

SEMIOTIC SUPERMARKET

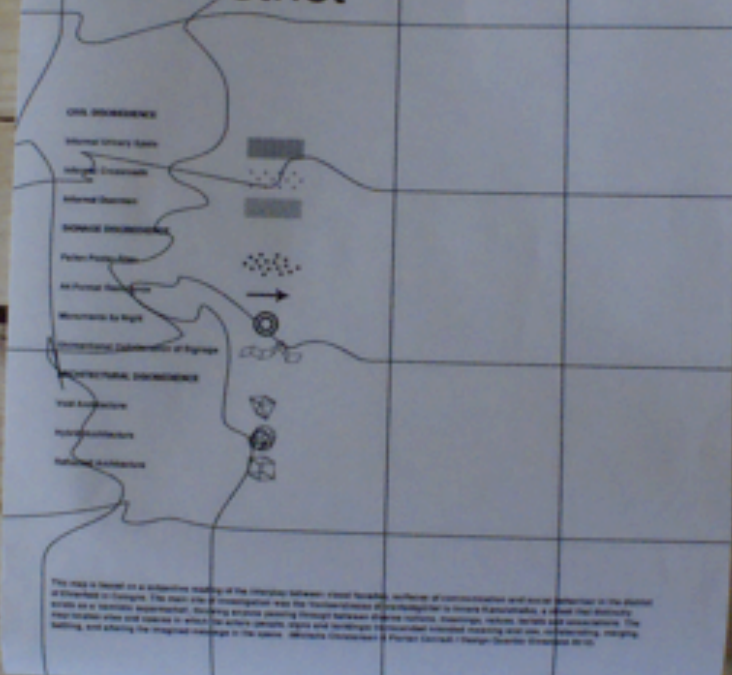
Mapping the Grammatology of a District

Michelle Christensen (DQE-Scholar)
In collaboration with Florian Conradi

Design Quartier Ehrenfeld (DQE)
www.d-q-e.net

SEMIOTIC SUPERMARKET

Grammatology of a District



The map is based on a subjective reading of the interplay between visual language, surfaces of communication and social behaviour in the district of Oberland in Turin. The main site of investigation was the food-systems distribution in urban environments, a field that distinctly reveals an economic supermarket. Following traces passing through between global networks, meanings, values, trends and connections. The map traces what and where in urban life, where objects, signs and meanings are produced, circulated, received, meaning and use, redefining, mapping, setting, and affecting the original meanings in the urban. Authors: Alessandro & Pierluigi Cristofari / Design Studio Oberland 2010.

INDEX

1.0 INTRODUCTION: READING A NEIGHBOURHOOD

2.0 THE TERMINOLOGY OF A DISTRICT

- 2.1 The Brand Alphabet: Claiming Recognition through Manifestation
- 2.2 Political Poster Jungle: Pleading for Empathy in Public Discourse
- 2.3 Informal Communication: Insisting for Attention of Personal Values
- 2.4 Tagging and Graffiti: Manifesting Individual Opinions
- 2.5 Handwriting: Asserting Uniqueness through Necessity
- 2.6 Construction Sites: Preserving Steady Incompletion

3.0 THE GRAMMAR OF A DISTRICT

- 3.1 A Battle of Time
- 3.2 A Battle of Reduction
- 3.3 A Battle of Accessibility
- 3.4 A Battle of Threat
- 3.5 A Battle of Direction
- 3.6 A Battle of Everywhere
- 3.7 A Battle of Colour
- 3.8 A Battle of Space

4.0 THE ARGUMENTS OF A DISTRICT

- 4.1 Civic Disobedience
 - 4.1.1 Informal Urinary Spots
 - 4.1.2 Informal Crossroads
 - 4.1.3 Informal Doormen
- 4.2 Signage Disobedience
 - 4.2.1 Missing Communication
 - 4.2.2 Accidental Opposition
 - 4.2.3 Monuments by Night
 - 4.2.4 Unintentional Collaboration
- 4.3 Architectural Disobedience
 - 4.3.1 Void Architecture
 - 4.3.2 Hybrid Architecture
 - 4.3.3 Reflecting Architecture

5.0 JOUR FIXE: SEMIOTIC SUPERMARKET

6.0 MAPPING A SEMIOTIC BATTLEFIELD

IMPRINT

1.0 INTRODUCTION: READING A DISTRICT

The research project 'Semiotic Supermarket: The Grammatology of a District' took its starting point in investigating the potentials of communications design in analyzing how covert manifestations form diverse spatial aspects within a local environment, with a focus on the question: How can we read the less obvious? In this sense, this investigation took the starting point: It is not about what you can tell the local vicinity as a communications designer, but rather, what it can tell you.

The main site of investigation was the Venloerstrasse in Ehrenfeld, from the Ehrenfeldgürtel to Innere Kanalstraße. As a street that distinctly exists as a 'semiotic supermarket', it throws anyone passing through between diverse notions, meanings, values, beliefs and associations. The empirical context of Ehrenfeld was utilized, not only as a site of research and analysis, but also as a source of unpredictable insight. We chose to adopt this district as a case study, since we found that there lays a vital potential in the elements that make this specific area a 'site of contestation' within the politics of both personal and public life. The temporality and non-establishment of this site manifests itself in the provisional add-on architecture of the area, the displays of a swiftly shifting economic rise and decay of local businesses, and the momentary transfers of inhabitants and audiences in and out of multiple spheres of imagery, ideology, creativity, language, class and culture. The fluid characteristics and potentials of the space are apparent in the indefinite changeable ideals that lay in the social, cultural and economic multiplicity of everyday life within the space, and the capacity for transformation that is proven both by the history and the threats in the near-future of the area. Therefore, within this research project, Ehrenfeld was seen as a site of observation and conversation, investigating the potentials of a hybrid,

cross-cutting and surprising temporary logic in terms of the momentary construction and extensions of norms and values, the reading of meanings and local realities, and the fluid manifestations and potentials of divergent languages. Based on the methods of observation and analytical participation of everyday life in the area, the site thereby served as an inlet into investigating the potential of reading the area, as one reads a text.

Seeing as reading is a cognitive process that involves the decoding of symbols for the sense of deriving meaning, we assumed the supposition that in order to understand the potential meaning of a district, it must be read, on equal terms to a text. Or, if you like, the public space can be viewed as a text in itself, holding the properties of para, meta, super, and hypertext as any other text. The process of reading is shaped by the reader's prior knowledge, experiences, attitude, cultural and social position, and therefore, the process of reading a district is based on its terminology, grammar and arguments, and is in a sense a very intuitive occurrence, based on an individual's interpretation of a perhaps limitless set of references, interrelated insinuations and traces. In this way, the surfaces and functions, positions and placements, all refer to associational intimations of the objects in the space, deciding its literary structures, and making the reading of it easy or difficult, open, ajar, limited, approachable, negotiable, ineffectual and so on.

If one views a street as a multidimensional space where a variety of writings clash and blend, even as a 'tissue of quotations drawn from an innumerable centre of cultures' (Barthes 1977:146), then the references of this text, and how they clash and blend becomes vital. As Julia Kristeva argues with her concept of intertextuality, every text is anyhow made up of references and associations to a million other texts; so all texts are inherently connected to writings outside of themselves (Kristeva 1980:69). As a passenger that moves through this urban

space, ones actions and thoughts are often governed by a complex set of cultural messages and conventions, and dependent upon ones ability to interpret them instinctively and instantly. Viewing and decoding these signs enables us to navigate the landscape, and therefore, every individual is constantly unconsciously interpreting the meaning of the signs around them, from traffic lights and street signs, to advertising, political messages, individual statements, activism, the shapes of cars, the architecture of buildings, and every other designed surface that surrounds them.

As residents of this neighbourhood, the analysis of the empirical reality that one lives in and experiences every day means confronting the fact that subconscious perceptions become hard to locate. Therefore, a large part of the investigation lied in finding an approach to read the less obvious, using a form of 'grounded theory' as an approach to interact between what we were looking for, and what was perhaps looking to be found. Often times, the aspects that we found expressive and interesting were thereby not the aspects that we were looking for, but rather the aspects that we came across coincidentally by looking at other things. In this sense, one might say that the research lay between the strategic visual reading of the neighbourhood, and incidental findings.

Through reading expressions of different languages in the visual surfaces of the neighbourhood, different phenomena were perceived and categorized. The concept of 'language' was here seen in a broader sense than verbal communication, referring to visual and behavioural expressions manifested within the local environment. Communication was seen not just as an image, but rather as an image of behaviour and social practices. Thereby, this study built on the perspective that what we as a society embody in visual and textual communication surfaces and practices within a local context, is an expression of specific ideologies, mentalities and values. In this way, we move

through a space that is obscurely influencing us with different languages of for example power or defiance.

The first part of this report displays some examples of what we termed 'the terminology of the district'. These aspects are in a sense merely the basic elements that form the visual vocabulary of the space. The second part demonstrates what can be understood as the 'grammar of the district', or in other words, how the terminology interacts to create certain 'rules of formulation'. The third part of the report then depicts what one could name 'the arguments of the district'. This section presents the conclusions of the investigation, namely that within a space which is as semantically loaded as this site of inquiry, the actors under investigation (public spaces, communication and buildings) transcended their intended meaning and use, collaborating, merging, battling, and altering the imagined message that was initially attributed to them. In this way, they take on unforeseen and unintended arguments of their own. Finally, the last part of the report displays the map that was created based on the results of the inquiry. As a result of the subjective reading of the interplay between visual facades, surfaces of communication and social behaviour in the district of Ehrenfeld, the map makes accessible the experience of navigating through the space, being able to perceive ones own reading of the less obvious.

In a sense, one might say that this project reflected, from numerous and diverse angles, on the questions of: How is the city written? How can we read an urban space? And when do surfaces of communication take over their intended meaning, collaborating, struggling, battling, and taking on new arguments, insinuations and implications?

2.0 THE TERMINOLOGY OF A DISTRICT

2.1 The Brand Alphabet: Claiming Recognition through Manifestation

Within the site of investigation, namely the Venloerstrasse and the streets that bridge it, one finds countless aspects that could qualify as functioning vocabulary of the space. Being a highly commercial highway that runs through the district, this street acts as a main site for economic exchange of goods, but also of beliefs, values and opinions. In this way, the street functions as a market of convincing, inducing and persuading anyone who passes through with secure and unassailable gestures of seemingly high guarantees of freedom, mobility, and swiftness. Not surprisingly, this makes it the favoured location for sizeable national and multinational corporations, all of which largely display their recognizable symbols, printed in easily identifiable colour schemes, in light boxes, printed matters and street signs which one must constantly dodge when trying to walk a straight line. Due to the fact that these economic congregations tend to simplify their symbols to absolute elementary denotations, often the letter with which their name begins, they come to shape what one might perceive as an alphabet of the street. In this way, from M to T to A to K, brands manifest their existence and unquestionable financial power through colourful hieroglyphs (#1).

2.2 Political Poster Jungle: Pleading for Empathy in Public Discourse

Furthermore, within the period of this mapping, several political elections unfolded, adding a comprehensive semantic layer to the textual surface of the street. If a fortunate lamppost had been standing around in this space, free of the weight of carrying someone's point of view, this was certainly

not the case anymore. At this moment, every object in the space seemed to be at work, fulfilling the task of being, or at least carrying an opinion. As values and beliefs were suddenly sold everywhere as suggestions of common sense and moral logic, smiling faces screamed for attention and a fleeting moment of empathy. (#2)

2.3 Informal Communication: Insisting on Attention for Personal Values

Moreover, when moving through the space of the street, one cannot ignore the third level of communication, namely the informal print communication. These objects of mostly home grown visual aesthetics and straightforward rhetoric's host locally initiated events, offers and statements. Whether it be a notice for a fight-night showing cut-outs of young muscular men with their shirts off, an offer to be hypnotized and have your future revealed, or simply a call for people to remember that Jesus does in fact live and is here with us on the Venloerstrasse, these messages tend to be embodied in copy-shop printed posters, banners and flyers. This informal communication occupies any spot that is free in the semiotic muddle, obviously 'unlawfully' claiming walls, doorways, electricity boxes, newspaper stands or poles for displaying personal beliefs and interests. Due to weather conditions and the tremendous use of the public spaces, these messages rapidly dissolve and change, however, the consequent similarities in the visual presentation seems to make it a distinctive jargon of the neighbourhood. (#3)

2.4 Tagging and Graffiti: Manifesting Individual Opinions

Perceptibly, public exhibits of tagging and graffiti belong to any urban space. Nonetheless, in this space, one often finds it as add-on messaging, marking over any other communication, or anyone else's

tagging and graffiti, resulting in layered statements of mostly unreadable surfaces. Although not always forming a comprehensible opinion, these surfaces fill in any gaps that may have existed in the space, adding a layer of non-printed message making which in turn offers a ocular multiplicity that challenges the printed communication in its 'produced' aesthetics. Due to the high reproduction of this seemingly fervent opinionated gibberish, the signs seem to become possible to decode at a subliminal level, coming to exist as an informal lexicon, perhaps even as a form of slang of the area. (#4)

2.5 Handwriting: Asserting Uniqueness through Necessity

Another element that adds a definite touch of unique personality and individuality to the full facades of communication is the masses of handwritten signs. What is perhaps specific to this street is that up to ninety percent of the stores have handwritten signs attached to their windows, doors, freestanding signs and anything else to which one might be able to attach a paper with scotch tape. This is not just the case for copy-shops and kiosks, but also for larger brands, and anything in between. Through the different handwritings, writing tools and 'layouts', the script and its placing on the page express the unique impulses of the diverse individuals. From theatrical to inhibited, and from cautious to careless, the perfection, imperfection, spelling mistakes, and manual corrections begin to create distinct languages in themselves, adding yet another layer of interpretable surfaces. (#5)

2.6 Construction Sites: Preserving Steady Incompletion

Lastly, an aspect of this district that can be seen as an expression of basic terminology of the area is the element of construction

sites. In this area of constant flux and change, where things break, and sometimes the municipality just seems to be attempting to put more citizens in work-activation, one will never fail to fall over a construction site. Most often, one will have to steer around several building sites as one walks through the highway of uninterrupted chaos. On the one hand, this does have an evident impact on the experience and decoding of the space as the reproduction of colours, patterns, noise, smell and dust becomes indispensable and principally obligatory to the language of the space. But furthermore, the constant confrontation of construction sites means persistently changing the route through which one walks down the street, subsequently implying a change of perspective and navigation. In this sense, the construction sites reflect the constant change of stores and facades in the space, preserving the steady incompletion of the culture and story of the street. (#6)

#1



#2



#4



#5

2018.2019

Liebe Kunden,

aus wirtschaftlichen Gründen
die Appasofta musste geschlossen
werden. Für Ihre Besuche
bedanken wir uns sehr herzlich.

Arbeits Team

Preisliste

DAM. Har. 10 €
Vasen 10 € + 10 €
Diva 10 € + 10 €
Sax 10 € + 10 €
Sax 10 € + 10 €
Auge 10 € + 10 €

Herren Snayden
1-fug 10 €
Fantastiss 5m. 15 €
Harvassen + 20 €
Kopf Raz. - 20 €
Kinder Har 20 €

Liebe Kunden
Wir sind umgezogen
20 Meter ←
Didi + Elke

KEIN IMBISS

BITTE KEINE
FAHRRÄDER
ABSTELLEN!

Shisha
Zubehör

#6



3.0 THE GRAMMAR OF A DISTRICT

3.1 A Battle of Time

Grammar can be seen as the structural rules that govern the composition of clauses, phrases, and words in any given language. In a sense, one can thereby view the grammar of an urban space as the structures that direct how the terminology of the space relates and creates meaning. In terms of this site of research, where the space and time for meaning to occur and manifest itself is under enormous pressure and distress, much of the 'grammar' of the location took its form as battles for existence and acknowledgment.

The first scuffle that was located unfolded itself as a battle of time. Firstly, when one apprehends the amount of numbers in the space, it becomes clear how these figures are in themselves at war, striving to be more compelling, larger, and more colourful. As the street as a phenomenon moves towards being a twenty-four hour federation, the amount of time-signage grows vastly. Furthermore, this sense of time-rivalry is expressed in the concept of age, as corporate elders attempt to daunt the younger through manifestations of establishment. From light-signs to engraved buildings and large window-stickers, the 'Since 1858, 1907, 100 years, 150 years' and so on, is not to be underestimated. Moreover, the amount of time-based terminology makes itself a worthy opponent in the battle, overwhelming any passenger with one newer shade of new than the other. As brightly coloured window stickers combat 'Jetzt' against 'Heute', the 'Neu' seems to prevail in amount. Together, these dimensions of time becomes an essential part of the grammar of the street, constantly defining and redefining the sense fleeting moments, transitory eras and short-lived epochs. (#7, #8, #9)

3.2 A Battle of Reduction

Furthermore, a battle that cannot be ignored is the battle of reduction. Of course, this is a competition that can be expected in any site of financial opportunity and commodity exchange. However, when one in fact begins to record the amount of percentage signs, realizing in how many way this sign can be presented, making it more noticeable and more influential than the last one, it nevertheless deserves a few lines. From large to small, from window signs and light boxes to patterned posters and actual shop names, the idea of 'sale' and 'percentage' engulfs the visual space. In every colour, and up to ninety percent, one cannot ignore the feeling that 'Alles muss Raus', and if not now, then never. Interestingly, one might add that perhaps it is more an immense-show than an extreme-reduction, since we percentage-wise located twenty percent to be the most reproduced number. (#10)

3.3 A Battle of Accessibility

A typical visual in a space as the one under investigation, one that hosts kitschy-nostalgia and craves ample attention, is the 'open' light-signs. As these signs moderately diminish in the day, and fully excel at night, they nevertheless always fortify the idea that a space is approachable and easily accessible. However, the more compelling invitations one bashes into during a walk through the street, the more pressure and strain they create, resulting in a battle of accessibility. (#11)

3.4 A Battle of Threat

Furthermore, a conflict that infinitely affects anyone moving through this overloaded sphere is the battle of threat. From signs telling you what you must do, to signs telling you what you absolutely may not do, to clear statements of repercussions and consequences, the warning signs heavily man the

corners of the space. From massive amounts of warnings that relate to not hanging up commercials or informal posters on facades, to where and how not to park, to signs that warn you not to eat, not to smoke, and certainly not to steal flowers, this space is subject to a fully-armed war of obedience. (#12)

3.5 A Battle of Direction

Moreover, when reading the elements that form meaning and spatial aspects on this street, one quickly stumbles upon the great array of arrows. From where to walk, to where not to walk, to 500 meters right, or 250 meters left, sometimes one might even lose track of where who is trying to send one, and why. However, on this highway of semiotic attack, one could perhaps also view them as exits out of the unwavering stream of turmoil. (#13)

3.6 A Battle of Everywhere

A noticeable battle for attention and placement is without question the fact that perhaps nowhere else in the world will you find so many references to other places. As a satellite dish connecting you to every other continent, country and culture, this feature of 'anywhere else' becomes vital to the grammar of the Venloerstrasse. From road-signs and shop-signs, to travel destinations, restaurants, calling centres, and money transfers, one cannot avoid being reminded of the whole world outside of the space one walks through. From the directions to Istanbul and flags of Albania, you can basically fly to Turkey from every corner. As one walks into shops and cafés, an instant transferral takes place through smell, sound, written and spoken language, and interior. Suddenly, one could in fact be anywhere, or perhaps nowhere. In this battle of places and spaces, the question is whether Ehrenfeld even exists, or whether it simply functions as a portal. (#14)

3.7 A Battle of Colour

Furthermore, when one embarks upon the endeavour of colour-coding this street, three main colour schemes become evident. Firstly, there is an overwhelming amount of white writing on a red background. Surprisingly, it is even consequently the same red shade, and in fact, one can even locate specifically red and white areas of the street. From stop signs and tabloids, to local and national brands, political parties and the branding of the city of Cologne, the colours undeniably influence the space.

The second highly recognizable colour scheme is black writing on a yellow background. From re-direction signs and warning signs, to money transfer, post boxes and local brands, this colour combination is not easily overseen. Similarly to the red and white colour combination, there is in fact a yellow and black area of the street.

The third colour combination noticeable in the space is white writing on a blue background. From direction and street signs, to parking and subway signs, to the police, kiosk, homework help and door numbers, this set of colours makes itself undeniable, and likewise creates a spatial colour sphere in itself.

Not surprisingly, these colour combinations come from traditional signage of forbidding, warning, and directing in traffic. What was interesting to see though, was that an immense amount of brands have adopted exactly these colours, resulting in a battle zones between different colour schemes, and strongly affecting the associations that one has to the different elements through their similarity, when subconsciously decoding the passage through the semiotic supermarket. (#15, #16, #17)

3.8 A Battle of Space

Lastly, a battle that is tremendously distinct to the site of investigation is what one might call the battle of space. Within this limited spatial reality, in which almost every corner is covered with at least one message, there is a remarkable use of any surface, and often, even a multiple use and re-use. The overloaded poles soar with smiling faces, seemingly important information and ostensibly urgent proclamations. Meanwhile, in the distance, one sees towers of buildings battle for attention and power, although one can no longer perceive what sign belongs to what building, and for what it stands. As each sign presses down on the other, it begins to look although the whole thing might just fall over and land on you. Thereby, the battle of space becomes comprehensible in the overloaded towers of communication, where every face and statements fights for just a moment of your attention. **(#18)**

#7

23h

8-24h

24 Std.

8-24 Uhr

#8

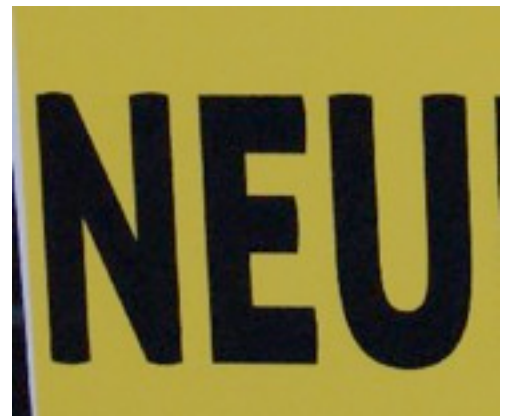
seit 1907

Seit 100 Jahren

SEIT
1859

15 Jahre
Blumen Britz

150
Jahre



#10



20%

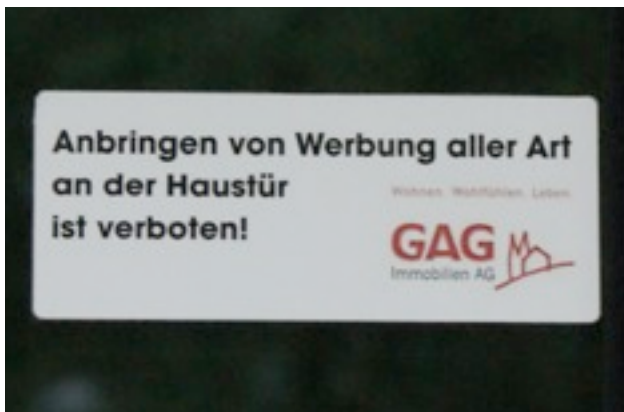
20%
Rabatt

20%

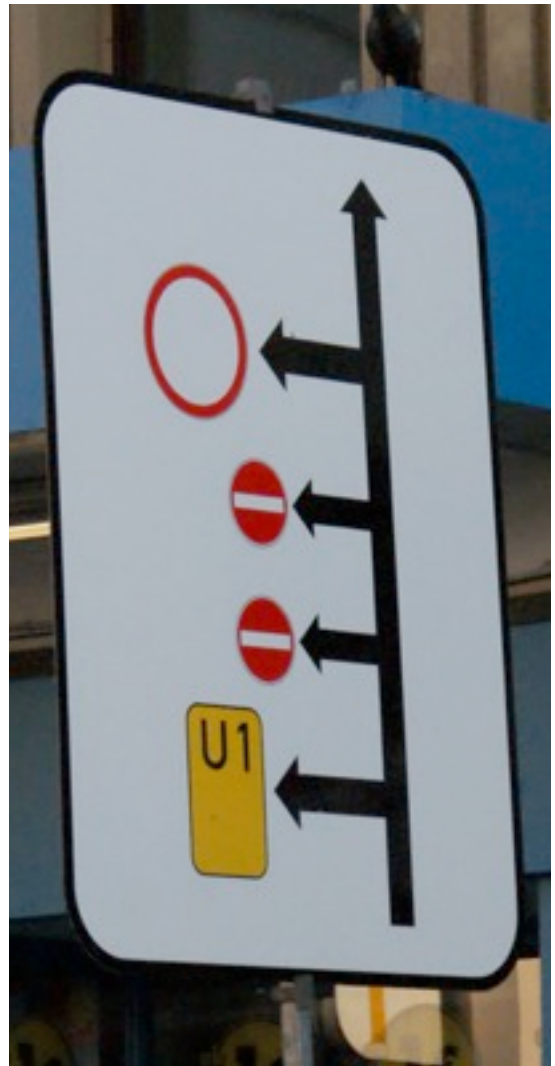
#11



#12



#13



#14



HÖHENFLUG SPECIAL'S
Hin & Rückflug*

AUCKLAND	ab	630.- €
BANGKOK	ab	315.- €
BOMBAY-Mumbai	ab	315.- €
CARACAS	ab	399.- €
DUBAI	ab	269.- €
DELHI	ab	315.- €
HONG-KONG	ab	349.- €
HAVANNA	ab	429.- €
JOHANNESBURG	ab	390.- €
KOH SAMUI	ab	444.- €
LOS ANGELES	ab	299.- €
MIAMI	ab	279.- €
MEXICO CITY	ab	389.- €
PEKING	ab	329.- €
RIO DE JANEIRO	ab	399.- €
SYDNEY	ab	489.- €
TOKYO	ab	329.- €
ZANZIBAR	ab	480.- €

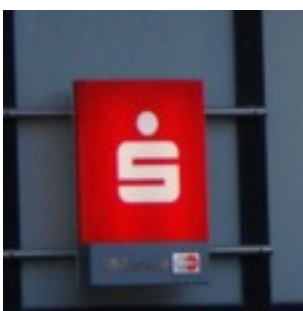
*Alle Tarife zzgl. Tax & Steuern!
www.onlineweg.de/hohenflug
Call 0221-525201
Buchten Sie mit Top Hotel & Mietwagen Angebote



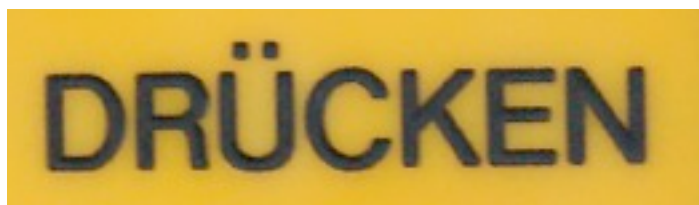
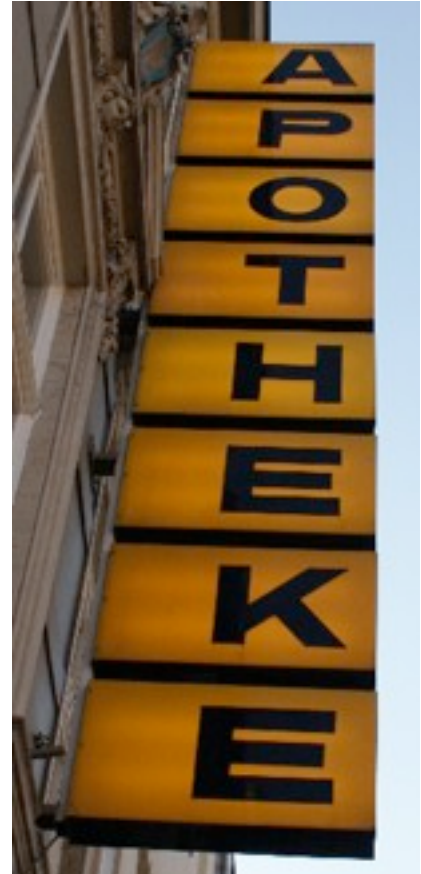
Afghanistan Postkarte	Albanien Postkarte	Algerien Postkarte	Bangladesch Postkarte & Handy
Bulgarien Postkarte	China Postkarte & Handy	Georgien Postkarte	Hong Kong Postkarte & Handy
Indien Postkarte & Handy	Irak Postkarte	Iran Postkarte	Italien Postkarte
Kambodscha Postkarte & Handy	Kanada Postkarte & Handy	Kolumbien Postkarte & Handy	Marokko Postkarte
Niederlande Postkarte	Nigeria Postkarte	Pakistan Postkarte & Handy	Polen Postkarte & Handy
Rumänien Postkarte	Russland Postkarte & Handy	Schweden Postkarte	Sri Lanka Postkarte
Thailand Postkarte & Handy	Türkei Postkarte & Handy	USA Postkarte & Handy	Zypern Postkarte & Handy



#15



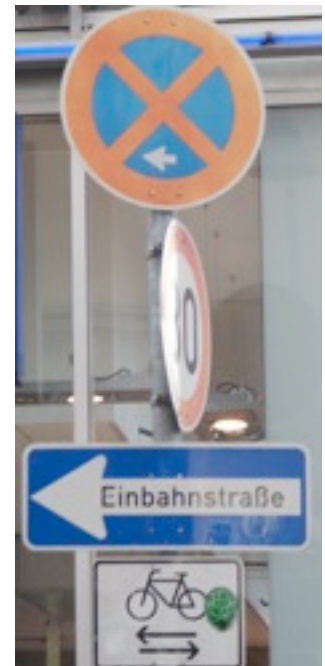
#16



#17



#18



4.0 THE ARGUMENTS OF A DISTRICT

Looking at all the terminology and grammar defined and located in this 'semiotic supermarket', just some of them mentioned above, we came to wonder how in fact all of these brands, signs, advertising, formal and informal communication etc. interrelate. In this jungle of messages, where we are constantly exposed to reading fragments of isolated realities, how do these fragments interact?

Acknowledging the idea that meaning making and the process of reception is far more complex than what is often assumed when we design communication, namely that the meaning is not fully under control of the author, nor a simple appropriation from the receiver, one could imagine that these designed objects that fill the urban space come to take on a self-ness, and meaning of their own. Therefore, we decided to reflect upon the question of how communication eventually frees itself from its intended meaning through clashes with its context and social reality? Does it perhaps collaborate, battle, ignore, or engage with other communication, way beyond our intention or control? In a space that is constantly trying to dictate what you should think, feel, do and not do, when do signs, buildings, and even people interact and perform insubordinate agency? In a sense, what are the arguments of the district, the rhetoric that goes beyond the pre-written script?

4.1 Civic Disobedience

4.1.1 Informal Urinary Spots

Due to extremity of the site of research, there exist very few dark corners, especially during the day. Almost everywhere on the street, ones every action seems to be exposed, ones decisions revealed. Perhaps this is why the only spaces that we observed

were heavily used for informal urinary were placed at the church. Perhaps for the sole reasons that this space offers corners, darkness and appropriate vegetation, this seems to be the place of choice for most people, especially during the day. As a group of punks moved contentedly between their beer in front of the Supermarket across the street, and their privacy at the church, they seemed to have claimed and initiated this specific corner for alternative use.

4.1.2 Informal Crossroads

Moreover, in terms of civil opposition towards the normative perception and use of the space, one might consider the sites of informal passage. Within a system, not just a local one, but a national, and perhaps even global one, where the script is written for how and where one may cross a street, the Venloerstrasse holds a fair share of resistance. When one observes the behaviour of the majority of people, there are specific routes that are taken when crossing the street, usually approximately 10-20 meters from the officially designated areas. This behaviour does not seem to be carried out with disregard and negligence, but rather with awareness and consequence. For instance, one of these informal crossroads is placed precisely in front of the police station, but nevertheless, one can observe everyone looking highly alert as they run across the street, skimming over their shoulder to avoid the protectors of the law. However, what is interesting is that somehow, through the reproduction of these spots, and perhaps through the human ability to do-as-others-do, these spaces have been reclaimed for alternate meaning and use, becoming for the inhabitants of the district, simply crossroads.

4.1.3 Informal Doormen

Furthermore, an interesting phenomenon that we observed is the occurrence that Ehrenfeld is getting more and more informal

doormen. While the punks guard the doors of Rewe as commercial bouncers, not letting a soul by without questioning, the hippies guard the Commerzbank, respectfully requesting that one pay the price of passage. Meanwhile, the homeless people sit firmly on the stairs in front of the church observing the order, and a group of men in all ages speaking an unidentifiable language stand stringently in front of the Ria money transfer, despite rain or storm. Due to the fact that these groups of people have each their place, to which they seem to be bound, and perhaps even accountable, they slowly become part of the image of that spot. When one cannot experience the entrance to the highly commercial supermarket without the party of cocky, young, anarchist-looking punks, then they integrate into the imagery, in a sense, they come to complete the brand. As certain groups of people appropriate certain spaces for alternative use, they alter the meaning, value, and belief of this space. They disrupt the visual discourse and the intended argument of the spot, not fleetingly, but as a consequence visual and material addition to the site.

4.2 Signage Disobedience

4.2.1 Missing Communication

When observing the agency of printed communication, and how it takes on a selfness, performing insubordinate agency beyond our control, our attention came to be drawn to the movement of posters removing themselves from their intended function. Firstly, it is highly noticeable, when once noticing, that all over the district, there are countless posters loosening themselves from their designated space and responsibility. While huge facades are left only with the fragments of posters that were once there, we caught a great deal of posters that were only partially attached, precisely in the action of releasing themselves and blowing away. One might say that this is merely a coincidence; however, one might also consider whether this is in fact a movement

of action, considering the large amounts of conspicuous culprits, removing themselves from their post. What can definitely be argued through is that the visual impact of this action makes perceivable the limit of time, and the ever-changing visual facades of the neighbourhood.

Furthermore, there are several sites in Ehrenfeld that could be termed 'poster graveyards'. These spaces, mostly large walls and fences, hold only the slight traces of what used to be there through the taped corners of the former communication. Due to the overwhelmingly large spaces in which this phenomenon is visually repeated, these graveyards come to hold an almost emotional sentiment, serving as a local testimony of what used to be. Again, the fleeting manifestations of the district become apparent, and the monument of past communication reminds us of the momentariness of things. (#19)

4.2.2 Accidental Opposition

Furthermore, an interesting movement within the arguments of communication is the phenomenon of the A4. It may be fair to say that nowhere else will one find such an extensive use of inkjet-printed and handwritten A4 format communication. Whether it is one, or whether it is twenty patterned, there is hardly a shop without one. Now, obviously it is hard to get to excited about an A4. However, what is interesting about this phenomenon is that due to the fact that it is so significantly visually repeated throughout the space, it takes on a certain power of representation. One could in fact say, that on this commercial highway, where large brands have the financial resources to strike their eventual target with highly produced convincing communication; the repetition of A4s comes to stand as an actual visual opposition. Due to the fact that these A4s are usually printed out of practicality and necessity, this hostility is evidently not

intended. However, the printouts seem to collaborate, creating an unintended opposition, which reaches far beyond the intention of the individual shop-owner. (#20)

4.2.3 Monuments by Night

Another phenomenon that occurs in the space could be termed 'monuments at night'. While this merely refers to the simple actuality that the objects that are lit up become specifically important in the dark, it is not to be underestimated the impact that this has on the semiotic highway. Due to the fact that many shops close, however leaving on their light-signs on at night, these signs create a completely alternate spatial dimension, almost although one would be in an entirely different space. Seeing as the shop is closed, and dark inside, one does not get drawn to entering the commercial space, just to the sign. When looking down the street, the high amount of light-signs begin to take on their own dimension, erasing everything else in the space. While one might never perceive the relation between two light signs by day, since they are too far from each other, drawing attention to the hundreds of messages in between, they become allies at night.

4.2.4 Unintentional Collaboration

Lastly, in terms of signs taking on an aspect of agency, one cannot ignore the element of unintentional collaboration of messages within the space. When one walks through the street under investigation, one cannot physically read all the messages that are exposed at one time. However, one can also not ignore much of it, since we read and decode as we navigate through space. This must mean that we are in fact reading fragments all the time. How then, one might wonder, do we combine these fragments in our memory as we are processing and decoding? Do we combine things based on colour, or typography, font-size, or content?

As an attempt to reflect further on this phenomenon, we photographed areas within this space, analyzing the image as a frame, investigating what words overlap in a visual sphere and create new content? Within this attempt of understanding, we found that some spaces hosted an immense potential for such occurrences. Whether one remembers 'Steuer Engel seit 1859' or 'NRW Kuba Frieden Erreicht', signs definitely had an great potential of collaborating, battles, struggling, and hosting messages way beyond their intended meaning.

Similarly, we became aware of the great impact that social context and placement of signs has within this overloaded space, and how this affects the associations that one has to them when perceiving them swiftly and in fragments. For instance, what does it mean that the Greek restaurant is placed between a financial help organization and an army outlet that sells guns and gas masks? In this example, all three elements take on an unintended meaning, based solely on the common denominator of the Greek restaurant, which through its mere existence creates an association to the financial crisis and the recent uprisings. Similarly, one could mention the police station that directly faces a gambling hall, making them look although they would be frozen in the middle of a steady duel, and for some reason might implicitly lead one to question both elements in terms of illegality and corruption.

4.3 Architectural Disobedience

4.3.1 Void Architecture

The last actor that we observed in the space was the building, or perhaps more specifically the surface of buildings, and what they sometimes come to mean. The first aspect that struck us in this regard is what we came to term 'void architecture'. Within the context of this street, which is so filled with seemingly open and accessible spaces, the few inaccessible non-posing

spaces come to stand very much out. These spaces are characterized by being completely visually closed, making them feel highly unapproachable, isolated, and somehow segregated from the rest of the space. An example of void spaces is the gambling halls that are placed along the street. While these spaces ironically use friendly terminology, such as 'Open' and 'Spiel mit', they nevertheless pose a visual threat through their entirely darkly covered windows, closed doors, and what looks somewhat like bouncers standing outside. After a while of navigating through this street, we realized that these few spaces that we feel that we cannot access, and that we do not use, in a sense seize to exist as a three dimensional space, being reduced to simply a void.

4.3.2 Hybrid Architecture

In a sense, the extreme density of the Venloerstrasse seems to allow for several unintended collaborations of meaning to occur, also from the perspective of architecture. From certain angles, things seem to merge and complete each other, despite being separate elements. One instance of this phenomenon happens when one walks towards the Innere Kanalstraße. From this perspective, one realizes that somehow, the Shell Patrol Station and the newly built Mosque seem to merge, becoming one building. This is likely due to their form and the texture of the façade, but nevertheless, the Shell seems to become the entrance hall of the Mosque. Notwithstanding any distinct interpretations of what the intersection of oil and Islam might possibly raise of associations, it is interesting that this phenomenon occurs unintentionally, merely due to the fact that these buildings, which came to have that content, are placed in a certain way. (#21)

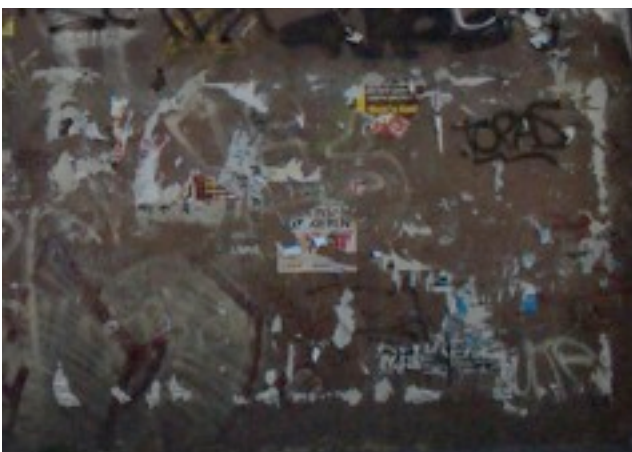
4.3.3 Reflecting Architecture

Similarly, it is quite captivating once one begins to recognize the power of the aspect of reflection on the Venloerstrasse. Often, things merge, battle and provoke messages due to the fact that one message mirrors in a shop window containing another. Again, these aspects exist completely independently of each other, but nonetheless, they happened to be placed as they are, and within an extremely dense and packed space, some of these disconnected meanings are bound to collide. This is for instance the case when one looks in the window of the T-mobile store, and sees an overwhelming reflection of the church on the opposite side of the street, its tower raising towards the sky. Again, without a further interpretation of what smart-phones and religion might reflect on each other, the image might begin to take on new meaning beyond what was originally intended. (#22)

#19



#20



#20



#21



#22



4.0 JOUR FIXE: SEMIOTIC SUPERMARKET

Based on the mapping and analysis above, the conclusion was drawn that the site of investigation in fact functions as a 'semiotic supermarket. On July 14th, 2011, in the middle of the overall investigation, the basic approach of the research and some of the main findings that had been drawn out so far were presented at a Jour Fixe at the DQE. Within this presentation, we set the findings on the backdrop of the discussions of how to see a multiplicity within the forming of a neighbourhood identity, rather than reducing it to a simplified image.

Furthermore, we spoke more extensively about how to find an approach to dealing with empirical reality, especially when one is a native of the site under investigation. In order to spark this discussion, we presented some of our former works that had faced similar challenges, and reflected upon how and on what terms one can in fact read the neighbourhood one lives in. Furthermore, we spoke about what phenomena might be interesting to include in a final mapping, and considered how this mapping could potentially take form. (#23)

#23

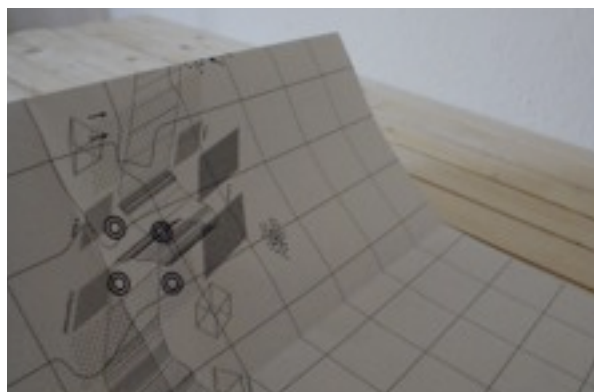
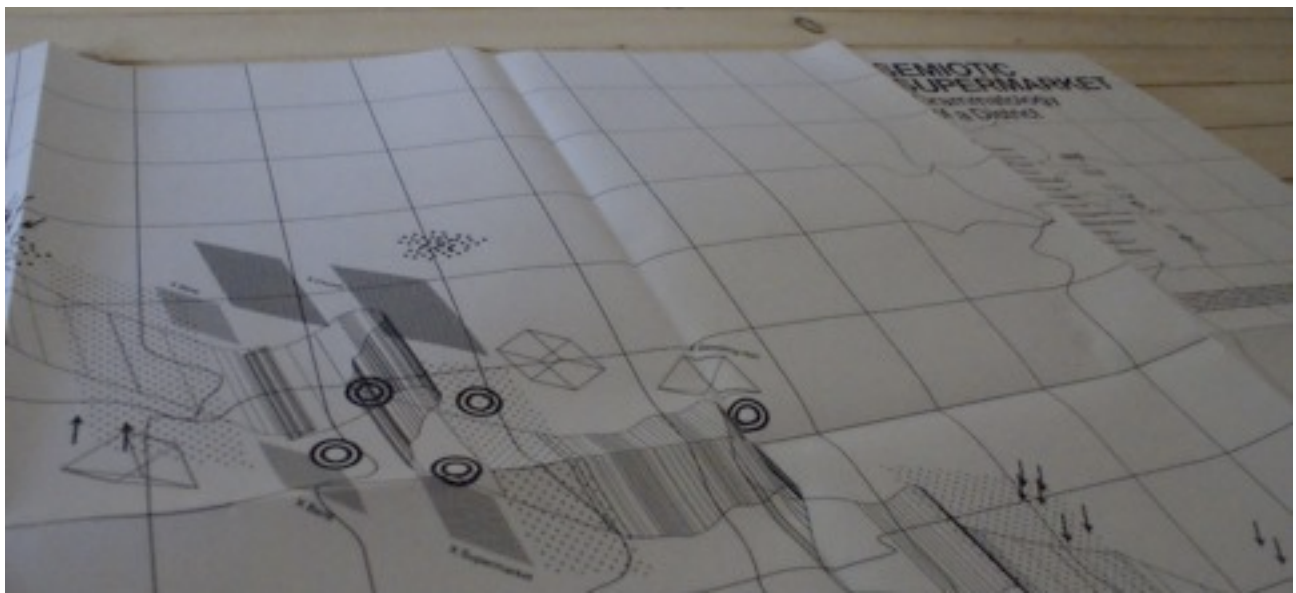
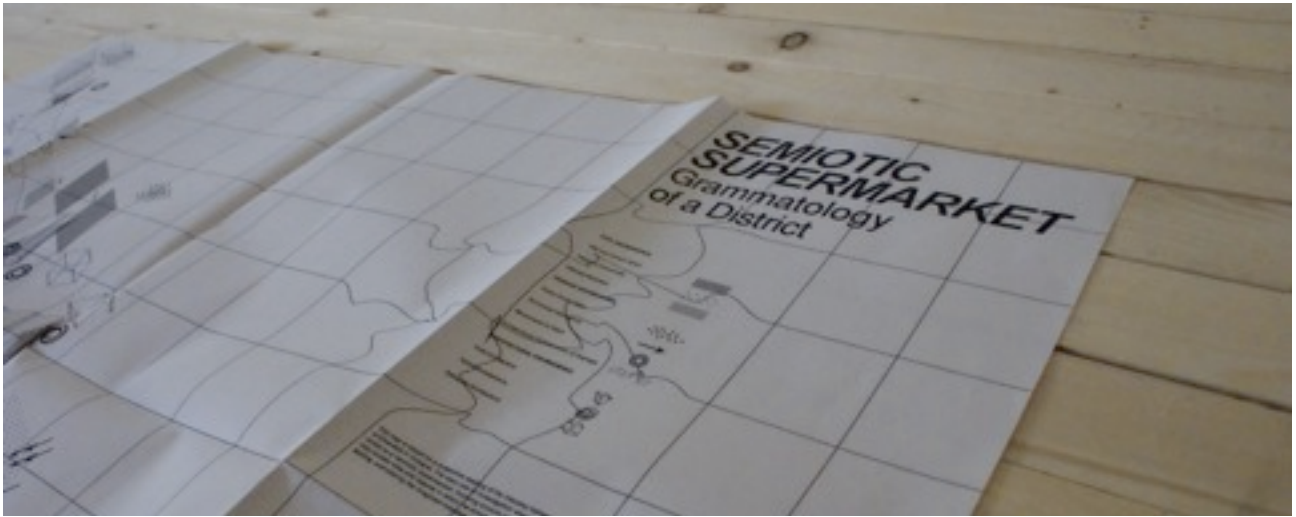


6.0 MAPPING A SEMIOTIC BATTLEFIELD

Finally, the last parts of the findings, namely 'the arguments of the district' were positioned in the form of a map. This map is thereby based on a subjective reading of the interplay between visual facades, surfaces of communication and social behaviour in the district of Ehrenfeld in Cologne. The map (format A1, folded to A4) locates sites and spaces in which the actors (people, signs and buildings) transcended intended meaning and use, collaborating, merging, battling, and altering the imagined message in the space. Through reducing the visual aspects that we saw (and therefore documented) to a more cross-empirical form, the document allows people to navigate the actual space, yet confronts them to look for their own interpretations and understandings based on the framework provided. (#24)

#24





IMPRINT

A Project by:
Michelle Christensen and Florian Conradi
(www.conradichristensen.eu)

The project was carried out in the context of
the scholarship program of the DQE:
Design Quartier Ehrenfeld (DQE)
Heliostasse 35-37
50825 Cologne

Supervisor: Sabine Voggenreiter

Text and Images © 2011-2012
Michelle Christensen & Florian Conradi