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As told to Julian Brimmers, 3704 words.

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# On the importance of energy and enthusiasm

An interview with publisher and writer Ricarda Messner

**For the first time in your professional life you're not fully self-employed. How does it feel so far?**

I'm admittedly a relatively lazy person. Working from home and constantly having to motivate yourself became increasingly difficult over the past one and a half years. Sure, you're in touch with people via email, but apart from that I had no daily external input. Going to an office, being around working people, it makes a difference. You're more switched-on.

However, I'm generally not a fan of this strict separation of work and private life. The things I do and I'm concerned with, are part of me all the time—why would I neglect that? For the past five, six years, there wasn't much to separate for me in that regard.



**The Sao Paulo issue of *Flaneur* just came out, a new *Sofa* magazine is currently in production. How do you deal with the time in between finishing a product and the release date?**

The time in-between is indeed quite long, and it became even longer. Up until issue #4 we've published *Flaneur* twice a year. Then we'd have to sit down as a collective and talk. We started this project as strangers and we were honestly overwhelmed by the attention. Other publications wrote about us, and many people seemed to find the concept interesting. Hence we kept on moving. It's in these early stages, when you define what works and what doesn't, that you get to know each other better. Everyone has an ego. At one point you have to admit that publishing twice a year takes its toll, financially and emotionally. Diving into different places and cultures is pretty heavy. We deliberately chose to create a longer phase for us to continue the relationships we've built with the people in the respective cities. This was crucial for the project.

**In terms of production and design, *Flaneur* has been highly ambitious from the beginning. Five years later, how do you evaluate the start of the magazine?**

Everything about *Flaneur* was born out of a baffling naiveté. Like, extreme unknowingness. At the beginning, there only was the idea to focus on one specific street per issue. Then we got the team together: I'm the publisher, Fabian (Saul) and Grashina (Gabelmann) share the editor job, and Michelle Phillips and Johannes Conrad AKA Studio YUKIKO are our art directors. I was 23 and the others already had more work experience, especially our graphics department. We agreed on a format, without even knowing how the size would affect the postal charges or anything. The magazine market was completely new to me, although I always enjoyed reading.

**Becoming a publisher is not exactly an obvious dream like, say, musician or tennis star..**

I did want to become a tennis star at some point! My knees let me down [laughs]. Instead I studied social and business communication at UDK (Universität der Künste) in Berlin. In 2011, we developed a book for a group project. I remember that it felt incredible to have a 150-pages documentation of your past six months printed out in front of you. I knew I might want to do my own magazine one day. And the street concept presented us with a challenge. I realized quite early that there's something unique to it and I knew that there's a radical element in here that would make it an easier sell.



**How did that go down exactly?**

At 23 I had a great sense of enthusiasm that helped me a lot with getting people on board. The first issue was financed completely through ads. I went into those meetings without knowing anyone. A lot of it was pure serendipity—choosing the Kantstraße in Berlin, for example. In 2013 no one cared about Berlin-Mitte and suddenly, everyone was looking to Charlottenburg. Maybe our early partners thought it was refreshing that I didn't come with the most professional media kit, only with an idea and a good team of people. And maybe too much professionalism takes away from the charm. That part definitely became more difficult going forward.

**In what sense?**

I mean, how can it be that for the first edition, where we had not a thing to showcase, it was relatively easy to convince people? Now we have seven issues, they all look great, and we hear "No" more often than when the whole thing didn't even exist. The creative industry feeds off this fascination with being invested in something from the start. I've noticed that for myself. Launching projects is my favorite part, and maybe that's not that good either. I need to focus more on what I'm occupying myself with at the moment and try to improve it.

**You were born and raised in Berlin Charlottenburg, so contrary to all following issues, *Flaneur* #1 was an exploration of your immediate surroundings. Can you compare the motivation behind the first issue and what it evolved into?**

The first issue of *Flaneur* was at first a therapeutic project for myself. The idea came to me when I was not well. After my studies I lived in New York for a while. The plan was to create a future for myself in the city, which also had to do with a first big love. A couple of things happened and I had to go back to Berlin. After about a year or so I was completely out of it. At that time, I couldn't have worked for someone else because I couldn't have guaranteed 100% stability to an employer. I had to become my own boss and create something to do for myself.

**What was your relationship with Berlin like at the time?**

I had many problems with Berlin. In 2010/2011, the international hype was in full swing and everyone came here to feel inspired. I honestly didn't get it and it annoyed me because I felt stuck personally. I knew there was something about this place but somehow it seemed out of reach. In this phase of my life I needed a strong sense of familiarity. New streets and alleys, unknown places, caused anxiety attacks in me. Maybe the sensory overload in New York had been too much. So I was forced to take a closer look at my own city. The Kantstraße runs parallel to Kudamm, where I spent most of my teenage years. Back then we thought the Kantstraße was weird.

**Why did you decide to do the magazine in English?**

The fact that these streets contain so many different stories that are universally relatable—that's the exciting part. Can someone from Tokyo find the Kantstraße interesting? The FAZ (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung) described us as "every-day chroniclers," that's still my favorite review. So far we've translated selected pieces and put them in a booklet that comes with every issue. Sao Paulo is the first installment that's entirely bilingual, which is how we want to approach all issues going forward.

**What's the desired effect of your layout? Especially with the Sao Paulo issue one feels easily overpowered. Just like you have to orientate yourself in a new surrounding, the reader keeps trying to find the narrative and coherent passages on these giant, busy pages.**

Exactly, that's the concept. These are the kind of discussions that fuel every issue. The Rome issue had a more traditional magazine layout, short intro blurbs for each story etc. That was always heatedly debated. Our time in the city is, after all, quite overwhelming. Of course we can't transmit this feeling exactly to the reader. But we try to do so by leaving certain things unclear. Who's the narrator? Where does a story start and where does it continue? That's how it feels for us.



**Did you ever think, "Damn, the street two blocks down the road would've been better?"**

No—every street could work, to be honest. The decision-making is mostly based on a feeling one of us had. This feeling guides the editorial framework. For instance, while working on the Leipzig issue we all felt rather uncomfortable and didn't know why. The street had an incredible emptiness. Researching the street's history we learned that it used to be one of the most vivid places. So the arch for this issue was mostly based on archival work about the erstwhile promise of the city. There are no right or wrong feelings, that's why we "apologize" in the preface of every issue because we can only depict certain fragments in a very subjective manner.

**What responsibilities do you have when setting up shop in a new place?**

We're very aware of our role as outsiders, tourists even. That's why the actual articles are created entirely by locals. All contributors who develop stories for us are from the place we're visiting. A second major aspect is the ability to listen and to maintain a level of empathy throughout our stay. We're basically requesting to be taken by the hand. Patience is a major factor. Fabian and Grashina are two full months on the ground, which is a huge luxury for such an indie operation. Again, that's something we simply decided at the beginning. For our third issue, Montréal, it became obvious what this means financially. Sure, I could have said, we only stay three weeks and that's it. But then the project wouldn't be what it is. You can't establish these kinds of conversations and the amount of trust necessary in less time.

**How long do you personally stay in each city?**

In Montréal I was there for the whole two months as well. After that it became three, three and a half weeks.

**That means the conception and finishing of the magazine happen from a distance - but the actual content gets created within immediate vicinity.**

Exactly. An example: During my first meeting with our editor Fabian I felt that he's not only very well-read but also has the capacity to learn a lot of things in a short time. Before we go anywhere, Fabian does a deep dive into the history of the place. He's the one that talks eye to eye with the locals. When you notice that a visitor pays attention to the details, you immediately feel more valued.



We're by no means a journalistic project, but there's a ton of very superficial reporting out there. Lots of information is gained from a distance. I love the Internet for bringing us closer together, but particularly in journalism, the factor of being on the ground can't be overestimated.

**With *Flaneur* you're mostly concerned with capturing the present moment. Is *Sofa* your future-centric project?**

In a way, yes, although for *Flaneur* we're making use of all timelines to capture the current moment. I love all things futuristic, but they too need the past. Every issue of *Sofa* will take a look at the future through the lens of the now.

I founded *Sofa* together with Caia Hagel, whom I met in Montréal. Since then we spoke forever on Skype and via email. Two years later we wanted to launch a new project together. I was 26 and had defined my own ideas and my own voice a bit more. I knew from the start that we had to go with a different business model than the one we used for *Flaneur*. I wanted to get away from the high production value, which suited the trashy concept of *Sofa* better anyways. With *Sofa* everything is printed glossy and then stapled together. I wanted to learn from my experiences and be mindful of certain production mechanisms.

**Speaking of learning from the past, you recently organized a "trauma workshop" for '90s kids, what was that about?**

Together with my boyfriend, Andre Harris, I organized this event about our respective '90s childhoods at the Berliner Kunstwerken. It started quite banal with the question of "What do we still remember? What do other '90s kids feel? What kinds of trauma do they have?" I'd love to turn this into a regular event series. These eras are more often than not defined by people who were already grown-ups at the time. Pop culture in particular, with its weird recycle dynamics, provides us a tool to look at what's coming back and what that means for today.

**How do you put together the right team for these very different projects?**

That also relies heavily on gut feeling. Talking to people you usually realize quickly who's as excited about an idea as you are. If I have to put a lot of effort into convincing people, it's probably not the right fit. We'll need this energy later to get things in motion. Collaborative projects are not unlike romantic relationships in that regard. If you feel like you have to talk someone into a second date, at least for me, that's completely uninteresting. This whole bit of chasing and getting chased... no thanks

(laughs).

That's how I feel about approaching brands and investors as well. Of course, that involves a bit more convincing, but if someone tells me "no" with one of those standardized marketing argumentations then it probably wasn't the right fit in the first place. This might sound a bit arrogant, but frequently brands came to me. That's why patience is so important. I maintain a certain level of confidence that people will approach you when they can identify with your project. One day, you open up your email inbox and there's this game-changing message. These things are hard to plan with, of course, but I strongly believe in a healthy mix of proactivity and patience.

#### **Is it easy for you to delegate work?**

Working with people is what I enjoy the most. This may sound stupid but I even considered going into talent scouting. I love to meet new people and personalities and help them tell their stories. That's the role of any publisher, I guess.

For instance, in April I will produce a small documentary. My boyfriend Andre is from Jamaica, he lived in the states for 15 years and in Berlin for the past 3 years. He told me about his childhood in Jamaica. Of course, there are all these clichéd narratives about Jamaica, Usain Bolt and whatnot. We wanted to find a way for him to rediscover his culture and his country, and tell his personal story. I love helping other people fulfill their dreams, hence the name of my edition "Publishing Dreams." Everyone has a story to tell, the chosen medium to do so is secondary.



#### **Did you ever feel like you got carried away with a project and months later had to admit that it's simply not coming together?**

Not really. I mean, we had a year full of internal conversations in between the first and second issue of *Sofa* magazine. That's the cool part of being independent, your own life's rhythms dictate the tempo. Last year was insanely busy, I had to focus on things that pay my rent. That's another decision you have to take. Had I developed *Sofa* as a business model to finance my life, I would have a different amount of energy for it. Of course we want every project to finance itself but we're in it for other reasons than that.

#### **Every time you make those decisions, a small team is affected. How do you cope with that?**

It depends. Last year we had a pretty intense workshop weekend with the *Flaneur* team. All five of us had reached a point where we felt the need to discuss whether something was stagnating, and if so, what we can do about it. It really comes down to a mutual understanding of one another: Why is this person working at this pace, while another one is putting that amount of energy into it? That's the most important but also the most difficult aspect of working in a team.

#### **How do you reach such an understanding?**

Through transparency, mainly. Don't be shy to say how you feel. Don't just discuss your ideas, but also your emotions and your individual relationships with the project. I had a phase where I didn't feel anything. My role as founder/publisher overwhelmed me quite a bit at times. I went into a project without a clear vision or a financial plan, and yet these people were waiting for me to tell them how certain things are going down. That was a lot for me. Maybe it's not my biggest strength. I think I'm good at initiating projects but those administrative parts are not exactly fun (laughs).

**How do you deal with the non-fun parts of your job today?**

I have had a tax advisor for three years now, I was quick to outsource that (*laughs*). Asking people for help is important. You can learn a lot by yourself, but not everything. Sometimes you need another person to show you how it's done. I have a healthy sense of what I can do and what not, and I'm not afraid to ask.

**Would you like to have a monthly or weekly outlet?**

In a way I do have that with the daily newsletter I co-produce for *ZEITmagazin*. Every morning I send my mix of themes and topics to Christoph Amend (EIC, *ZEITmagazin*) and Matthias Kalle (Deputy EIC). We then produce the Newsletter together and I send out the email at 5 CET every day. Because Zeit generally has a huge reach it really opened my eyes to the dimensions of creating media. It comes with huge responsibility, because that's how bubbles are generated. As an editor you have to use a wide scope of sources, pay attention to what you read and always look beyond your own Facebook feed. That's quite a bit of work, nowadays more than ever. In that regard, doing a weekly or monthly magazine almost seems a bit scary to me.

**Since you're also taking care of *ZEITmagazin's* social media channels, you're probably confronted with those information bubbles in their most extreme form.**

I think that's true. I'm an extremely sensitive person and easily affected by the emotions of others. Sometimes that's not helpful. I need to learn to detach the feedback on specific topics and features from me as a person.

**What's up next for you and your edition?**

There are a lot of smaller and bigger ideas floating around. I recently initiated the "Talk To You Later"-library, which is an analog space for people to connect over books. Feuilleton reviews have always been of minor interest to me, I much rather go through my friends' bookshelves. Outside of studying, the library as a space is almost extinct, so we want to bring it back by curating our own library in collaboration with Villa Grisebach in Berlin. Everyone who participates is asked to add a personal note to the book they're lending the library. Someone else borrows it and we get the books back, plus the feedback of those who read it.

I've also been toying around with the idea of a digital platform that allows people to connect solely over the books they read. Time will tell what this will look like eventually, but it's definitely something I'd need investment capital for. I've never approached a project this way. Again, the main idea is to create something that's not just interesting for our creative industry bubbles, but also for people who only like *50 Shades of Grey*. A truly democratic digital space that depicts our reading behavior and inspires us, no matter what kind of literature we enjoy.

**Being involved in so many things, to what extent do you feel you're part of an indie-publishing scene?**

Not at all. I have a strong phobia against scenes in general (*laughs*). Social pressure scares me. Sure, there is a scene in Berlin and we know each other, but I'm not a constant guest anywhere. Especially in this day and age, this notion of exclusivity is very wrong. You can tell what that did to us, culturally. What we've brought onto ourselves by creating content exclusively for us. All of a sudden there's this big awakening "Oh, there's other people who think and feel completely different, how weird." Creative scenes, as small as they may be, have a responsibility to be less arrogant. To accept this responsibility means to reflect the world we portray and reproduce. Take travel magazines for example - I'm not gonna name any names but we have made every place look the same for years, be it Singapore or Morocco. That's insane to me. With *Flaneur* we're trying to work against this sort of template thinking. And with *Sofa* we try to bring high and low brow culture together. Both things can coexist, especially supposed societal taboos that are not part of any elite discourse like porn, reality tv, video games. They all can tell so much about us. My weekly episode of *Keeping up with the Kardashians* keeps me sane.

Accepting this responsibility is a common task for all of us. Or, if we don't do it, we should stop acting so surprised when the backlash comes.



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Fact



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1