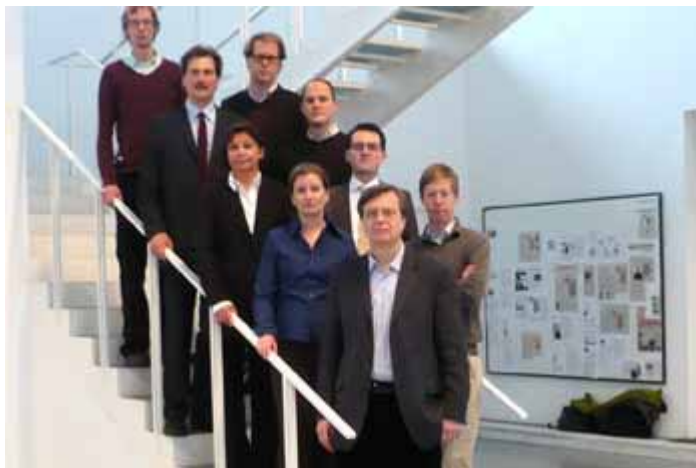


Full Version



© Olaf Bargheer / Subvision
Subvision staff (complete with [subvision focus](#))

HAMBURG'S *SUBVISION* IS TRYING TO COOPT INTERNATIONAL "OFF" ART PROJECTS

A generously state-funded project with leading Hamburg art-institution figures at its helm is planning to showcase international "off" art—"new forms" of artistic activity that have developed at "far remove from the big art-fairs"—in Summer 2008. [1]

Great news? Have you, or acquaintances, been already invited?

Just one minute, please.

Below you will find some (not quite impartial, perhaps, but well-documented) information that may be of interest to those (hopefully all) of you whose cultural endeavors draw on emancipatory and/or art-democratizational aspirations.

This project, we feel, must be understood against the backdrop of recent Hamburg culture-political events. The past seven years here were tumultuous, in this regard, and the names at the head of this project are associated with a clear political line.

URBAN CONTEXT

Touted as the highlight of the Hamburg "HafenCity" Summer 2008 cultural program, the Subvision art festival [2] was presented to local press on February 5th. HafenCity designates 155 acres that were formerly part of Hamburg's freeport and is also a corporation (**Hafen City GmbH**), with public and private shareholders. HafenCity is a giant, exclusive [3] residence and office real estate development: its streets and sidewalks are private property, it has its own private security force.

Subvision has received art-in-public-space money, yet calling HafenCity "public space" is questionable, to say the least.

HafenCity, a drain for city funding (the pompous *Elbphilharmonie* concert hall is set to cost 280 million euros in taxpayer money), is an attempt by Hamburg's city-hall (currently controlled by the conservative party CDU) to compete in the city-marketing game and to expand its tax-base by attracting the affluent.

While the likes of SNS Property Finance, ING Real Estate Germany, Garbe Consult, Pfadt & Pfadt Immobilien GmbH & Co, Vivacon AG, and Deka Immobilien Investment shaped the permanent edifices in HafenCity, art and artists were mobilized to "see if they can make a contribution." [4] The results were a series of half-hearted, bland art concepts that confirmed the view that Hamburg art-in-public-space ambitions were faltering. [5] The upcoming installment, Subvision, promises to maintain that steady downward course.

INITIATORS

Artistic Director Martin Köttering

Restructuring public space for the sake of private interests is also a leitmotif of Subvision Artistic Director Martin Köttering's tenure at the helm of the *Hamburg Art School (HfbK)*. The son of CDU politician Maria Köttering, Martin's first executive job was leading the Municipal art gallery in his home town, Nordhorn. After doing a stint in an art-consulting firm, he was appointed director of the *HfbK* a few months after the CDU won city elections in 2001. Soon thereafter, he started convening the *HfbK* staff to "conference retreats" in order to discuss upcoming "changes." These unfolded at castles or luxury hotels, with consultants from the *CHE* present as "mediators." [6] The *CHE*, by the way, is financed by the *Bertelsmann-Stiftung*, widely decried as a proponent of "neoliberal reforms" and as an "antidemocratic institution." [7]

Köttering made the most of new CDU rules for Hamburg's educational structures ("neue Hamburger Hochschulgesetz") that were to change decision-making at the *HfbK*, weakening checks that student and staff representatives had on his power—allowing him to simply refuse their demands. Since then, he has autocratically imposed his "final say" in the hiring and promotion of professors (Andreas Slominsky, for instance), disregarded staff co-determination rights (Mitbestimmungsrecht), taken control of the school budget (which had previously been negotiated by staff) and subsequently refused repeated student and staff calls for transparency in this area.

Under his term one workshop after the next has been shut down (paper, metal) or downsized (silkscreening), with more to come (electronics), yet money has been readily available for expanding the PR department (in-house and via contractors), and hiring corporate consultants, such as his friend from Nordhorn, Heiner Rénatus Müller, who was awarded a contract worth €100,000. Students are dismayed by the permanent renovation (some say, sterilization) work contracted by new employee Til Bingel.

Finally coming up against a student revolt against his implementation of CDU plans to introduce tuition-fees, Köttering (who had publicly made much of his qualms about this measure) showed his true colors when he ordered registrar staff to work overtime (in August) under orders to send letters of expulsion of 269 students (over half of the student body!) who had initiated a fee-boycott. A court decision on the legality of the expulsion is pending, and the matter generated wide media coverage. [8] In October, Köttering also draconically responded to a student intervention on the school walls by immediately pressing criminal charges and demanding €30,000 in damages, as well as imposing a 9PM curfew (enforced by a private security company hired just for this purpose) at the school. [9] Köttering had met student criticism since the start of his tenure, but mobilization against *HfbK* leadership and city authorities has recently reached a high-water mark for the history of this school.

Going back, it's hard to find any trace of "off-ness" in Köttering's Nordhorn curatorial program: we find many painters (Franz Ackermann, Katharina Grosse, Michel Majerus, Rupprecht Matthies). Despite one or two sightings at the Astra

Stube or the Golden Pudel Club, Köttering's Hamburg period shows the same inclination: under his tenure the once "experimental" school has steadily drifted back to traditional media and commodity-production, in a no-black-sheep atmosphere that fosters individual scurrying for posts, prizes, awards, stipends, funding and favors. [10]

Artistic Board: Robert Fleck and Hubertus Gassner

As early as 1998, Robert Fleck jumped on the rematerialization bandwagon, championing the introduction of "sensuousness" in the place of what he called the "prim (spröde) concept-art aesthetic." [11] Fleck's avatar for this "charged" approach was an artist whom a major NY collector was pushing that very year (via *MoMA* board membership), and who was fetching high prices at Christie's shortly thereafter. [12] Since coming to Hamburg's *Deichtorhallen Art Center* in 2004, Fleck has used public funds to pompously showcase one gallery-scene "genius" after the another, working in just enough critique to cover his flank (one Hans Haacke show in cooperation with Berlin's *Akademie der Künste*) and failing to devote a single solo exhibition to a woman artist (ten men were so honored up to now).

As an Austrian, Fleck pontificated that no artist should accept public funding or even exhibit after Haider's right-wing FPÖ entered the governing coalition (Fleck was safely employed in France at the time). [13] Interestingly, three years later, he apparently had few reservations about taking employ (and city-funding) at a time that the Hamburg city government included the right-wing, xenophobic Schill Partei. In a published interview, he even suggested the main issue was not right-wing politics, but the pressure art was under to "legitimate itself," and he went on to bizarrely compare the CDU-Schill coalition to the situation "in Paris, where a red-green coalition constitutes a populist threat to art" [14] (as if "legitimation" were something new to art, and as if Bernard Delanoë were its newest "theat"!).

Hubertus Gassner is an art historian whose involvement with contemporary art has been more focused on "beauty now" [15] than on non-market alternatives. When he arrived here in 2006, he made the generation of blockbuster shows a cornerstone of his mandate at the *Hamburg Art Museum (Hamburger Kunsthalle)*, as he previously did in Essen and Munich. And, he makes clear himself, this means pumped-up advertizing budgets, which in turn require "strong efforts" to get corporate sponsors. [16] Since his arrival, Hamburg residents have seen admission prices climb to €10 (with group-discounts phased out), and campaigns that leave every single subway station plastered with really, and unintentionally, tasteless posters (the Caspar David Friedrich one [17] set the pace). The lower level of the *Kunsthalle* contemporary art wing had once exhibited elements of the museum's impressive collection of fluxus works; these have since gone to storage to make room for Warhol polaroids.

Bottom line: it is unclear why public funds (*Kulturstiftung des Bundes*, see below) should be spent to give Köttering, Fleck and Gassner a refresher course in the "off art" that has been so glaringly absent from everything they have programmed in the last decade.

CONCEPT AND BACKGROUND

Subvision/WSW2

Subvision is conceptually superfluous. Does Hamburg (or any city) need a copycat version of an art project done ten months earlier? In October 2007, 22 Hamburg artist-run spaces and projects joined up to produce the *Wir Sind Woanders #2 European Art Festival (Wir Sind Woanders 1* was a 2006 symposium), which lasted one whole month. [18]

Compare: [19]

Wir Sind Woanders #2 (2007):

"Artist-run exhibition and work spaces (...) stake a position in urban discourse, and present art as a non-instrumentalized field of experimentation in the spirit of social innovation.

In parallel the galleries' and museums' establishment of marketable values and representative works, respectively, the off-space scene has proved its worth as the third column of artistic production."

Subvision (2008):

"Worldwide, new forms of artistic activity and mediation have developed at far remove from the big art-fairs and biennials."

Wir Sind Woanders #2 (2007):

"For *Wir Sind Woanders #2*, each Hamburg art space selected a "partner-city" and from there, an artist-run space that has affinities and reflects its approach. The invited spaces then send a representative and artists from their network to Hamburg."

Subvision (2008):

"The three large Hamburg art institutions - the *Hamburg Art Museum*, the *Deichtorhallen Art Center*, and the *Hamburg Art School* - want to invite over a hundred of these initiatives from all over the world to Hamburg."
(note: the figure has been scaled back at least 50%)

Wir Sind Woanders #2 (2007):

"The focus of the 2007 project is to compare cities nationally and internationally."

Subvision (2008):

"It is especially through its international perspective that this festival promises multifaceted views of the quality and significance that non-established artistic strategies have for the cultural scene."

In grand usurpative style, when Martin Köttering and Robert Fleck presented the *Subvision* project on February 5th, only *passing mention* was made of *Wir Sind Woanders #2*.

Conjuring up images of "the little engine that couldn't," Köttering laid out the credit due to the previous festival in the following elaboration:

"The term *off* and these art initiatives have, over the last decades, become stronger and have a stronger presence in specific, often locally-bound, scenes, yet do not, in our view, get enough public - also international—attention. This is why we think that in a tradition, in a context like that in Hamburg - *Artgenda* was (just) mentioned, *Wir Sind Woanders* was a project where, indeed, the off-scene wants to adopt a relatively sophisticated and also ambitious role—one should really open up this view internationally and should internationally position Hamburg in such kinds of questions."

[20]

Note the twist: *Wir Sind Woanders* protagonists wanted, according to Köttering's construal, what only the can-do *Subvision* team can deliver!!

Wir Sind Woanders is somewhat less parenthetical to Subvision when you look at the latter's staff: Köttering hired *Wir Sind Woanders* co-initiator Tim Voss to be his "curator", and *Wir Sind Woanders* #2 Press and Public Affairs Officer Olaf Bargheer is now doing the same job for *Subvision*. We are waiting to see what other crossover specialists may follow.

Subvision applied to the same source as its precursor did for funding, the *German Federal Culture Foundation (Kulturstiftung des Bundes)*, which was set up by the German government in 2002 in view of supporting innovative projects. *Wir Sind Woanders* saw its funding request turned down. *Subvision*'s subsequent application for diversion within the confines of HafenCity yielded €500,000. Virginia Craven has detailed the ethical cloud that hovers over this award. She writes: "Very questionable also the practice of the *Kulturstiftung des Bundes*: the juridical term "accepting advantage" was used to describe that Dr. Christoph Heinrich (then Director of *Hamburg Kunsthalle - Galerie der Gegenwart*), as a member of the jury, decided to give nearly half a million Euros of taxpayers money to the subvision project, whose advisory board member Hubertus Gassner (Director of *Hamburg Kunsthalle*) was at the time of application - his boss..." [21]

Wir Sind Woanders is not the only Hamburg artist-initiative that challenged old-guard norms while also having a direct bearing to the *Subvision* project

Subvision/KiP

In 2005, cultural policy within the HafenCity itself was the object of "new art practices" [22] that, even, received considerable media attention. The "Artists inform politicians" (KiP) initiative [23] brought together over one hundred artists and cultural workers who "set out to inform the city's politicians, as well as the public, about the proceedings connected to the *International Maritime Museum*" [24] in HafenCity. Indeed the CDU-Schill Hamburg government gave *Maritime Museum* founder Peter Tamm (a nazi-memorabilia collector and former media executive who gained prestige in the late 1960s and early 1970s working on campaigns against the political left) incredibly favorable conditions: a 12,000-square-meter historic warehouse for free, as well as €30 million public-fund support for the private museum enterprise.

On February 5th, *HafenCity GmbH* CEO Giseler Schultz-Berndt sketched out, in one same breath, a 2008 "art and culture" program that included both the opening of the *Maritime Museum* and of *Subvision*. It is worth noting that former anti-Haider crusader Robert Fleck, sitting in the audience, didn't raise a peep (as little as he has shown any interest towards KiP).

Subvision/Hamburg Art Center Board of Directors Conflict

The *Hamburg Art Center (Kunstverein)* receives half its funding from the city, but is run by a director who is in turn selected by and answers to a board of directors, themselves elected by members every three years. In April 2005, this board extended Yilmaz Dziewior's contract at the helm of the *Art Center*, which dismayed many observers. When he first came here, Dziewior seemed to promise a shift to social instead of formal debates... yet, the very opposite happened, compounded by an unapologetic policy of "exhibiting friends." (two of his early group shows as solo curator bore the titles *Making connections* and *Formalism: modern art, today*.) Four years saw eleven exhibitions with artists from the *Galerie Christian Nagel*, and Dziewior's moonlighting for the *Artist Pension Trust* was taking shape. So, on October 12, 2005, considerably more members than usual (117, instead of the usual 40 or so; total membership is ca. 1900) showed up to

exercise their right to elect the board of directors. Several artists challenged the direction the *Kunstverein* had taken, urged a fresh start, and were nominated as candidates. When the ballots came in, the top 3 vote-winners were artists who had criticized the program, and several gallerists and collectors had lost their posts. [25] This immediately triggered a backlash, orchestrated by millionaire collectors Harald Falckenberg and Jochen Waitz. Falckenberg, an "honorary" city judge, had the staff of the *Kunstverein* (in violation of center rules!) go through all the membership files, and unearthed a technical mistake: one of the elected artists had a family membership, not an individual one. This was the legal basis for declaring the entire election invalid. Falckenberg kept sending mail to *Art Center* members calling himself the "chairman of the board" (on the 12th he placed 6th in the vote), one which contained a list of 52 members calling for an "exceptional general meeting" whose one "agenda item" was the "new election of the board." Waitz mailed 1000 personally addressed letters to members of the Hamburg bourgeoisie and, predictably, the second election, with 450 in attendance, saw a reestablishment of the old power relations, with only one of the critics, Claudia Reiche, elected to the 9-member board. She has gone on to start a "Art Center Working Group" bringing together members who rethink the *Kunstverein*'s business-as-usual and consider, and realize, alternatives. [26]

Why mention this story? Two reasons:

1. *Subvisionaries* Martin Köttering and Robert Fleck were personally involved: the former was one of the 52 original Falckenberg supporters, and the latter was sitting front and center with the collectors/gallerists at the "backlash" election.
2. Discursively, it is interesting to note how *Subvision*'s positioning to *Wir Sind Woanders* is similar to the argument current *Kunstverein* board member Susanna Hegewisch-Becker (and wife of gallerist Jürgen Becker) used to discredit the insurgent artists in Fall 2005: they are local, provincial, whereas the protagonists of the art market are international, have wider vistas. (A preposterous statement, debunked by the fact that those most international movements in the twentieth century were ALL articulated against commodities and/or classical distribution).

Thanks to backing from various tax-dodge foundations and its misappropriated public money, it's almost sure that *Subvision* will be able to invite guests from much further away than *Wir Sind Woanders* was, *Subvision* will be multi-continental whereas *Wir Sind Woanders* was merely European. We should not be fooled: although Köttering and all his team flounder as soon as they have to speak English, the classist and elitist world-view their posts rests on requires them to hammer this view over and over again: broad vistas on life's potentialities are to be gained as one *rises* (culturally, financially, but usually a mix of the two, hey!) in society... what comes from below is particularistic, divisive, cyclopic. The "offs", like IMF candidates for third-world "development," need the professionals to extend their helping hand if they are to become art.

Bottom line: *Subvision* is not building on the dedicated work and contributions of those who have a competence in "off art"; *Subvision* wants to instrumentalize foreign "off art" initiatives to outflank the locals' self-organizational and challenging steps forward.

PRESENTATION AND CONCLUSION

Did someone say "professional"? Some details are hard to believe (a selection, here).

- Take the ridiculous name that, in connection with Hafencity, brings submarine tours (as part of Tamm's museum?) more to mind than art.
- Take the exhibition architecture plan. Those foreign guests are to be featured in containers. On February 5th, Köttering called these an "adequate form" for "off art" projects who "maybe don't even want to be shown in the exhibition spaces" in downtown Hamburg (as if they would willingly, given the choice, opt for exhibition in a private real-estate development whose residents vote CDU by a margin of 58,7%? [27])

Some observers will be forgiven for seeing another dimwitted half-conceptualisation of the "harbor theme"—in the last years these have run the gamut from all those buildings that look like ships, terminals and submarines to Köln artist Cosima von Bonin's "thematization of the special nature of Hamburg as an exhibition location" (Dziewior) by exhibiting a sculpture that looks like a sailboat at the *Kunstverein*.

Others will have to be forgiven for seeing a really tasteless joke. [28] Under the CDU, Hamburg has become one of the worst German cities with regard to the treatment of asylum seekers. [29] (The record under the SPD was not much better: they started housing refugees in a dehumanizing container complex located... near the harbor).

In an amusing turn, the containers themselves are proving quite unwieldy, and the container-architecture risks becoming a fiasco... rumors are that the three story complexes are not structurally feasible... the containers that have been made available are printed with the word "Capital"...etc.

"We know that everywhere that reaction has triumphed over the last forty years, it has done so by the détournement or the parody of a revolutionary, or at least social, ideology." [30] Mohamed Dahou, *The Sovereign People*, in: *Potlach #9/10/11*, August 1954.

Bottom line: there is a contradiction between what *Subvision* says and what it does. It says "far remove from the big art-fairs" is where it's at, but its effective decision-making model places business-as-usual actors in (cahoots with rightist politicians and real estate interests) back at the top – *Wir Sind Woanders* was the opposite: a grass roots FORM that was about artist-run initiatives trying to reinforce their sustainability (survival!) in a threatening context of capitalization of culture and education. *Subvision* is vampiristic and depressing: for *Subvision*, *off* is exciting for one spin on the merry-go-round, for latching up useful career connections, but it's not a sustainable, anti-hegemonic strategy: the *off* presentation makes way for the the Xmas market, the Sausage Festival, the Harley-Davidson-Meet. The cuddliest *offs* get a show at the Produzentengalerie. The *Subvision* initiators are building up up in a ramshackle way (like the refugee containers) with their left hands what they have undone and undermined with their right one. *Subvision* has **neoliberalism** and **culture-industry** written all over it.

If invited spaces think they can resolve these question, we will be intrigued to see the results. Please feel free to address us if you would like additional information.

English/Français: m@targetautonopop.org
Deutsch: 2ol@gmx.net

Notes

[1] *Kulturstiftung des Bundes* [website](#)

[2] *Subvision* [website](#)

[3] *Mieterverein Hamburg* [website](#)

[4] Jorn Walter (Director, Hamburg City Development Office), statement in "Fragen an die Kunst" talk, Kesselhaus Hamburg, 17 February, 2001. He insisted that HafenCity should NOT become a "playing field" for art, and that any art projects should be temporary.

[5] On the political, social, and ideological background of the HafenCity project, see: Virginia Craven, *art, money & real estate* [virginworld.blog](#)

On the increasing contradictions of Hamburg's art-in-public-space program in 2001, see: Rahel Puffert, *Fortschrittliche Stolpersteine. Oder was aus den programmatischen Überlegungen der "Kunst im öffentlichen Raum" in Hamburg seit "weitergehen" geworden ist.* [eipcp](#)

[6] Klaus Neuvians worked closely with Köttering, is still at CHE consulting, and his plan for the HfbK is available on the [CHE website](#)

[7] [wikipedia on Bertelsmann anti-bertelsmann.de](#)

CHE is the new address of Köttering's former boss, the unpopular *City Department of Science and Education* head Jörg Dräger (axed in the aftermath of the 24 February elections here).

[8] See the website of the HfbK Student's council: [hfbk.de](#), as well as the University of Hamburg student-organized anti-fee website [gebuehrenboykott.de](#)

[9] The students described their action as a response to "working conditions in this school (that) are increasingly uninspiring, clinically white walls, locked studios, no way to see the work other students are doing." Documentation is available under: [thing-hamburg.de](#)

An analysis of the administration's response, which even drew in representatives of the German Staatsschutz (equivalent of the FBI) is to be found in Frank Wörlner, *Wenn der Staatsschutz zweimal klingelt...* [thing-hamburg.de](#)

Several professors wrote an open letter in support of the students [thing-hamburg.de](#)
And organized evening seminars to undermine the curfew [thing-hamburg.de](#)

[10] Shortly after being appointed professor, Ecke Bonk realized what was really underway in-house, and took indefinite sick leave. His comments on the HfbK situation are here: [blog.hfbk](#)

In the 80s the *HfbK* staff included internationally-recognized practitioners of body-art, concept-art, and fluxus (Marina Abramovic, Stanley Broun, Henning Christiansen). Currently, German commodity-producers (Pia Stadtbäumer, Werner Büttner, Andreas Slominsky) set the pace, reinforcing Köttering's hand. And it must be mentioned, due to the ludicrousness of the *Subvision* proposition: no one anything close to "off art" has figured among *HfbK* hirings or guest lecturer appointments under Köttering's entire tenure (and several have applied!).

[11] Claudia Posca interviews Robert Fleck/Ulrike Gross, *Manifesta 2: Interview*, *Kunstforum International* #142, October-December 1998, pp. 358-359

[12] Judith Benhamou-Huet, *Art Business* (Paris: Assouline,

2001), pp. 28-30

[13] One of Fleck´s statements at that time is available at [lot.at](#)

[14] "Robert Fleck" in: *Citymag Hamburg*, 10/2003, p 12

[15] Actual title the most internationally prominent show he has curated (Haus de Kunst, Munich/Hirshhorn, Washington, D.C.)

[16] Matthias Gretzschel interviews Hubertus Gassner, *Wir brauchen große Ausstellungen*, Hamburger Abendblatt, 30 June, 2005. See: [Hamburger Abendblatt](#)

[17] see [Hamburger Kunsthalle website](#)

[18] See [wirsindwoanders.de](#) *Wir Sind Woanders*, in English, means *We are somewhere else*

[19] *Wir Sind Woanders* quotations are from [wirsindwoanders.de](#)
Subvision quotations are from [kulturstiftung-des-bundes.de](#)

[20] Video documentation of the speech is available at [youtube.com](#) The passage cited is 1´35-2´25.

[21] Virginia Craven, *subvision - a pathetic art project in Hamburg´s Hafencity* [virginworld.blog.de](#)

[22] Rahel Puffert, Cornelia Sollfrank, Monika Wucher, *New art practices in the field of political decision-making: a process report from projektgruppe*, in: *Afterimage*, Sept-Dec, 2006, p.73

[23] The initiative [website](#)

[24] *New art practices*, p.73

[25] For a chronicle and analysis of the events, see Collective, *Applied critique to the institution. The case of the Kunstverein in Hamburg* [igkultur.at](#)

[26] Its work was presented at Blinzelbar in Hamburg in November and at NGBK/Berlin in December 2007. Documentation is to be found in Burbaum/Kasböck/Kriegerowski, ed. *Demokratie ... in der neuen Gesellschaft* (Berlin: NGBK, 2007), pp 190-197.

[27] Recent election results for Hafencity: [website](#)

[28] Virginia Craven, *subvision - a pathetic art project in Hamburg´s Hafencity* [virginworld.blog.de](#)

[29] Well documented in the 2005 Michael Richter/NDR film *Abschiebung im Morgengrauen - Alltag in der Ausländerbehörde*

[30] Reprinted in *Guy Debord présente Potlach (1954-1957)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996) p.71