

UP LIFE'S LADDER

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## ART SQUAT

**BY RACHEL CORBETT**

**T**he Austrian-born artist and teacher Rainer Ganahl has a few guidelines for his prospective students: 1. Don't expect him to like you; 2. Don't expect him to like your work; 3. Expect to be criticized. "That is the life of an artist," he writes in his pedagogical manifesto, "Strange Teaching: The Artist as Excellent and Miserable Teacher."



Even in Germany, the birthplace of this sort of Nietzschean tough love, "there are students who don't dare come to my class," Ganahl, who is fifty-four, said on a recent afternoon at the Sump, a scrappy music venue in Ridgewood, Queens. He was hosting a two-week residency there for thirty art students from Vienna, Munich, Hamburg, Bremen, and Stuttgart, where he is a professor, though he lives primarily in New York.

Ganahl, who has a mass of dark hair and was wearing floral-printed sneakers, pushed open the door to a six-hundred-and-fifty-square-foot studio, where the students were living. Clothes hung from the windowsills; Cheez Doodles littered a countertop. Sleeping bags were lined up, zipper to zipper, on the floor. "It's perfect!" he announced in a thick accent. "See, they learn from miserable situations. This will teach them how artists live in New York."

The students were less enthusiastic. “It’s horrible. Someone stepped on my head last night,” Anna Schwarz, a sculptor from Vienna, said.

“There’s only one shower,” a classmate, Emanuel Mauthe, added. “Actually, it’s more of a hose.”

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The accommodations were luxurious compared with some of Ganahl’s previous residencies. In 2014, the students doing his program squatted in an abandoned, unheated shopping mall in Leipzig; last spring, in Milan, they slept on the floor of a gallery; and, three years ago, in Shanghai, they installed their student exhibition amid counterfeit “Prado” bags at a street market.

Ganahl had persuaded two dozen professional artists to speak to his students during their stay. If the artists couldn’t host the group in their studios or galleries, he suggested that they meet in such unorthodox locations as building vestibules, subway platforms, or grocery stores. The artists weren’t all game. “Sorry, I don’t want to meet in a Chinese restaurant. It’s just not the right setting,” a typical cancellation, from the conceptual artist Anicka Yi, read.

But many agreed. Hans Haacke talked about censorship for an hour and a half over the grinding of a Jamba Juice blender at Whole Foods, while the students marvelled at the size of American salads. He gave them some real-world advice. “In order to say what’s on your mind, you have to find a source of income that doesn’t depend on the sale of your work,” he said. Ganahl asked all the guest speakers to answer the question “How does an artist live?” To his delight, the responses were often bleak.

“How should I know? I stopped being an artist and I’m still a hundred thousand dollars in debt,” Vito Acconci, the former performance artist, said.

“Only be an artist if you have no choice!” Marilyn Minter told the students.

“If you work with a commercial gallery, ask the other artists if they actually get paid,” William Powhida said.

“Commit to New York,” the Italian-born painter Rudolf Stingel advised. “If you’re just flirting with it from Europe, it’ll never happen.”

The installation artist Trisha Baga had to cancel because she’d just been forcibly evicted from her apartment.

Rirkrit Tiravanija, an artist whose work often involves cooking Thai food in galleries, invited Ganahl's group to join his students from Columbia for a meal at the stately Harlem town house of his dealer, Gavin Brown. Tiravanija's assistants and the students prepared a traditional English breakfast of baked beans, sausage, and eggs, in honor of the artist Mark Leckey, in from London for his show at Brown's gallery, downstairs.

Out smoking on the patio, the Europeans chatted optimistically. Some were already hatching plans to move to the city. Tiravanija, smiling, said, "I hate teaching, but somebody's got to be there to stop people from making stuff. You don't have to make art to be an artist. You make art through having an interesting life."

If the fifty-person ruckus bothered Gavin Brown, who appeared in a bathrobe and slippers, he shrugged it off. "It kind of makes me want to go back to art school and join this class," he said, putting the reggae album "Weed Beat" on the turntable. ♦

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