Trinkhallen Photography
The Many Visual Lives of the Ruhr Region’s Neighborhood Institution

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[Dieser Beitrag erscheint in der Reihe „City Scripts trifft Pixelprojekt_Ruhrgebiet“, einer Kooperation des KWl-Blogs, dem Leiter des „Pixelprojekt_Ruhrgebiet“ Peter Liedtke (DGPh) und Autor*innen des Forschungskollegs City Scripts, die sich künstlerisch oder wissenschaftlich mit Bildserien des Pixelprojekt_Ruhrgebiet auseinandersetzen.]

This contribution considers a unique space of the Ruhr region, the Trinkhalle, through three different photographic representations within the archive of the Pixelprojekt. Like its sibling, the Kiosk, the Ruhr region’s Trinkhalle is a small store, typically consisting of only one room, that sells cigarettes, alcohol, candy and any kind of daily necessity. The Trinkhalle is a site where neighbors gather to have a beer, make an emergency grocery run, and where children make their first independent purchases. Many childhood memories center on the “bunte Tüte,” the small paper bag with a selection of candies carefully chosen from a variety of sweets at the store, and bought with one’s pocket money. Through the items on sale, each Trinkhalle is attuned to the daily needs and wants of its regular customers, thus reflecting the range of people living or working in a specific urban neighborhood, as well as changes to this population, for instance, due to gentrification.
The name Trinkhalle ("drinking hall") is somewhat inaccurate because the actual drinking occurs outside of the store at make-shift tables and benches at which customers drink but often continue conversations with the salesperson across an open door or window. This demonstrates how the Trinkhalle is an ambiguous urban space with blurred borders between inside and outside; between what is considered a private space or public space; between a commercially motivated space and a site of neighborly interaction. The Trinkhalle is geared toward utility but does not follow a single architectural style and may be hard to categorize due to the multiplicity of stores that follow under this category. Despite the diversity of appearance, the editors of the collection *Kiosk Parcours* (2017) agree that this space is immensely recognizable and constitutes an unadorned, honest phenomenon of everyday urban life. And, as a kind of situational urbanism, Trinkhallen share an improvisational quality responding to the momentary needs of a neighborhood that may not always follow official regulations and restrictions.

Accounts estimate that there are up to 48,000 Kiosks in Germany, with about 18,000 or so located in the Ruhr region. Definite numbers are impossible to come by because there is no register of these stores in Germany. Urban areas known for their strong and locally specific Kiosk cultures are the Ruhr region, the Rhine-Main region, as well as Berlin, Hamburg, and Hannover. Whereas in Berlin, these Kiosks are called Späti/Spätkauf, the Rhine-Main region prefers Büdchen, and in the Ruhr region people visit their Trinkhalle. But it is not just Germany, many countries have this kind of small grocery store as a neighborhood institution. The British corner shop, Japanese kombini, or US-American (and specifically New Yorker) bodega are all examples of such spaces. Even though each of these convenience stores has a specific national and local history, the imaginations of such spaces of convenience and neighborhood interaction travel transnationally.

Cultural histories trace its origins to Persia and Turkey; they highlight how the Trinkhalle arrived in the Ruhr region in the middle of the 19th century after a detour through Vienna and Paris. However, the purpose of these early Trinkhallen was to provide a water supply for the growing population of industrial cities, since inadequate or contaminated tap water posed a risk to public health. At the turn of the century, the Trinkhalle expanded their range of beverages to tea, coffee, milk, and later alcohol, as well as offering tobacco and newspapers.
Michael Dannenmann’s black and white series “Ladenportraits” depicts shop owners in front of their stores in the 1980s. In one of these photographs, the owner “H. Webelkind” stands in front of her Kiosk in Dortmund in 1984. Ms. Webelkind wears a work smock, an outfit that simultaneously connotes a (gendered) professionalism and connections to the working garb of domestic workers. From today’s perspective on the Kiosk as an everyday space of interaction, her clothing appears almost too proper or professional. Her store is one of the many Trinkhallen that have closed by now – a trend that continues with alarming speed. Up until changes to the German law regulating opening hours, the “Ladenschlussgesetz,” in 1996, the Trinkhalle was the only store that was open after 6:30 pm. Ms. Webelkind’s customers were likely relieved to have a space to run to when out of milk, cigarettes, or bread. Today, the Trinkhalle is threatened by the expanding opening hours of supermarkets, gas stations, online shops, as well as the growing services of food delivery by bike.

The kiosk has long fascinated photographers. In the 1960s, Cuban photographer Justo Martí documented New York City’s Nuyorican bodegas.\(^5\) In a similar style, from 1976-1984, German photographer Tata Ronkholz explored the industrial city’s 20th century leisure culture through the Büdchen of Düsseldorf, Cologne, and the Ruhr region. She expressed that “Mir ging es weder um einen sozialen Aspekt noch um das Design, sondern ich fühlte mich zum Alltag hingezogen. Ich wollte das Büdchen um die Ecke in...
seiner ganzen Liebenswürdigkeit zeigen“ / “I was not interested in any particular social or design aspect, instead I was drawn to the everyday-ness. I wanted to show the little shop around the corner in all its loveliness.” Ronkholz’s pictures rarely include people and focus on the Bude or Trinkhalle as a setting. They render its colorful packaging and advertisements somber and harmonious through the atmospheric black and white style. Dannenberg’s photograph from the same period shares some stylistic preferences, yet centers the proud and simultaneously shy owner, hiding her hands behind her back.

Jasmine Shah’s “NO GO – GO NOW!” (2015) explores the Duisburg neighborhood Marxloh as a response to the neighborhood being sensationaly framed as a “no-go area” by national newspapers and politicians. Shah’s portraits of the neighborhood’s diverse inhabitants depict people lounging, playing, and working in public spaces. The photograph of a woman working in a Trinkhalle thus again demonstrates its unique spatial character as a private commercial space as well as a public space whose openness parallels the streets depicted in the other photographs. The woman’s summer blouse and the fan in the background reinforce the impression of summer and heat, but also remind the viewer of the cool drinks and ice cream sold in the store. She stands in front of shelves filled with packaged goods, mostly tobacco and cigarettes but also a multitude of snacks, chewing gum, and cookies. She looks off to the side as if this is where the door is located through which a customer could walk in any minute.
It is striking, for instance, how often the possibility of owning one’s own shop and being self-employed makes this line of profession attractive to first- or second-generation immigrants as an alternative to discriminatory hiring practices in other professions. Ingrid Breckner argues that the kiosk continues to fulfill an important economic function for immigrants, as it secures their livelihood – albeit with long working hours and comparatively low income. Hence, in urban immigrant communities, like Marxloh, the Kiosk symbolizes hard work and upward mobility; and the understanding of the kiosk-owner as a community leader is prevalent in such accounts.

The female Trinkhallen owners in Dannenmann’s and Shah’s respective photographs may appear shy to the viewer because they are not used to having a camera pointed at them, and because they are not used to being the center of attention. They likely have perfected the social skills and emotional labor required from a Trinkhallen salesperson. Academic (and other) observers point out that it is part of the profession to listen to the stories of the customers, a practice that creates familiarity in an often anonymous urban context.

Again and again, academic, journalistic, or artistic accounts of the Trinkhalle emphasize how it is a deeply relational social space, a site where neighbors run into another and have conversations about their everyday lives and changes in the neighborhood. These stores are part of the social bond of a city and act as an interface between different milieus. The Trinkhalle demonstrates the sociological argument about the strength of “weak ties,” social and interpersonal connections that are fleeting, situative, and informal – as opposed to the “strong ties” of romantic relationships, family bonds, or friendships. The Trinkhalle’s “weak ties” often are formed among its owners or salespeople with their regular customers, as well as among customers running into each other at the store. For example, because of the different people frequenting a Trinkhalle, one may be able to find out about available apartments, jobs, or services in a neighborhood. The strength of these connections results from their heterogeneity and wide-ranging reach across different demographics.

For the series “Wovon Maschinen träumen” (“What machines dream of”), Fred Hüning works with photographs of Duisburg from Google Map’s feature Google Street View, a problematic archive created without the consent of those photographed and aiming to recreate the entire city virtually through satellite photography and photographs taken by “Google Fleet”-cars driving through neighborhoods. Hüning explains that he looks for moments of humanity, beauty, and humor in these photographs from the summer of 2008. With such a goal, there is no way around a photograph of a Trinkhalle. Yet, Hüning’s photograph has a very different style and calls forth different affective reactions in the spectator.
Next to the storefront of a Trinkhalle, a person lounges on the steps of a house, almost completely hidden by a parking car. To the side, there is the store window filled with colorfully packaged goods and crowned by a Coca-Cola sign. The blurring of these goods likely is the result of the speed of the drive-by photography, whereas the person’s face and car license plates are blurred for privacy reasons. Because so many parts of the photograph are blurry, the clearly readable large “TRINKHALLE”-lettering on the store window stands out even more and is accompanied by no name, reference to the neighborhood, or other decorative elements. The beauty of this minimalist shot lies in its curious emptiness and the way that the Trinkhalle sign appears almost generic and not an indicator of a unique locality. The person sitting next to the sign has us wondering. Are they working at the Trinkhalle and on a break? Is this a neighbor who has just bought a drink but prefers to consume it by themselves rather than in the social setting of the Trinkhalle? Or are they waiting for the Trinkhalle to open? And most pertinently: is this person aware of the photographic trace they left in the digital archive of Google and how this trace was rediscovered by Hüning and deemed interesting and representative of the beauty and humanity of everyday life in the Ruhr region? Hüning’s photograph also sparks the question of what form the Trinkhalle’s representations take in other digital environments and social media.

The coffeetable books Die Bude: Trinkhallen im Ruhrgebiet (2009) by Osses and Kraemer as well as Treffpunkt Trinkhalle (2018) by Coddou and Gruszecki curate current photographs of the Trinkhalle. Coddou and Gruszecki’s project is ongoing through
the accompanying Instagram account. Their approach to the Trinkhalle offers another interesting visual representation of the Trinkhalle following those of the Pixelprojekt. While their composition is indebted to earlier Trinkhallen-photographers, the photos are much more colorful, flashy, and cater toward a glossy Instagram-able aesthetic. In an interview with the blog Ruhrbarone from February 2019, Gruszecki explains that it is this foreboding disappearance of the Trinkhalle that inspired the book as a kind of commemorative culture.\textsuperscript{12}

In June 2021, the Ruhr region’s Trinkhalle and the everyday culture of encounter and exchange that it represents was declared cultural heritage by the state of North-Rhine Westphalia. Marie Enders from the Aachen University of Applied Sciences submitted the application after writing a Master’s thesis on the Trinkhalle. Enders continues to research the Trinkhalle and maintains the Instagram account thirdplacetrinkhalle. Enders is not the only millennial from the region fascinated with the particularities and practices of a space that they grew up with. At the TU Dortmund, students of the Department of Spatial Planning are working on the project “Dortmunder Kiosk-Kultur: Der Trinkhalle auf der Spur.”\textsuperscript{13}

Additionally, the “Tag der Trinkhallen” is only a few weeks away.\textsuperscript{14} This event will take place for the third time on August 6th, 2022. It aims to celebrate this space through concerts, literature readings, and theater performances situated at different Trinkhallen in the Ruhr region. Just like the photographs of the Pixelprojekt, the Tag der Trinkhalle further develops an alternative vision of the Trinkhalle as a site of cultural production, creating yet another archive and visual life for this unique urban space. One cannot help but wonder how the class connotations of the Trinkhalle as a working-class meeting spot have merged into a very particular space in the postindustrial and gentrified city, just as much as the appealing, quirky representations on social media.

References

2. See Hemmerling, Tüchsen, and Derksen.
3. New York City’s bodegas, for instance, developed following the post-World War II Puerto Rican migration to the city and carry this history in their name – bodega is Spanish for “storeroom” or “wine cellar.”


8. Hemmerling, Tüchsen, and Derksen, p.4.


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