

**FRI ART  
KUNSTHALLE  
FRIBOURG**

**SEPT 5 – NOV 8 2020**

**CALLA HENKEL &  
MAX PITEGOFF**

**GERMAN THEATER  
2010 – 2020**

*The survey exhibition on the first decade of work by American Berlin based artists Calla Henkel & Max Pitegoff takes place in its first iteration in Fri Art Kunsthalle Fribourg, from September 5 to November 8, 2020.*

*German Theater 2010-2020 assembles over fifty works produced by the artists during the last decade. Shown for the first time together, they reveal the consistency of a practice as well as an engagement with photography by artists of a new generation.*

Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff started their collaboration as undergraduate students at The Cooper Union, a small private Lower Manhattan university specializing in engineering, architecture, and fine arts. One of their earliest works in the exhibition, FUKNAB, 2010, included a number of choreographed performances that tested, in the campiest fashion, the architectural boundaries of the university's hugely expensive New Academic Building (i.e. the NAB part of the FUKNAB equation). As a direct result of this urban expansion scheme, along with other poor financial decisions made by the institution's board, The Cooper Union began to charge admission fees for the first time in its 130 year-old history. The FUKNAB performances involved other students directly impacted by these structural changes, as well as an extended network of friends living in the city. Simultaneously to these scored communal events, Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff began to develop a body of photographic works. The earliest of these pictures in the show in Fri Art Kunsthalle (Scheißdreck, 2010) was taken after one of their performances at Berlin's Universität der Künste, which Henkel attended as an exchange student, and which Max Pitegoff crashed, alongside half-a-dozen artists enrolled in various programs of different schools. The photo is of a note written in broken German by Mathieu Malouf, a French-Canadian artist, that asks the Universität der Künste's janitorial staff to not clean up the mess they had left behind.

These early works carry the seeds of the numerous interfaces the artists would orchestrate throughout the decade in Berlin, where they relocated in 2011. There, the artists would run a string of bars and theaters, where they staged over 40 collaborative theatrical performances. These included plays at New Theater, which they opened in 2013, as well as a number of formal productions in the Grüner Salon of the Volksbühne, the "People's Theatre", Berlin's iconic theatre located on Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz. Their latest project is called TV, a bar that, in its off-hours, functions as a film studio where Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff are currently shooting a sitcom titled Paradise.

Whether a drink, a play, or a sublet, Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff score and choreograph social interactions among artists, teasing the limits of what might define a creative community, however fictional it may be. Their works continuously perform what Benjamin H.D. Buchloh famously called "allegorical procedures" – in that they are infused by, and constantly refer outward to the culture in which they were created. The political framework that conditions the limits of their communal freedom and its eminently fragile autonomy is directly addressed in their plays and performances. Their output aimed at exhibition spaces – which includes most of their photographic work – espouses a viewpoint that is largely peripheral to their community organizing, painting a deadpan picture of the economic scaffolding that sustain such communal exchanges. Following FUKNAB, no direct documentation of their live staged events was made public.

By the turn of the 21st century, Berlin had reinvented itself as an international capital open to a new generation of artists coming from every corner of the world. Yet, in the early 2010s, around the time Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff moved to Berlin, this new metropolis's laid-back-tech-triumphalism had begun to give way to malaise. Rising rents, the progressive loss of DIY spaces and the growing precarity of their peers, became an integral part of their day-to-day reality. Their work thus yields a wry and bitter-sweet portrait of the German capital in the last decade. Contrarily to the previous generations of self-reflexive artists, the narrative horizon of their work is no longer tied to specific art-historical accounts (i.e. the rise of contemporary art institutions or its markets, the dissolution of the field's purported autonomy into pop culture at large, or into the immateriality of the Internet, etc.), but immanent to an autopoietic economy of sharing.

## **ARTISTS BIOGRAPHY**

Calla Henkel (born 1988, Minneapolis) and Max Pitegoff (born 1987, Buffalo) had solo exhibitions at the Kunstverein Hamburg (2018), the Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin (2016), and The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2015). Their work was included in group presentations at Manifesta 13, Marseille (2020), the Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich (2018), the Museum Ludwig, Cologne (2016), the 9. Berlin Biennale (2016), Kunsthalle Wien (2015), UCCA Beijing (2014), Artists Space, New York (2013), and Kunsthalle Bern (2012). They have been guest professors at the Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung in Karlsruhe, the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam; the NYU Berlin; Politecnico di Torino, and have been working since 2016 as mentors at Berlin Program for Artists. Their work is in the collection of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Geneva.



## **CONTACT**

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## WORKS

### RECEIPTS

Portraits of Berlin-based artists doing their taxes. The federal republic of Germany grants visual artists a freelancer fiscal status that allows them to write off professional expenses. An oblique, deadpan record of the precarity of a project-based lifestyle and the ever-evolving ennui of everyday logistics that comes with being an artist in a rapidly gentrifying city.



Exhibition view, Calla Henkel & Max Pitegoff, "German Theater 2010-2020", Fri Art, 2020. Photo Gunnar Meier. Courtesy of Fri Art Kunsthalle



Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff, *Yngve, Berlin, Spring 2013*, 2013, Framed archival digital print. Courtesy the artists and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin

## TIMES ATHENS

Times Athens, a series of photographs Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff took of themselves in Athens in February 2012, imagines the franchising of Times Bar in the Greek capital. The series was spurred by ongoing conversations overheard at the bar about the means of artistic livelihood in Berlin, paired with an ostensibly bottomless pining for the next city with cheap studio space. In a time when German-enforced austerity measures against Greece hardened, Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff framed their project against the backdrop of Athens as the symbolic birthplace of European democracy. Looking for hotels that advertised rooms with a view of the Acropolis or the Hellenic parliament, they gained access to these prized vantage points by passing themselves as fashion photographers from Berlin.



Exhibition view, Calla Henkel & Max Pitegoff, «German Theater 2010-2020», Fri Art, 2020. Photo Gunnar Meier. Courtesy of Fri Art Kunsthalle



Exhibition view, Calla Henkel & Max Pitegoff, «German Theater 2010-2020», Fri Art, 2020. Photo Gunnar Meier. Courtesy of Fri Art Kunsthalle

## APARTMENT

Photographs of Berlin-based artists' apartments. Before each shoot, their owners were asked to style their living space as if it were about to be photographed for a rental or sublet platform. Harking back to Thomas Ruff's iconic 1979–1983 *Interiors* series of minimally furnished – yet awkwardly sentimental – West German *petit bourgeois* apartments, these photographs appeal to the bottom-rung-IKEA aesthetic that characterized domesticity in the mid-2010s, as the generic stage upon which to fulfill Airbnb's seemingly contradictory promises to “live like a local” and “belong anywhere”.



Exhibition view, Calla Henkel & Max Pitegoff, "German Theater 2010-2020", Fri Art, 2020. Photo Gunnar Meier. Courtesy of Fri Art Kunsthalle



Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff, *They take a break, feet up, stars of the latest neoliberal sitcom. There is an ashtray in the apartment so it seems they had assumed it was fine. The dish towels are missing*, 2014, Framed archival digital print, 50 × 55 cm, Courtesy the artists and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin

## EXTERIOR

Photos of real estate promotional tarpaulins projecting images of sanitized urban comfort. The final stage in a gentrification process, these digitally rendered visions place hold before the transformation of the real estate market of Berlin, and highlight the role of images in contemporary urban planning.



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## PARADISE

Paradise is the name of the fictional bar that serves as the setting for Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff's ongoing sitcom, filmed at their own bar, TV. Shot on 16mm, Paradise is cast with a mix of patrons and employees, professional actors and neighbors. Set in 2023, the show follows several central characters that are employed both as bartenders and as newscasters by an ominously absent boss who seeks to transform the bar into a human-centered local news channel. Each of the employees is tasked to read prepared speeches to customers via a teleprompter, as the boss films their every move. Over the course of the show, the workers attempt to take control of their own narrative. The first episode of Paradise is presented on monitors at Café Le Belvédère in Fribourg and various bars and cafes where the artists exhibit in 2020 (Manifesta 13, Marseille).



Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff, Exhibition view at Le Belvédère, *Paradise, Episode 1-Tara and Josef*, 2020, still, 16mm film transferred to Video, 22' and above: *Paradise Belvédère*, 2020, Oil on linen, 60 × 18 cm. Photo: Fri Art Kunsthalle

## PLACES

### TIMES BAR

Times Bar was a one-year venture the duo ran in the Neukölln district in 2011 which catered to a mostly expatriate community of artists. Over the course of the year, over thirty artists were invited to hang their works during opening hours above the bar and, consequently, to perform for other artists. This setup facilitated a dialogue between peers and allowed for new works to be experienced outside of institutional or commercial contexts.



Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff, *Joe (New Theater)*, 2012, Framed archival digital print, 100 × 75 cm

## NEW THEATER

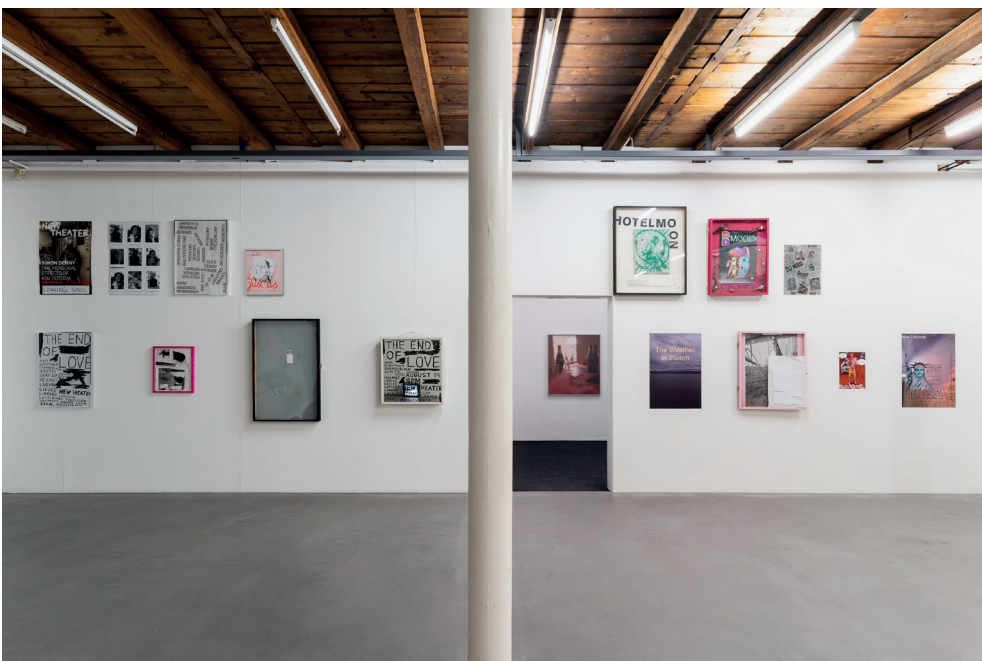
New Theater opened in August 2013 in a storefront space in Berlin–Kreuzberg. The project brought together over 80 artists who were invited to participate in about 20 live theatrical events produced over a two-year period. These plays were not only written, staged and promoted outside of the habitual circuits of contemporary art exhibitions, but also remained resolutely cut-off from the numerous channels of the “Freie Szene” productions that still to this day characterize the archetypal grassroots Berlin cultural landscape.

New Theater became a communal space to collectively suspend disbelief and artistic ego, a place to safely act out fictional scenarios that tested the ever-wavering moral boundaries between the field of contemporary fine arts and the service economy at large. The plays’ main protagonists included once-radical-art-dealers turned international-foody-influencers; dilettante-adult-children who, upon the death of their parents, turn their family’s beloved Parisian book store into a nightclub; and artists forced to transform their dingy apartment into the last open ramen restaurant in a post-apocalyptic NY.

As with all the live events staged by Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff, no photographic or video documentation is made public. Every New Theater production is represented in this exhibition via the posters and display cases commissioned for each performance, hung outside the theater.



Exhibition view, Calla Henkel & Max Pitegoff, "German Theater 2010-2020", Fri Art, 2020. Photo Gunnar Meier. Courtesy of Fri Art Kunsthalle



Exhibition view, Calla Henkel & Max Pitegoff, "German Theater 2010-2020", Fri Art, 2020. Photo Gunnar Meier. Courtesy of Fri Art Kunsthalle

## GRÜNER SALON

In 2017, Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff were invited to develop a season-long program in the Grüner Salon of the Volksbühne, the “People’s Theatre”, Berlin’s iconic theatre located on Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz. Erected just before WWI, this theatre was founded to promote the social realist plays of the day at prices accessible to the common worker, and has since presented many of the most emblematic productions of the city’s rich theatrical history. Their program was part of a tumultuous year at the Volksbühne, when Chris Dercon, a contemporary art curator, was installed as the head of the theatre, leading to an intense debate on the role of publicly funded culture in Berlin.

In addition to inviting other artists to develop performances in the space, Henkel and Pitegoff structured the season around four plays of their own, loosely tracing the rise and fall of a city. They cast mainly non-professional actors, including a number of the Volksbühne’s propmasters, lighting and sound technicians. Henkel and Pitegoff faced these cultural conflicts head on, borrowing lines for their scripts from the inflamed public conversation, attempting to create their own “theatre within the theatre”.

As with all the live events staged by Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff, no photographic or video documentation is made public. The Grüner Salon of the Volksbühne’s productions are represented in this exhibition via the trailers the artists made for each performance, sometimes months before the opening of the actual plays, each with a cast and score of their own.



Exhibition view, Calla Henkel & Max Pitegoff, "German Theater 2010-2020", Fri Art, 2020.  
Photo Gunnar Meier. Courtesy of Fri Art Kunsthalle

## TV

Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff's most recent undertaking, called TV, is a real bar – *real* in that the artists took over the license of a pre-existing establishment, and continue to maintain regular opening hours each weekend. During the week, the space serves as a set and production studio for Henkel and Pitegoff's fictional sitcom, Paradise, the first episode of which will be on view offsite in Fribourg at Café du Belvédère.

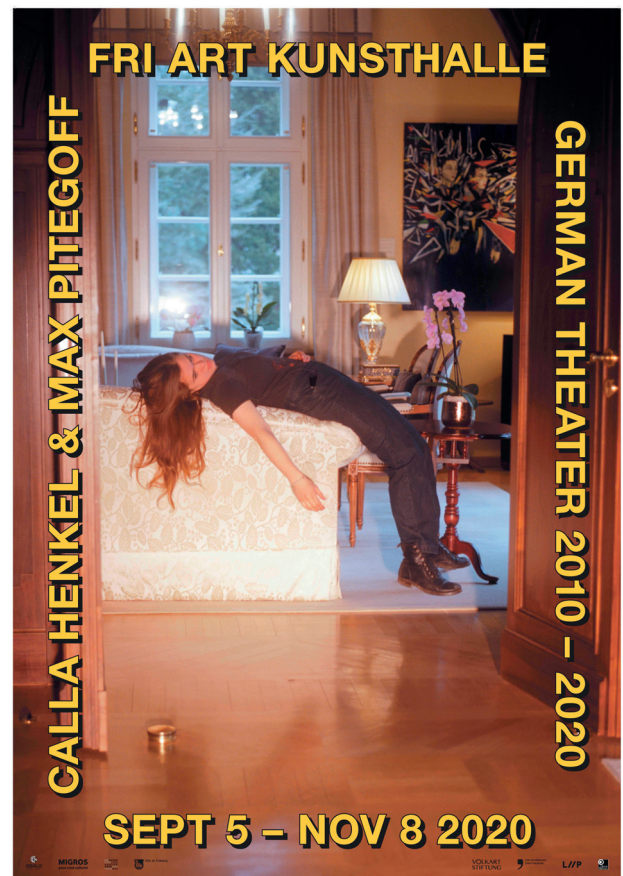
## EXHIBITION POSTER

The photograph used for the exhibition poster was taken in the public reception of the private home in Berlin–Dahlem of the US Ambassador to Germany – a stage for diplomacy designed to resemble a living room. Henkel and Pitegoff photographed the space with theater lights, just before the 2016 presidential election.

## THE CATALOGUE

The survey exhibition will give birth to the first monographic catalogue dedicated to this decade of works. The publication will be divided in three main chapters; photographs reproductions, a critical apparatus, the theater play scripts. It will be richly illustrated with color reproductions, accompanied by an in-depth interview of the artists conducted by Nicolas Brulhart and Fabrice Stroun and an introductory text by a guest writer. It is designed by Dan Solbach, edited by Fri Art Kunsthalle, Hard Hat Geneva and Walter König (in negotiation) and will be launched in March 2021.

Text: Fabrice Stroun and Nicolas Brulhart



Exhibition poster, Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff, "German Theater 2010-2020", Fri Art Kunsthalle.

## **SPECIAL THANKS**

Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, Galerie Gregor Staiger, Zurich, Cabinet Gallery, London, MAMCO, Geneva, Mitchell Anderson, Corina and Oliver Brux, Arthur Fink, Georgia Gardner Gray, Jürg Haller, Tanya Leighton, Megan Francis Sullivan, Anina Troesch, Axel Wieder

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The employees of TV

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## **OPENING HOURS**

Monday and Tuesday: by appointment  
Wednesday 12 am - 6 pm  
Thursday 12 am - 6 pm  
Friday 12 am - 6 pm  
Saturday and Sunday: 1pm - 6 pm