

The Copycat

Every Friday on the fringes of Frankfurt's gloomy red-light district, members of the city's creative class gather for a communal meal. Classical ballet dancers discuss motion-capture techniques with nerdling video-game designers. Wealthy collectors and powerful curators flirt with ambitious young things just out of the local Kunstakademie. Artistic collaborations are hatched; careers are born; beer is drunk. The Freitagsküche, or Friday Kitchen, is the gustatory gestalt of the contemporary German art scene, which by some lights is producing the most interesting art in the world today.



Michael Riedel, in his Frankfurt studio. Wolfgang Günzel

There's no guest list, no velvet rope at the door. Anybody who can find the place, which is hidden at the far end of an alley across the street from the city's former Hells Angels headquarters, is invited to share in the feast. "When I found the building," said Michael Riedel, the artist-impresario behind the weekly dinner, "it was full of junkies." He has since filled it with studios upstairs, the Freitagsküche on the ground floor and a nightclub in the basement, all of it done up in Riedel's signature post-minimalist style. "The idea of a 'factory' is occupied by another artist," he said. "But that's what it is: a kind of factory."

Riedel, 38, is a rising star whose work delights and frustrates critics in equal measure. His show at the David Zwirner gallery in New York last February — 18 wall-size canvases screen-printed with raw HTML cut and pasted from the "Michael Riedel" entries on moma.org and other Web sites — sold out immediately. Next month he's going to get the retrospective treatment at the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, one of the most important contemporary art spaces in his native Germany. His true import, however, may ultimately be in the Warhol-like scene that has coalesced around him.

Riedel would never call himself the new Andy, but the comparison is inevitable. He's got a "factory," a monthly magazine called Hundert5 that documents the goings-on there, and even an unmistakable personal style. Riedel is rarely seen wearing anything but a vintage suit and is fastidious to the point of keeping an electric shoe polisher on every floor of his building. "I was a mod in art school," he explained, "and I'm still in love with my fantasy of the '60s." But it's his art-world provocations that draw the most high-minded Warhol comparisons. "It all came together when I realized, 'O.K., you can repeat last week as well as the '60s,'" he said. "It's the same concept."



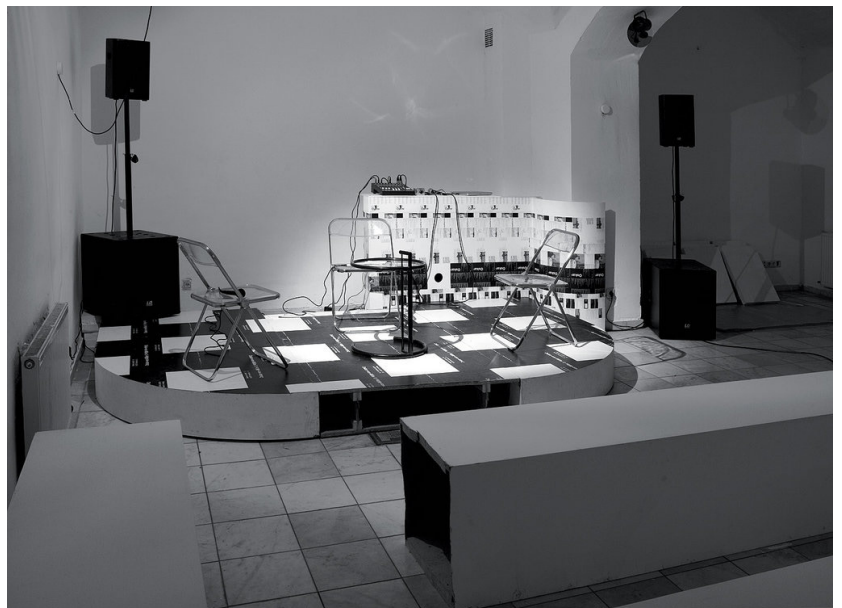
Riedel's studio is also where he hosts the restaurant Friday Kitchen, Wolfgang Günzel



In 2000, Riedel and his cohorts fished the remains of a Jim Isermann installation out of the trash behind Portikus, one of the city's many art institutions, and then reinstalled them in their own space. Courtesy Michael Reidel

In 2000, Riedel and a few artist friends were Dumpster diving behind Portikus, one of Frankfurt's many cultural institutions, when they found the crumpled remains of a show by the California artist Jim Isermann. Isermann had covered the gallery walls with sheets of Mylar — and there it all was, put out with the garbage. After dragging the Mylar back to their shared studio space, Riedel and company put themselves to work rehanging it, and then proceeded to plaster the city with posters inviting everyone to the opening of their Isermann show. Dirty, torn and rudely taped to the walls, Riedel's reinstallation was hardly the sleek space-age bachelor pad environment that had made its debut at Portikus a couple of months before, but that was the point. "We ruined it," Riedel said with a crooked smile. "We made it twice as bad as it was."

For the next five years, Riedel's crew terrorized Frankfurt's characteristically uptight art scene with what amounted to a schoolyard game of copycat, dirty rat! When the celebrated English art eccentrics Gilbert & George came to town, they were greeted at their opening by "Gert" and "Georg," two actors Riedel hired to walk a few steps behind the art duo and mime their every move. No medium was safe from the Xerox treatment. The ersatz art happenings inspired a series of "Filmed Film" events, featuring bootlegs made by pointing a cheap video camera at the screen from the back rows of Frankfurt's art-house movie theaters, and "Clubbed Clubs," where the crowd would groove to a pocket recording made at a concert or performance the previous night. Often these events would be better attended than the real ones, because in Riedel's version there was always plenty of beer, music and dancing involved.



The nightclub in the basement of Riedel's studio building. Wolfgang Günzel

And as time wore on, the anti-art actions of Riedel and his band of merry pranksters got bigger, better and more creative. In 2004, Riedel and the artist Dennis Löesch produced their own Frieze Art Fair catalog: it was the official catalog of the London fair overwritten with their own text and images. That same year, in Cologne, Riedel made a faithful copy of a famous Frankfurt techno club, except everything was upside down. The bar and banquettes were nailed to the ceiling, and the light fixtures screwed to the floor. At the opening party, he played a techno soundtrack backward. Riedel was tapped by Zwirner, and given his first solo show in the United States in 2005. He reproduced the colorful canvases of his countryman, the painter (and fellow Zwirner artist) Neo Rauch, as dull black-and-white panels and hung them on the gallery walls. The show was a flop.

Meanwhile, Riedel's Frankfurt art posse was headed for a breakup. He started the *Freitagsküche* with Löesch, in order to keep the gang together, but as friends invited more friends, the makeshift restaurant became a scene in its own right.



One of Riedel's "Clubbed Clubs." Courtesy Michael Reidel

Last winter, I was invited to help cook. I showed up early in the afternoon, was issued a paring knife, a glass of wine and a pile of sweet peas, and assumed my place with the rest of the *Freitagsküche* crew. Sebastian Klöckner, a journalist, lives two hours away but drives to Frankfurt a couple of times a month to pitch in. Sunghye Ko, a studio assistant, runs the kitchen with the aplomb of an air traffic controller. André Willmund was the guest chef that week but judging from the trouble he had braising a bucket full of beef for the night's stew, he will no doubt keep his day job as a stage actor.

At 7 o'clock the doors opened, and a varied crowd of Frankfurters streamed in. Fresh-cut yellow roses and stiff white tablecloths graced every table, but these were the only formalities. People sat on stools and balanced plates on their knees while others ate standing at the bar. "We create a nice evening for the people," Klöckner explained, "but we are not their slaves." I met Shashank Uchil, a young video game designer, at the end of a long bench. At a nearby table was Cyril Baldy, a dancer with the Forsythe Company. "It's always a good vibe here," Baldy observed. "Good food, good music."

The *Freitagsküche* wrapped up at about 11: pleasantly buzzed, a core group of us went into the bitterly cold Frankfurt night. The drug addicts were out, and their ordinary nihilism brought Riedel's extraordinary version to my mind. Is it, I asked Riedel, a commentary on the human condition? Are we all just information addicts, churning out bad Xeroxes of something we once saw or heard? Or is the redoubled emptiness a more personal expression: the result of looking inside his own personal artistic soul and finding, well, nothing?

"There's no content being produced, because I'm in the first generation that grew up digital," Riedel replied, "we are just transferring all the time: tape, CDs and now the clouds." He paused for a moment before continuing. "The self-reference is because I am the system. The technique is mainly carrying something from here to there, sometimes with a car, sometimes by making a recording. . . ." And sometimes, as with the new HTML paintings, with the click of a mouse. The night ended at a club called Orange Peel, where Riedel began to move to the slow ska beat. "The paintings are a bit robotic, maybe," he said. "But my art is not as cool and dry as people think, because I have a lot fun doing it."



Riedel's "Blinds Vertical, Wheel 6 Spoke, and Checkerboard Across," 2011. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York

An article on May 6 about the German artist Michael Riedel misspelled the surname of his collaborator on their version of the Frieze Art Fair catalog. He is Dennis Löesch, not Lösch. A reader pointed out the error in an e-mail on June 15; this correction was delayed because The Times failed to follow through on the complaint.