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A Few Months in Hamburg

Where do I really even begin to talk about my experience here in Hamburg, Germany and my studies at HAW. I have been mulling over all that was these past 4-5 months of my life.

Truly this whole experience started long before that. First going through the whole decision and application process was a little bit tricky but all in all not horrible. The only real thing for me was deciding where to go in the first place. Two main things really made up my decision. The first was language the second was a strong illustration program. Although I did not speak much or really any German, from what everyone I talked to said, that would not be a big deal what so ever. Thankfully, this was completely true. Also looking at all of the different programs, my professors and I found that one of the strongest bets for me would be at HAW. Two professors stood out as the essential “reasons” for me to go there, Steffano Ricci and Anke Feutchtenberger. After my initial decision to apply to HAW was made, everything was smooth sailing from there. The application process, obtaining my passport, setting up housing and thing of that nature were fine. I even got a scholarship to attend, which helped a lot. More or less, everything leading up to me going to Germany was pretty straightforward and simple.

Next came that strange limbo time between finishing my Fall semester at MICA and getting on a plane to go to Germany. I personally found this time to be very frustrating. The wait time in between was a killer though. I guess I was just not used to having so much down time. Also I was trapped in my hometown. It was good in the way of I had a full time job which supplied me with the majority of my money for Germany. Still, on a personal note, I wish the time had been shorter. I doubt this should make much a difference in one’s decision towards study abroad, but its something that any perspective student should understand. The whole money issue had to really be considered for me as well. I am used to holding at least one job but

usually more during the school year. So I am obviously used to having a more frequent amount of income come my way every two weeks. My parents were there if I would happen to run into some tight financial situations, but still I really had to change my ways of looking/acting with money for this experience.

All right, so after the application, acceptance, preparation and travel I had finally arrived. Initially I was excited, hungry, thankful and a little nervous. Thankfully after the long plane ride into Hamburg I was met by my soon to be friend Jan. HAW had set up German students to help all of the incoming study abroad students with well anything we might have needed. Jan picked me up from the airport, had my keys for my apt ready and got me some food. Honestly, above all I just wanted to eat. So Jan was great when I first got there. I wish I had gotten a better description of my neighborhood at first though. Also having zero food and it being Sunday is a very terrible combination. It came to such a shock to me that everything was not open. I am used to a style of living where there is always a 24 hour shop where you can get whatever it is you want and or need at any hour. So for anyone coming in, I really suggest that they ask asap where they can get some food, even if it is Sunday.

I also found it really important for me to get my life set up there. And by my life I mean my room. Nesting or whatever one wants to call it is critical for feeling like a place is more homelike. Nothing would be worse than feeling like you are living out of a hotel room for a couple of months. It was good for me to just spend the time to get my space in every part of the apt from my room, to the bathroom, which I was sharing, into the kitchen as well.

After that it was time to explore. When I first moved away to MICA after living in Johnstown for so much of my life. I had to learn how to get around the city. It was the exact same way in Hamburg. It was a little bit unusual living in a city like Hamburg versus a city like Baltimore. I could walk anywhere I wanted to in Hamburg. I never felt unsafe once during my entire 4 month stay. That was amazing. It could be 3:30 in the morning on a Tuesday and walking around outside was no big

deal. This really helped me out when it came to exploring. See the trains stop running around midnight. So if you are not back at your place by then but you want to come back to your place, you really have no other choice but to walk. All right well one could grab a taxi, but that are horribly overpriced. I did that a total of once and only once. Also I spent a lot of late nights just walking around the different neighborhoods. It was really interesting to see everything at night as well. I liked walking around then because for the most part, the only other people walking around were drunk. Although the nights were fun, I still explored more during the day. I really preferred to be in either one of two places. I liked to be down in the thick of things. Going down to the Harbor, being in the city center, or on the Alster were the best. If I am going to be out and around a bunch of people, those were the spots. There was always something to do. That or I wanted to be out in the countryside as far away from the city as possible. The less I saw buildings, trees and people, the better.

I really found I loved going down to the Harbor. The air smelled better, the energy was different and there were tons of little café's and places to eat. You could let yourself get lost on a single street then just grab some food and stare at the water. It was a really nice escape. The water had a really calming effect on me. I guess there has been a history as long as life itself that people love the water, so no surprise there. The best spots were Blankenasa and The Fish Market.

Blankenasa was this upper class neighborhood, which had an amazing view, beautiful homes, and miles of sand and stone. People were always grilling on the sand, having beers, playing games, and in general just enjoying themselves. It's a great place to go for dinner and drinks. I would really suggest it for a date or if anyone has come in to visit. One of my fondest memories from Hamburg happened on those beaches. My friends and I went there for Easter. There is a fantastic tradition of lighting huge fires all over the place. We are talking bon fires not house on fire kind of thing. The atmosphere was amazing. Everyone gathered around them, just enjoying the night. I have always been a woods kind of person. I grew up in the mountains and rarely spent much time at the beach. My opinions really

changed about beaches in general after my time in Hamburg. That was totally unexpected yet pleasantly interesting.

Let me not forget the Fish Market though. That is the best place to get a lot of good food really cheap. I always ended up getting smoked salmon and a big basket of fruit from them on most Sunday mornings. You could go down to all of these different vendors and for 10 Euro they would fill your basket up with fruit. It was amazing. It saved me so much money. Plus I had great produce for the next week or two. Then I would usually get about 5-10 Euro worth of salmon. Salmon being one of personal favorite fish and living so close to the water, it would be crazy for me not to attack the chance to get wonderful fish as much as possible. It's a great thing for students to check out. You get a great experience, they sell food so there you go, plus it ends up saving you a ton of money.

As students abroad, finding ways to save money here and there is really important. Check out cheap places for food seeing how that will be one of your biggest expenses. It a totally different lifestyle for someone (like myself) who is used to having a steady income, and money should be going to other stuff. That other stuff I am referring to is travel.

When I say travel, I use that term very loosely. Travel for me means both small and large trips. Firstly, travel around Hamburg and the surrounding areas. I would suggesting just going to some random neighborhood or area of the city and spend the whole day there, breakfast through dinner. Even though you are never really leaving Hamburg, going into a different part is always amazing. These mini "trips" were a great thing for me to do on a weekend. They were amazingly relaxing and insightful. I would bring my sketchbook along with me wherever I went as well. There was always something interesting to draw or grab for use later no matter where I went. A great day trip would be going out to the Zoo and Aquarium. The prices are not bad at all plus they have so much to offer! There is a part where you get to feed the elephants, they eat right out of your hand. There is also a room where ring tailed lemurs run around. They will climb all over you if you are not moving

around too much. Tons of different animals live all over the zoo, it is really something that cannot be missed.

Next get out of Hamburg! I have more important memories attached with the short trips that I ended up taking rather than with the majority of my life in Hamburg. Hamburg is so easy to travel out of, it would be rather silly not to take advantage of this opportunity. I ended up going to several different places. The first big one and now one of my favorite cities in the entire world was my trip to Berlin.

Berlin is a really incredible city. It was one of the first big trip that I took while living in Hamburg. I have always heard such fantastic tales of the wonders that await anyone who would venture there. I found for an artist, it really struck a special kind of cord with me. The city had a different kind of pace. There were street for every single one of your sensory desires. Beautiful Boutiques, dirty alleys filled with amazing graffiti, sculptures along the street, food stands pumping delicious smells into the air, if you wanted it...Berlin had it. Not to take down Hamburg too much, but after going there I really wish I could have stayed in that city instead of coming back to where I was. I would say one if not multiple trips to Berlin would be crucial for art students to do.

Some other great cities I visited for pretty cheap and had an amazing time in while I was doing my semester abroad were Bonn, Paris, and Stockholm. Stockholm was really amazing as well. It is kind of pricey place to visit but no one should let that hold them back. It rivaled Berlin on almost all levels. Plus the landscape is amazing. I would suggest going island hopping with the fairies, taking out some extra money and enjoying some of the amazing restaurants out there and planning your trip around the weather. Go when you know it is going to be warm, or at least when you hope it is going to be warm. I was really happy I went then, it let me enjoy all of the wonderful outdoors that were offered. The only part that I really had to complain about was the sun. Seeing how Sweden is so far north, during the summer time the sun never really sets. Kind of freaky, throws off your whole internal clock, but you are on vacation so you should not be sleeping that much anyhow.

So travel wise, do as much as you can and make it good when you do it. I would say its better to spend some extra money on a trip and make that one 10x better instead of trying to cram a bunch of different trips in all together and not really getting to throw yourself into where you are.

So there was always a lot to do. Hamburg itself had tons of different neighborhoods to visit, different places close by and even more place not so close by but just easily gotten to with some simple pre planning. Getting to takes these trips and have all sorts of different fun, really helped put a smile on my face while I was in Hamburg. Although all of that was great, it was all just extra compared to the real reason I spent those 4 spring and summer months in Hamburg. The real reason was to come and study art. Strange enough, for much of the time, I questioned if that was what I was going to be doing or not.

To say I am used to a heavy work load when it comes to school is really an understatement. Coming from a place like MICA, I am constantly hit with project after project after project, always making something, never really going about anything in a leisurely pace. I love it that way. Coming from years and years of high stress and high energy environments, I need that same kind of thing to feel sound. Karate and cooking taught me to love it and understand how much one can make if they simply just keep on going. I had a really hard time finding this sort of thing in Hamburg.

During my first month in the city and heard almost nothing from the art school despite much fret. Schedules were not decided until well ever. I feel like I could have switched things around even after 2 months into classes. I did not even find out what classes were available to me until right before they all began. This was especially annoying because my HAW buddy could not come with me to the class explanation presentation put on by the illustration department. I sat there lost for quite some time. I ended up getting into some good things but I wish I would have known more so that my class choices were not made out ignorance and luck. Now culturally, this is nothing to get up all in arms when it comes to Germany, but for an

American, this was extremely stressful. I found in general an American culture like to plan things in advance more than once the time comes, to jump right in. Germans had a much more methodic pace, thinking of what ifs before they happen instead of dealing with things head on as they appeared. Personally, the head on approach is way more fun and way more rewarding.

I ended up taking 5 different classes at HAW. Each was a really unique kind of educational experience compared to what I am used to. I guess that is the point though, why fly 4.5 thousand miles and just do the same damn thing.

First off was Steffano Ricci in a Drawing meets illustration coarse. Ricci is a fantastic artist. Really looking at his work was one of the major reasons on why I chose to come to HAW and what really got me excited about the whole abroad experience. I even had teachers at MICA show other students his work because of me going to study with him, explaining how this was an amazing opportunity for me and that even they were jealous. Sad to say, my interaction with prof. Ricci was my most unrewarding experience when it came to my studies at HAW. To begin, he was not there many times. Ricci spent several weeks in Italy for various reasons. In my opinion this is unacceptable. I came to study under a professor, not for them to be doing other things during that time and not be in the class room. Also he gave me no real new and or interesting insight into art. There was never a demo despite requests and he being famous for his extremely textural unique illustration style. We seemed to look at other comics a lot, which was helpful, but I think more should have been done. Also I did not get much from the crits. It was either do more work or you did enough work. This is good this is bad. The class was also extremely disorganized and proper communication was nearly non-existent. He expects professional level result without giving the students anything close to that to work with. Also he became very angry with a fellow abroad student and myself when we did not know how to use adobe photoshop and in-design. Both programs with neither of us had on our personal computer and which we could not simply sit down and figure out seeing how the school computers were all in German. He also became angry when we had to leave by 5 (when the class ends) certain days because he

wanted to work more. We should not be held accountable for his lack of classroom management and scheduling abilities. It is a shame that such a wonderful artist is such a poor teacher. Thankfully though, I had some much better experiences with other teachers.

Anke was simply amazing. At first I really felt like her class was going to be going in circles for the entire time. That was really just because I did not understand her style of teaching and everything that I could get out of the class if I just went with what she was asking all of us to do. First we were doing explorations with drawing subject matters, different styles of drawing and mark making, just really exploring all the different aspects and avenues that we really could. Then we kept developing more and more as the class went on. Its amazing how engaged I became with this class and Anke's teaching style. It was very weird and my translating students often said this is too confusing to switch into another language but I loved it. I also found it funny that even though Anke spoke the least English out of any of my teachers, I got the absolute most out of her. We made books based on our studies and personal interests about nature and plants. This left things wide open for exploration. Anke pushed us all to explore not just what we talked about but how we did it as well. I would easily say that the work that I made for Anke is the strongest work I made during my time in Hamburg.

The whole style of teaching and classroom life is completely different from America to Germany. In an American style (at least at MICA) there is a much greater amount of work being done. We are expected to produce work at a high rate which is much more comparable to what we would be doing as a professional illustrator. This is in steep contrast to the usual one project which I was asked to do. From what I understand, there is a great importance placed on thinking, planning, and working out possible problems before they even arrive. I learned a lot about the importance of this process and how to slow down to think about what I am going to be making instead of just jumping in and making it. I would like to hopefully take some of this new practice into what I will be doing in the future just nearly as slow as what I did in Germany. It was far too slow and I felt anxious with things. It was

kind of nice though for once to get to sleep as much as I really wanted/needed during the school year. That does not really happen at MICA.

I also had a real culture shock of a class while in Germany. I was signed up to take a drawing class with one of the professors who came highly recommended. He was sick in the beginning of the year but I was told to not worry and he would return shortly. I thought it was strange that a sub was not immediately put into place so that the class could still start on time and then once recovered, the usual professor could just step in. So week after week the teacher remained out. This continued for almost 2 months until anything real was done. The answer...cancel the class and then provide a replacement for the 1st semester students so they were not completely screwed up. The thing is, all of the older students were out of luck and the class ended up being insanely short. A serious problem arose for me seeing how without this class I did not meet the requirements for my scholarship. In my opinion, this kind of thing should never even come close to happening. Luckily, I was able to explain to the professor the situation, which I was in, and make things work. We did an independent study. Not really what I am happy about having to compromise to do after flying 4.5 thousand miles to study somewhere. He was a good teacher, please do not get my wrong, its just I missed out of the peer input and interaction which makes the whole classroom experience all that more rewarding.

There was one other person who I really had my reservations about but in the end turned out to be really on his game. The only problem I had, was that someone like Nir Alon lets you figure out what the hell he is saying instead of him sitting there explaining it to you. Nir was the international go to guy for all of internationally interested or internationally active students. He pushed more travel and exploration and somehow dug into our heads. Never satisfied, but very supportive. I really thought Nir half disliked me for a long while. He is just a different sort of fellow. I would say that any student who ends up doing the HAW program should really listen to this guy. He made great suggestions for artists and approaches to art that I really helped me out. There were several things, which I

would have wished to explore under some of his guidance while I was still there, but time and money only allow so much. Either way, Nir Alon was fantastic.

So in the end, it was a good experience. I learned a lot about what I am comfortable with doing and how I like to live my life. Living in another culture made me appreciate and embrace the one, which I call home even more. Is that what the whole study abroad experience is about? I think I should want to move to Europe and travel around a whole bunch. Honestly, this just helped me love my work in a new way and see that there are tons of cultures and bits of inspiration awaiting me all over the United States. So thank you German. To anyone interested in going abroad, think about the country you will be living in not just the school you will be attending. Travel a lot be it with this program or any other time in your life. That and never go about this like it's a big party. Are you really learning anything or experiencing anything different if you are just getting drunk and screwing around from your own back yard or on a beach in Milan. Do something more and build yourself as a person not just your alcohol tolerance.



Easter bonfire



Elephants at Hagenbeck Zoo



„Prost!“



Eating in the hall of residence



Wall art Berlin – Artist: Blu