

KUPFERDIEBE IT'S EASIER TO ASK FOR FORGIVENESS THAN TO ASK FOR PERMISSION



When the long arm of the law is grabbing you, backstabbing you, police cars passing you on dark avenues, Mag-lights flashing you, pigs harassing you, breaking you down and smashing you... rebel, my friend, and live your life for your passion. Street art.

Sebastian Rathert, aka Rebelzer, has founded the art project 'Die Kupferdiebe' (the copper thieves) in the centre of Hamburg. Together with his workmate, Darko Caramello, they squatted a giant old art nouveau building and opened an amazing open-air street art gallery. They realized their vision of an urban oasis for all 'on-the-runners' at night and it's definitely more than 'just writing your name.' Die Kupferdiebe gives people from every walk of life an impression of what street art could be in its superlative diversity.

Basti and Darko, let's get into the details. Who are the Kupferdiebe?

Sebastian: We are a bunch of young creative people with the same philosophy. We want to innervate the 'Gängeviertel,' the oldest quarter of Hamburg. That's why we are located here. At present, we are a mix of 8 young people, artists and freelancers alike, who have their workplace in this old building, at the border to downtown Hamburg.

Darko: We all have the same intention. Together, we want to provide young motivated artists with a free space for their work and create for them a kind of approachable place where they can be at any time and interact with other artists or just chill. On the backside of the building, we have established a kind of open-air street art gallery for Hamburg's finest local urban art.

Your motto is: "Copper is the new gold." What does that mean and why is there a saw in your logo?

Sebastian: The slogan is a result of a true occurrence. We were sitting here in an amazing old art nouveau building which was on the verge of abridgment. One night, real copper thieves broke in and were about to steal the veneer of the gas pipes to sell it out at the black market. At a kilo value of seven euros, they would have made a good amount of money, that is, until they noticed that there was still gas in the lines, and they disappeared quickly. From this incident the slogan developed: Copper is the new gold! The saw stands as a symbol for movement. Where anybody is sawing, something happens!



What's the aim of the project?

Sebastian: We want to show that street art is to be seen as real and genuine art. Tags are not tolerated. Nobody needs a monument fully covered by Graffiti in the city center. With our open air gallery, we want to show all those people who still believe street art to be an abuse, like a dog pissing on every corner, are wrong.

Darko: Our aim is to create an open air gallery full of amazing artwork where people are astonished while standing for hours and hours in our courtyard, not able to avert their eyes from the mass of breath-taking creativity.

Sebastian: This should become a place of meeting and cultural exchange. For all 'on the runners at night,' this should become kind of a base where they have the possibility to get in contact with colleagues and consumers or just chill. The open air gallery is a new meeting point in the city center which awakes interest in all social backgrounds.

How does a normal passerby experience what this is all about?

Sebastian: From the best kind of advertisement: Mouth to mouth propaganda. We do not consciously turn to the press. People hear about the art project from a friend and get curious about 'Die Kupferdiebe' and want to know more about us.

Darko: The advantage of the proximity to the city center is that also different people who are normally not concerned with street art become attentive. They show a great interest in this old ensemble and to our project. From old grannies to business guys from our neighborhood, everyone is popping in and they are astonished by the creative power we represent. This is wonderful because in this way, humans from every social background become attentive to us and get in contact with street art.

The point in street art is that it usually takes place outside. How do people recognize that this is an open air street art gallery?

Sebastian: Typical street art usually occurs under hectic and pressured conditions. At our location, the artists have the possibility to create their work in peace. In addition to this, our wooden windows are almost made to be used as free space for street art. Fact is that street art is a bright and endless field. There are uncountable different techniques. You've got cut-outs, stencils or object installations, to name just a few. In our open air gallery people are requested to step it up and have the possibility to show their real talent. The gallery does not have anything in common with a typical Hall of Fame, which is to be known from the classical graffiti scene. The artists here are motivated to generate wicked, phat artworks with much effort and devotion for the detail. These works bring much more attention than graffiti barracks bombed to death.



The copper thieves are an artist collective. Which possibilities do you offer young creative people and what distinguishes you from other collectives?

Sebastian: Compared to others we can actually offer space for artists. Other collectives look constantly for free surfaces. We already have space and in addition to this we have enough square meters around in our building to create urban offices for creative heads to rent.

The 'Gängeviertel' is within a comfortable distance to the club and bar scene of Hamburg. Why did you choose this place for the project and what are the advantages?

Sebastian: Three years ago we founded a small independent office in this building. But they told us that it wouldn't last long because the government wanted to demolish this building and build up a new office complex. But nothing ever happened. So we decided to make our own thing, without asking for permission all the time. Faithful to the motto: "to ask for forgiveness is better than to ask for permission"



Darko: The 'Gängeviertel' is perfect for us! After 7pm it's almost empty and we don't disturb anyone while working. We are in the middle of the city center and scene quarter. Not much exists in this area so far, so we have the possibility to recreate everything to its best.

Galleries live from constantly changing exhibitions. What happens when your walls are completely packed?

Darko: That will be the point when it becomes really interesting! At this point, the artists will become really creative concerning the way of manufacturing technique. If the walls are completely packed they have to first consider which place they are able to come with their object. The requirement increases and these resulting works are always the most creative ones.

Sebastian: That would be definitely our final goal. A fully packed house of wicked street art!

Streetart is always connected to crime and the scene is afraid of commercialization.

What does the 'long arm of the law' think of 'Die Kupferdiebe' and how does the scene accept you?

Sebastian: It's funny, but we have 'the long arm of the law' directly catty-corner as our primary neighbors. Meanwhile they are quite relaxed and easy going.



Darko: It's always a question of the social network. Before we came here, the whole quarter was fucked up. Now we are like kings for them because we are quite easy to handle. There are no fights, we don't steal or pick fights. With our art, we reevaluate the quarter and also plant flowers by the roadside.

Sebastian: The scene sees the project as a challenge. They can try out something special and refine their techniques. For them the project is a constant stimulation.

How do you make ends meet at the moment?

Sebastian: I have learned sign-writing and besides this I also do other forms of art. Darko builds web pages. We are still in the normal crowd of designers, illustrators and graphic designers.

How did you get in touch with street art?

Darko: With graffiti, actually. My neighbor has been a writer. He gave me a can one day and said, "Do it!" Since that day, I released my passion for graffiti. I changed to street art after my studies as a graphic designer.

Sebastian: I actually come from Dortmund. In the Ruhrpott graffiti starts early and the big chrome letters were quickly common for me. When I understood as a young person that there are people who are on the run at night and paint a whole car of a rapid-transit, I was really fascinated by this idea. At that time, my mentor, Delacre, said to me, "If you are able to tag you are also able to do graffiti." So I sat at home in my secret chamber and I practiced all night long just tagging. That is my story of 'style wars.'

Describe the street art scene in Hamburg.

Sebastian: Alive, innovative and rising. But the street art scene is still rather small and visible. We have about 15 or 20 famous writers over here. Tendency is growing.

Darko: The scene is very ambitious. They begin to create new formations, like the project 'Illi Gallery.' People go in a large crowd at a proposed spot to make a mega-bombing. One week later they return to the spot and celebrate, with a GhettoBlaster and few beers, an urban vernissage. Hamburg is moving!

What are your plans for the future?

Sebastian: To develop a creative meeting place in the city center, offer creative people surface for their work and the opportunity to show their talents. It should become a symbiosis which gives people a network for sessions and which provides common art projects. People should meet here and get in contact with each other so that it increases in a huge value for everybody.

Darko: To give Hamburg a fat ass kick, when it comes to do more breath-taking street art.

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