reach the towers, and did not see security cameras. They would not say whether other people were involved.

They had made the flags themselves, they said, spending more than a week hand-sewing them with two kinds of white fabric, alternating the fabrics to make stripes, cutting out holes for the stars from one fabric and filling them in with the other. At about 10 by 19 feet, the white flags approximated the size of the American flags on the bridge.

The artists stressed that when they removed those flags, they ceremonially folded them, "following the United States flag code," Mr. Leinkauf said. The flags will be returned, he promised. As with their other projects, he stressed, the plan was always to come forward. "We always face the consequences," he said. "This is part of the work, to have an open discussion. We just needed a little time to decide how to respond to the reaction." They are now considering legal advice.

Their website suggests that for roughly a decade, Mr. Leinkauf, 37, and Mr. Wermke, 35, have focused on the often-illegal margins of public spaces. "Places people pass through or pass by, but don't usually notice, like tunnels and bridges or the tops of buildings," Mr. Leinkauf elaborated. Their projects (made public through films and exhibitions, mostly after completing the relevant escapades) are intended to draw attention to these sites and to the ambiguities and fragilities of public space. "Our work looks dangerous, but it's not about that," Mr. Leinkauf added. "We plan carefully and reduce risk to an absolute minimum."



The white flags caused a stir when they were discovered on July 22.

Credit Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

The two have photographs showing that they have scaled buildings and bridges from Tokyo to Vienna, and even attached balloons to the cables on the Brooklyn Bridge in 2007, which went unremarked at the time. That's when they say they cooked up the flag idea.

All-white American flags, whatever speculation they provoked, are not inherently suspicious, like the packages that art students planted in New York subway stations a few years back, or the black boxes with "Fear" written on them that yet another art student scattered around the Union Square subway station in 2002. That said, it can seem almost quaint, in this era of headline-hungry provocations, that a couple of artists from Germany say they climbed the Brooklyn Bridge to hang flags that they hoped would come across as only playful, respectful, even poetic.

But a cultural divide separates still-jittery New York from a much more laid-back, laissez-faire Berlin. "Few people would care if we did the same thing in Berlin," Mr. Leinkauf noted. "Of course, we did not have the same problems with terrorism."

Naturally, no explanations may appease the police or district attorney, who will have to decide whether, and if so, how, the Germans should be held responsible. On Tuesday Stephen Davis, the police department's chief spokesman, invited them to return to New York: "If they want to come in and speak with us, we certainly would be more than happy to entertain them."

As to the specific meaning of those flags, the artists chose indirection.

Mr. Wermke pointed out that Roebling "moved to the States because he couldn't realize his dreams here in Germany, and the bridge for us is a symbol of freedom and creative opportunity." He noted that Roebling based the design of the bridge's towers partly on Divi Blasii, the Gothic church in his native Mühlhausen.

Mr. Wermke and Mr. Leinkauf say that, before flying to New York, they took their white flags to Divi Blasii to give them a kind of informal consecration.

It so happens, Mr. Wermke added, that Roebling's son, Washington, who took over the bridge's construction after the death of his father from an accident, died on July 21, 1926. Hence the two white flags, like shrouds, for father and son, and the choice of July 21-22.

Asked whether they also had in mind Jasper Johns's famous "[White Flag](#)" painting from 1955, whose enigmatic message has provoked its own speculation, Mr. Leinkauf answered this way:

"Johns painted objects of daily life, like flags. We are not comparing ourselves to Jasper Johns. But we do see buildings, bridges, and so on as the architecture of daily life, which often goes unnoticed."

Mr. Wermke then cited a remark by Philippe Petit, the French high-wire artist, whom the two Germans admire. Mr. Petit [walked a tightrope](#) between the twin towers of the World Trade Center almost exactly 40 years ago.

Why did you do it? he was asked.

"There is no why," he responded.

Correction: August 12, 2014

A headline that appeared briefly on the home page misstated the occasion for which German artists said they placed white flags on the Brooklyn Bridge last month. It was the July 22, 1869, death of the bridge's designer, John Roebling, not his birth.

Joseph Goldstein contributed reporting.

A version of this article appears in print on Aug. 13, 2014, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Brooklyn Bridge's White Flags: Art, It Seems, Not a Surrender. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)