



AFF

Profile



AFF, Büro in a former "district library" from the GDR's National Development Program

Right at the end of the street stands the Berghain, the Berlin club that just about everybody has heard of. Otherwise, where AFF Architekten have their studio is a peaceful place. Hidden behind the still huge site for the newspaper "Neues Deutschland" in a, stylistically speaking, extremely charming area, at least if you appreciate 1950s classicism, that is, typified both by the nearby Karl-Marx-Allee and by the tranquil Wedekindstrasse. "Hans Kollhoff would live it here," the brothers Sven and Martin Fröhlich joke during our conversation. Indeed he would, as their studio is located on the former premises of a "district library" from the German Democratic Republic's National Development Program, with walls boasting fine wood paneling and everything kept in the neo-Prussian style. Ten employees ("including two interns") currently work at AFF Berlin. And of course there is also AFF Chemnitz, the branch managed by the third partner, Alexander Georgi. This was established in order to be closer to the construction site for their largest contract to date, the conversion and extension work of a Saxon Castle, Schloss Freiberg, destined to become an archive and mineral museum. The place is simply full of crystals, wherever you look!



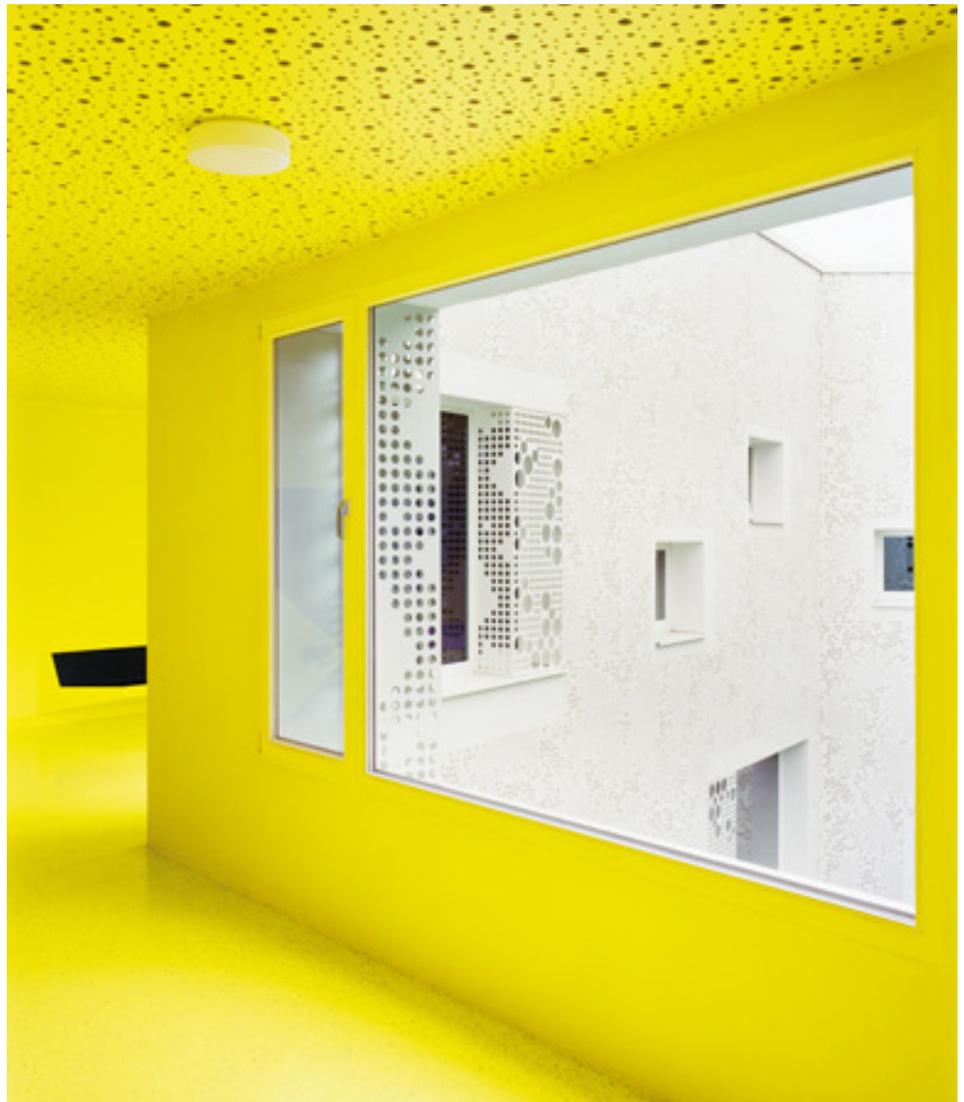
This, however, is not the reason why a visit to AFF was long overdue. For some years now, the brothers have been running what is regarded as one of the most interesting "young" studios in Germany. Martin Fröhlich was born in 1968, Sven Fröhlich, in 1974. They were both born in Magdeburg, studied Architecture in Weimar and Sven Fröhlich studied Visual Communications as well. The interesting thing about these two, though, is that unlike many others, who simply want to do a "good job", they tend to go overboard. And the two projects that they recently completed are extreme, each in its own way. In fact, seeing a coherent whole, an office philosophy, is no easy task. The reason being that at one end of the spectrum is a concrete block, what used to

be a wooden “shelter” in the Erzgebirge mountain region, directly on the German-Czech border, which the Fröhlich brothers converted for their own use. It is a building that could have come out of the Manufaktur catalogue; no, more like a building that could beat those Manufaktur bores at their own game! More about this later. The opposite end of the AFF spectrum, as one might say, is occupied by a school building constructed in line with the cheap building regulations currently in force in Berlin, the Anna Seghers Gemeinschaftsschule, a comprehensive school in the Adlershof district of Berlin. Its outer sheath is the opposite of the concrete fortress that is the “shelter”, because it consists of a composite thermal insulation system, but one that has had a dot matrix spray-painted over it. Inside, all the corridors are bathed in a garish yellow. The school buildings looks like a constructed picture and the holiday home, by contrast, like a sculpture.

COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL

ANNA SEGHERS

Berlin-Adlershof, 2008



INTERNATIONAL YOUTH- AND MEETINGCENTER

Magdeburg BarleberSee, 2002



The brothers’ very first project, a loud pink group of containers housing toilets and showers on the grounds of an open-air swimming pool in Magdeburg, succeeded in transforming the everyday into something magical. The containers are still recognizable, but have been given wacky “hoods” and a coat of loud paint. The result of this finger exercise in design is a prime example of why we need architects. Not to prettify or act as guardians of good design, but because they have a feeling for how to handle large structures such that they look neither coquettishly modest nor far too brash – although , in this case, the uproarious shade of pink quite clearly exceeds the bounds of what is generally considered tasteful.

That AFF's work is so appealing without doubt also has something to do with the fact that to date they have tended to handle anything from simple to slightly curious construction projects, whose tight budgets have forced them to improvise. At first glance, their website only lists five projects: alongside the ones already mentioned, no more than a series of residential buildings in the prototype building area "Am Horn" in Weimar. Actually, however, there have been a large number of smaller projects alongside these five major ones: residential buildings for the most part, either conversions or new buildings, most recently designs for exhibition architecture, as well. Only recently they won first prize in a competition for redesigning the foyer of the Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany (what a name!) in Bonn. Also known as the Gustav Peichl building with its peculiar sugar loaf peaks.

CASTLE FREUDENSTEIN

Freiberg, 2008



TERRA MINERALIA
CASTLE FREUDENSTEIN

Freiberg, 2008

Their largest and most comprehensive project to date, Schloss Freiberg, provided them with enough opportunities to get up to speed with interiors, right down to furnishings. And indeed, the Freiberg project is something of a Gesamtkunstwerk (total work of art): the interior decorations were made to measure, even down to the handrails on the fire escape. They were also commissioned to design the permanent exhibition of the mineralogical collection. And they regarded the materials entrusted to them in this context – all those minerals, crystals, druses, all that specialist knowledge about how to mine it in the deepest depths of the Earth – as a metaphorical mine, shoveling them together into a whole in their design. And the "crystalline" theme was repeatedly worked into the design, right down to the sloping table legs in the library's furnishings. Producing "narrative architecture" so aggressively in this way might easily incur the suspicion of being kitsch. This would be unfounded. However it should be noted that since Hans Hollein's volcano museum (1994-2002, Saint-Ours-Les-Roches, France) nobody has attempted to abstract natural products in so many different ways and to translate them into architecture.

For AFF, minerals and the mining tradition in Freiberg, Saxony, are not only a formal theme. It is possible to find another twist to the idea of thinking in metaphors and images in their treatment of the large archive body that was set inside the protective covering of Schloss and, once again, is now revealed to the outside world via "hooding" (with AFF, many things are "hooded"). The giant concrete building, for which even historical substance was sacrificed is made of concrete, whose surface was attacked by building workers with pneumatic drills. But isn't that...? Yes indeed, it is a similar process to the work miners perform underground at the mine face! A number

of the great thinkers of Postmodernism would have taken great pleasure in this way of thinking, first and foremost, the founder of the Architecture Museum Heinrich Klotz, who championed countering the soulless functionalism of the post-War era – he liked to call it “construction industry functionalism” – with a new, fresh fictionalism. In short, he wanted buildings to be able to tell stories. Anybody who knows the Fröhlich brothers would doubtless agree that science-fictionalism would also be highly appropriate for describing this rare case of architecture that is not nobly self-referential but has many sparkling sources.

Their latest and most radical work, the concrete shelter in the Erzgebirge mountain region is no exception to this rule. This building, too, can be interpreted as a narrative – more on this in the following interview. It too is strong and mysterious. The hard, simple life that this concrete buildings promises us is probably much harder and more simple than what we are familiar with from the feel-good purism of the Manufaktur catalogue. This building is a political statement that is important to the brothers: a plea for less comfort and more sense in our approach to finite resources. In its own way, a “green building” in grim gray.

SKI HUT

TELLERHÄUSER

2010



Interview



Sven Fröhlich, Martin Fröhlich

What are you working on right now?

Sven Fröhlich
Spring.

Martin Fröhlich
Extending my family

Can you guys be of any help?

(they both laugh)

OK – what are AFF working on as architects?

Sven Fröhlich
Just around the corner from here we've got what has to be the nearest building site you can have as a studio. 200 meters away. A school. As far as Freudenstein Castle is concerned, we've started on all the converting and refurbishing work. And for three years now we've been involved with conversions, schools, school extensions.

You are actually in charge of the construction work as well? Not just in overall charge of the artistic side of things?

Martin Fröhlich
Indeed, it's all part of building and architecture. We are closely involved with craftsmanship, not just because a few of us learned trades first.

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Which ones?

Martin Fröhlich

We've got bricklayers, model builders, and skilled builders, what a lovely way of putting it, on board. With regard to the school: It's an extension, not energy-related refurbishing work. Then we're also working on a terraced houses project. It's a real group project. With 11 developers.

Are you going to be moving in yourselves?

Martin Fröhlich

Indeed. Actually, the whole office was planning to move in, but ultimately there were only three people left. And otherwise ... we are tinkering on designs for competitions.

Was the Sprengel Museum in Hanover your biggest success in recent competitions?

Sven Fröhlich

The biggest was Freiberg, which was then actually built. With the Sprengel Museum we were in fourth place.

IN LOVE, TO:

Exhibition in the German Center for
Architecture, DAZ
Berlin, 2011



In the Deutsches Architekturzentrum (German architecture center), or DAZ, there was a recent exhibition in which you were presented as collectors. Where do you keep all the things on display there otherwise?

Martin Fröhlich

Here in the studio.

Excuse me?

Sven Fröhlich

Well, it was a bit more congested here. I don't know what it's like where you live... Where we live, though, it's a bit like here in the studio. And that's with us already having dismantled and sold our dark room! (to the photographer Torsten Seidel:) You could have had yourself a Linhof!



AFF, Büro in a former “district library” from the GDR’s National Development Program

So you’ve read an awful lot and could carry on a conversation using quotations...

You had a plate camera for professional use?

Martin Fröhlich

Sven studied photography. I’m more of a Nikon F3 type myself.

So you didn’t take all the photos in your exhibition on a cell phone?

Sven Fröhlich

Well yes, but... And there are sets of analog photos as well, we haven’t been through them yet. We were once – there’s even an edition of ‘Bauwelt’ about it – at the Pioneers’ holiday camp in the Crimea, there are still 5,000 slides of it (it’s the ‘Bauwelt’ 16, 2000 edition).

Why did you go to it?

Martin Fröhlich

It was the biggest Pioneers’ holiday camp! (laughter). Naturally enough, under the aspect of there being Modernism in the East too! Back in former East Germany, though, we all looked to the West. There was a seminar we did as assistants at college. But also a spirit of adventure.



To get back to your passion for collecting: You both accumulate vast quantities of things?

Sven Fröhlich

Not just – the material is from the whole studio. It was important for us to sharpen the team here.

Martin Fröhlich

It’s like with you as a writer, describing things, quoting. So you’ve read an awful lot and could carry on a conversation using quotations...

...you really think so!

Martin Fröhlich

That’s the image we have! (to Torsten Seidel) You as a photographer can remember images, as a writer you can remember texts.

IN LOVE, TO:



**Martin Fröhlich, Sven Fröhlich,
Alexander Georgi**

People spend more money on cars than on architecture.

And as an architect...

Martin Fröhlich

... you're somewhere in between: between being able to remember texts, images, and objects.

And do you sometimes integrate the objects in the collection as ready-mades, precisely as they are, as it were, in your architecture?

Sven Fröhlich

We would certainly have a certain amount in store. But we deliberately didn't put such concrete things in the exhibition. And we even had a ban building parts. I could open the cupboard right now and get out a box of some cable clips or other...

But you don't put the things collected here to so concrete use?

Sven Fröhlich

You would find out if you were to take a look at Freiberg, or right now the school. There are little details. A door stopper, for example, that comes from a totally different field, from vehicle construction.



You like taking photographs of snow-covered cars, right?

Martin Fröhlich

The question sounds like the revelation of a fetish, that's not what it is. We photograph anything and everything that fascinates us. The best thing about the snow-covered cars was that you've got this German value, this luxury vehicle, that people spend their entire lives saving for. People spend more money on cars than on architecture. These are the sort of similes we like using when we're talking to developers.

About cars?

Martin Fröhlich



Martin Fröhlich

Not just cars. We grew up more at a time when we had television and other media. That means that when you're building a school you can talk about Teletubbies as well...

Teletubbies?

Sven Fröhlich

As far as I'm concerned Teletubbies as well, yes. With us a lot gets done by way of examples. Derived from metaphors. In principle developers like this sort of thing too. "Just take a look at your car, you got everything right there as well". That way it's simply easier to make yourself understood to the developers than by just talking about architecture all the time.

The concrete hut in the Erzgebirge mountains– what's the story behind that?



Sven Fröhlich

SKI HUT
TELLERHÄUSER
Fichtelberg, 2010

The region has a lot to do with our sporting roots: downhill skiing. Cross-country skiing, so as such it also has something to do with memories.



Sven Fröhlich:

The region has a lot to do with our sporting roots: downhill skiing. Cross-country skiing, so as such it also has something to do with memories.

Memories. memories.

Sven Fröhlich

It has to be said: we are nostalgic. The sort of people that can explain how the engine in an old car works...

Getting back to the concrete hut:

Sven Fröhlich

Just by chance we came across this particular piece of real estate on an auction platform. We thought that this was a place where you can do some experimenting – without knowing precisely what. Then it took two years.

Martin Fröhlich

Whenever you go on vacation as an architect, you always get annoyed having to sit in ugly surroundings, on plastic chairs. When otherwise you spend all day driving that sort of thing out of people! We do things better. The hut is out in the open, 10 meters in front of the welcome to the place sign. The building regulations were such that you couldn't just tear something down and put something else in its place. That is how we hit on the idea of covering it in concrete. We were only able to extend it by 10 percent. That's a rule of thumb where building in the open are concerned.

So do you then your cards on the building authorities' table and say, OK, we've bought this hut and want to cover it in concrete?

Martin Fröhlich

Nooo, the building application plans are on a scale of 1:100 and there's a rough description. You don't go into any great detail.



We're against this Germany-insulating-itself-to-death approach.

SKI HUT
TELLERHÄUSER
Fichtelberg, 2010



So what is now the inside wall is the old outer sheath?

Martin Fröhlich
Right.

There's no heating?

Sven Fröhlich

We discussed it beforehand with a friend who's a building physician. On average we spend 20 days a year in the hut, so insulating it was not economical. This friend suggested doing it differently, installing something that gives off a lot of radiant heat. That's how any mountain hut that is stonewalled works: You keep warm next to the stove and the next day you're gone again!



And are you making a romantic anti-heat insulation, anti-thermal skin statement at the same time?

Sven Fröhlich
We were after a primeval hut, right.

Martin Fröhlich

Yes, we're against this Germany-insulating-itself-to-death approach. Is it not a political statement if we ask how much heat we actually really need? Basically, though, we do that with any project.

But do the concrete walls reflect cold air?

Martin Fröhlich

That's the case in any mountain hut.

A wooden structure would be easier to heat. I'm talking here about the famous 'hut climate'.

NEUES BAUEN AM HORN
HOUSE IHLENFELDT
Weimar, 2001

We always got them to step down a notch, and asked what was really necessary.

Martin Fröhlich

Yes, but not high up in the mountains. At high altitude you get stone huts. But you're right: Wood, stacked, would have had advantages. But the existing structure was made of wood, and we wanted to play around with contrast and moulds.



How do you integrate this experience in normal projects?

Martin Fröhlich

Whenever the developer of a single family residence came along, he wanted 250 square meters of living space. And in most cases what he got from AFF was a 150-square meter house. We always got them to step down a notch, and asked what was really necessary. A lot of houses ended up being much smaller. Discussing with planners about whether the rooms have to be heated throughout was actually more difficult. Farmhouses never worked like that, in winter it was only warm in the main room.

Sven Fröhlich

We have always told developers: Spend 30,000 rather than just 10,000 on your windows. Because they'll never need replacing. And put cement screed down. Then, when you come into an inheritance or get a pay rise you can put a wooden floor in, or buy a Persian carpet.

COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL
ANNA SEGHERS
Berlin-Adlershof, 2008



Martin Fröhlich

There's actually nothing worse than going round to families who are slaves are their own homes!

This school that was recently featured in 'Bauwelt' (the 3. 2011 edition): What's the showstopper with regard to the facade?

Martin Fröhlich

It's a composite thermal insulation facade. Highly insulated such that it even goes further than current heat insulation stipulations. Making walls of lime sand brick and putting first the insulation, then the plaster on top gives you the cheapest building part you can get these days. Industrialization extends to the building trade as well! The question for us was how we could move on from here? What can we do with the surface, perhaps using sgraffitto technology. We have to find a low-cost but high quality finish. We had a ready-made, in the form of the curtains hanging in the school...

... these camouflage nets, Swedish camouflage nets.

Martin Fröhlich

Tear-proof paper, costs next to nothing. We take them, hang them in front, give them good spraying, job done. Like a street graffiti artist. So we use a left-over ready-made to create structure. Ultimately what we had was not just the curtains but rather a stencil, a prototype, because it's technically fine.

COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL

ANNA SEGHERS

Berlin-Adlershof, 2008



So what is like being a young studio in Berlin in the post-Stimmann era?

Martin Fröhlich

We didn't actually work much in the pre-Stimmann era, we had no projects. But I can well imagine that everything is opening up more, that there is a softer view of things. But it's budgetary planning that still imposes the actual restrictions.

Thriftiness can also be a virtue, though.

Martin Fröhlich

What chance do utopias have under these circumstances?

Do utopias cost money?

Martin Fröhlich

By utopia I don't mean throwing money at things. No, you have to think differently with utopias. You perhaps violate the brief. Make houses in which there is only warm room, where everybody congregates when it gets cold. Build open museums in which you also stroll around wearing an overcoat. Or take as an example the reconstruction of Dresden Castle. In Dresden they've been reconstructing the castle for 20 years. That is almost a utopia. Economically it doesn't pay.

You have to think differently with utopias. You perhaps violate the brief.

CASTLE FREUDENSTEIN

Freiberg, 2008



But if anything money is spent on old structures.

Martin Fröhlich

There are few examples of it being spent on new things. The opera house in Hamburg. Only rarely does a small community treat itself to something big. For Freiberg the castle was indeed was something unusually big.

How did the Freiberg project come about?

Sven Fröhlich

The town was the developer, and for the most part received subsidies. The users were the Ministry of the Interior of the Federal State of Saxony for the state archive, and the Mountain Academy of the Technical University for its mineralogical collection, not to mention the town of Freiberg, which used the castle itself, while gastronomy was the fourth in the group. That took some doing.

Martin Fröhlich

Projects of this nature only come about through committed people with a vision.

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Take, for example, the Rector of the Mountain Academy of the Technical University, who is now the Minister of Finance in Saxony. It was he who had a vision of housing the collection there. As far as the state archive was concerned, the procedure for awarding public contracts for freelance professional services was already in place, with selected architects, whose brief was to build an archive out in the country. Nonetheless there was a vision: The castle is empty, why not use it for the archive and the collection! If you take a look at the history of our architecture, it's a bit like what happened in Styria, in Austria. Why did we do such good things there for a while? There were good architects there, good politicians, good decision-makers, who perhaps knew each other from school, that's how good things come about.

And how does something visionary come about in Berlin?

Martin Fröhlich

Well, Berlin is a conglomerate of lots of people who have moved here and few Berliners. They will meet each other gradually. That'll be the big surprise. Wait and see.

I wish you all the best and thank you for the conversation.

Oliver Elser is a curator at Deutsches Architekturmuseum. He has written numerous architectural reviews in newspapers and magazines (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Texte zur Kunst, Frankfurter Rundschau, AD - Architectural Digest, Bauwelt, Baumeister etc.) as well as in catalogues and books. He has taught in Graz and Vienna. He lives with his wife and two children in Frankfurt/Main.

project management: Andrea Nakath



Projects

COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL

ANNA SEGHERS

Berlin-Adlershof, 2008



SKI HUT

TELLERHÄUSER

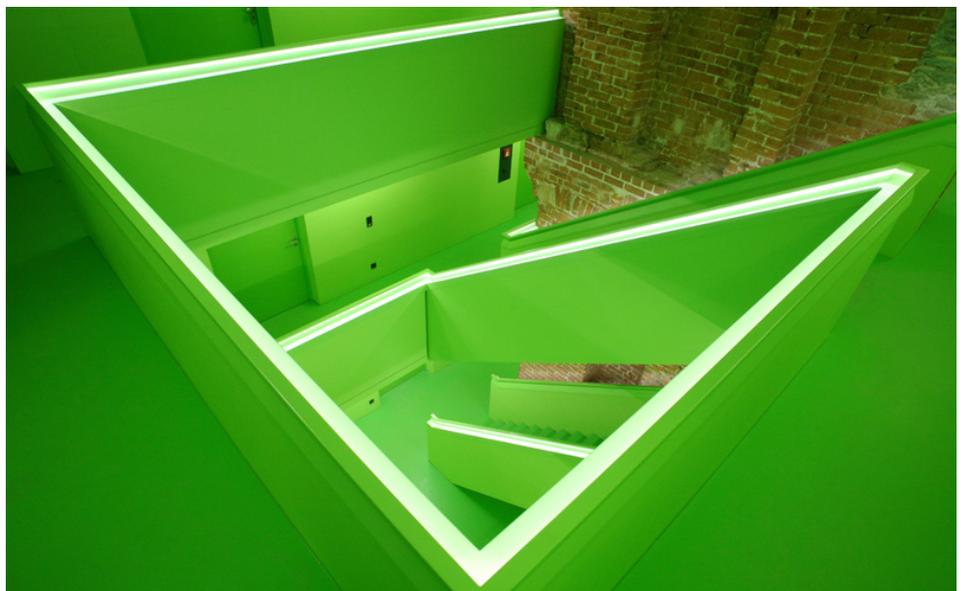
Fichtelberg, 2010



TERRA MINERALIA
CASTLE FREUDENSTEIN
Freiberg, 2008



CASTLE FREUDENSTEIN
Freiberg, 2008



HOUSE ZEIMER

Kleinmachnow/Berlin, 2006



NEUES BAUEN AM HORN

MOLDED BRICK WALL HAUS ZIVCEC

Weimar, 2005



INTERNATIONAL YOUTH- AND MEETINGCENTER

Magdeburg BarleberSee, 2002



NEUES BAUEN AM HORN
HOUSE IHLENFELDT
Weimar, 2001



SEQUENZ _ A TEMPORARY
WORKROOM
Weimar, 1996

