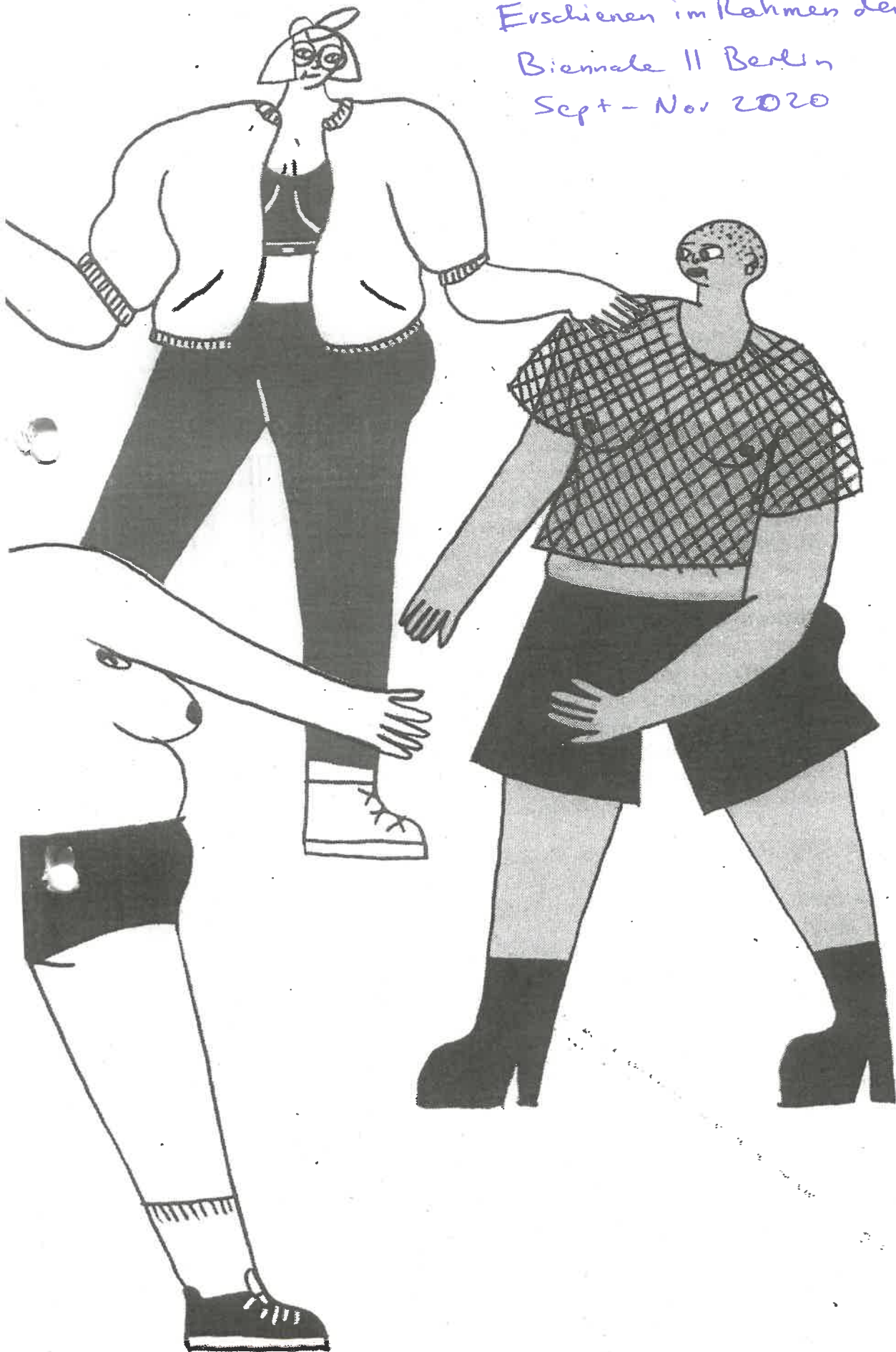


Being in Crises Together

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**Feminist Health Care Research Group
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Being in Crises Together
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Julia thanks Jörg, Raphael und Maxi, Fränzi, Hanna, Anna und Anna-Lena.

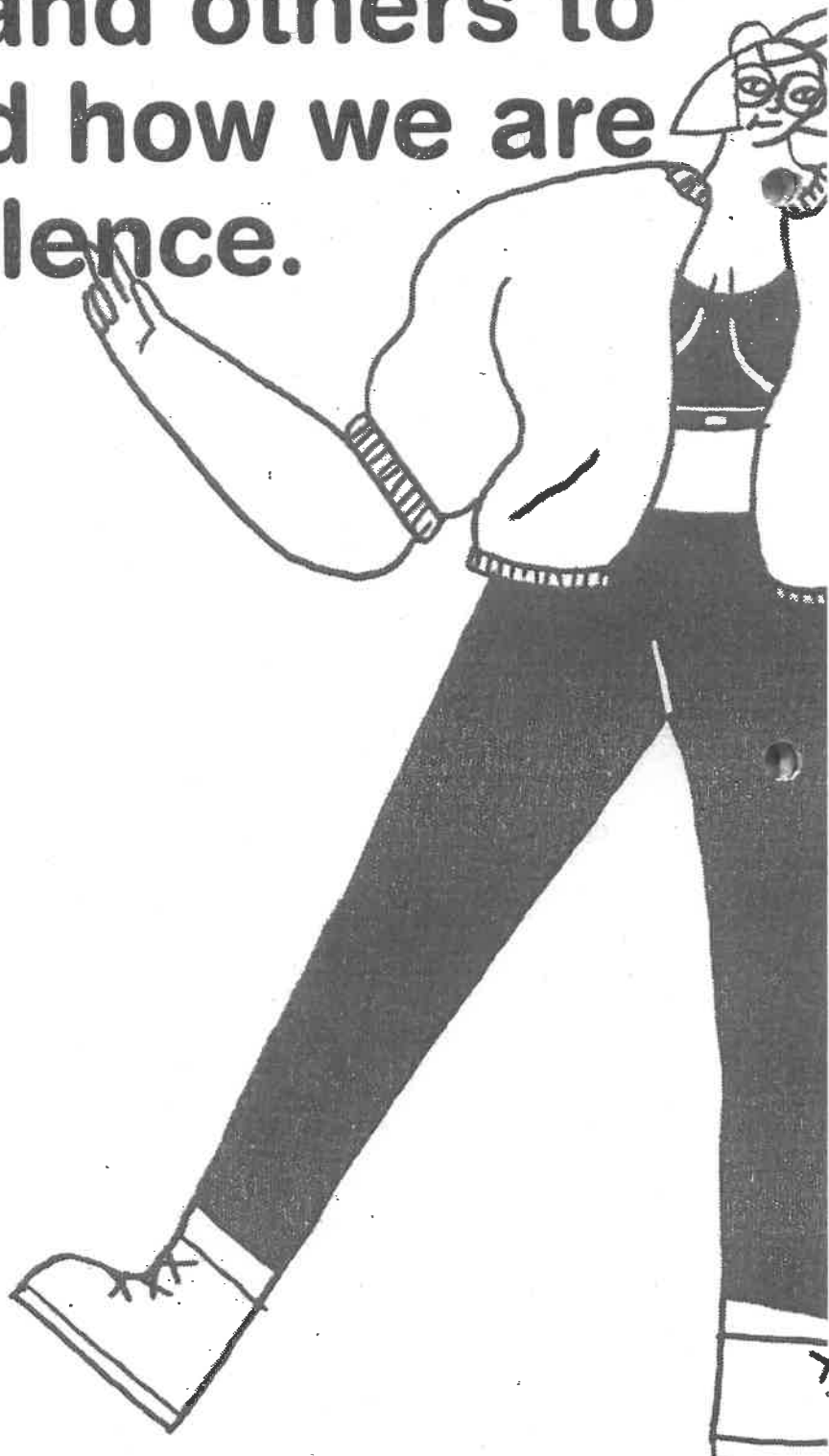
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Political activism is not only about fighting. It is also about creating structures and spaces for ourselves and others to be who and how we are without violence.



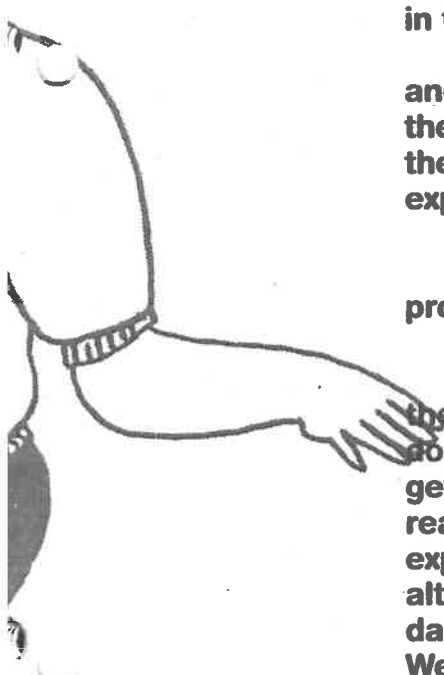
**An interview with
Kim Wichera at
Antipsychiatric
Information Centre**

Our visit to the Antipsychiatrische Informations- und Beratungsstelle (Antipsychiatric Information Centre) happened as the third and last in our series of visits in early 2020. Feminist Health Care Research Group had visited the Antipsychiatric Information Centre once before in 2015. Then and now the conversation had been so nourishing, encouraging us to imagine different practices and approaches to emotional crises. Many of us brought personal experiences and stories to the table. In the transcript questions from the group are abbreviated with "Q".

Kim Wichera: Weglaufhaus (Runaway-house) is an old villa in the North of Berlin. It is a big community flat where up to 13 people can live. It is a rather narrow space as the building had not been intended to house a social institution, it was designed to house a family at the beginning of the 20th century. There's a kitchen, a living room and a garden for people to hang out. Our office is next to the dining and computer room. On the first floor there are seven rooms, mostly single bedrooms, the second floor is for women, trans*, inter* and non-binary people with five beds in three rooms.

People can come here in a situation of crisis, they can call and ask for help and support. They make an appointment, and if there is a free place at Weglaufhaus they can come and tell from their perspective what happened to them. If their and our expectations towards the situation match, they can stay.

Q: When people are coming in, you don't have a fixed program that you are working with?



Kim: First, when people come to Weglaufhaus, and that's the big difference to a psychosocial place or psychiatry, our place doesn't have a lot of rules or program. No daily routine of set getting up times, schedules, occupational therapy etc. There is a reason to this, because most of the people coming here have experienced violence and they come here in search for an alternative. Many are not able anymore to organize their own daily life, having lost the capability to structure their lives. At Weglaufhaus they can just come and we support them in figuring out daily life again like cooking, shopping, living with other people. Some might come here and this approach is too open for them, they don't feel like they are being held. If that's the case, we can talk to the people, because we are close to them. We are trying to figure out what is going on, what the individual situation

requires. If for instance you tell me you have problems going to the staff to tell them your needs, maybe the staff can come to you. It is also about people figuring out their needs. Trying to create a relationship is more important than a stiff program. The work is actually about building relationships between the staff and the people living here. In the first conversation we are telling them how the community is working. Probably if you need to get a lot of rest and don't want to be with other people this is not the best place for you. It is a small place and not drug-free either. Alcohol and drugs are allowed. If people come here to get off drugs we tell them it might be harder here. But if they think they can cope, they can stay. Then there's a long conversation about their own situation, too. We talk about income problems, struggles with the job center, problems with legal papers, the question of where to go afterwards. A lot of what we do is social work in the sense of aiming to improve their social situation during their stay so that afterwards they find themselves in a better social place. But that doesn't mean we slip into the role of professionals, who are objectifying people, checking their behavior and telling them how to change it. This work is very much about thinking about how much you yourself are willing to introduce into this relationship instead of upholding this professional distance between you and other people, but rather being engaged with your own story and emotions. I guess that creates a very different way of communicating.

Q: At our first meeting with you, I remember one person was saying the question that is initially asked at Weglaufhaus is: What has helped you in a crisis before and what would be supportive for you? We learned a lot from this question and have adopted it in our work.

Kim: That is a question we are asking, yes. We have this concrete paper where together with us people can write down what their experience of crisis is, what has helped them, and what hasn't helped. At the moment our practice does not focus so much on this paper anymore. We rather talk about it. Our experience with the people in the house is that they rarely want to hold onto this certain paper where this is written down. We are working with different aspects of anti-psychiatry which can be broken down into the following principles:

Firstly we are not working with diagnosis. We don't think it helps and we don't support the concept of a so to speak

biological disease. It is important for us to center what is actually going on, to build a relationship without objectification, and to acknowledge a human being with feelings.

Secondly we don't work with psychiatric drugs. That doesn't mean that we force anyone to get off them, but if people want they can. Mostly this concerns people who feel a lot of side-effects from these drugs. They may feel numb, which does not allow them to feel their emotions, their creativity, their libido, their bodies. Of course getting off psychiatric drugs needs to happen very slowly to avoid any rebound effects. If people want to take them again, we support that, too, and accompany them to the psychiatrist as well. This is their own choice.

Thirdly independence and free will are the principles we are building our work around. That doesn't mean that it is easy. It's not easy to figure that out, to get along with the community or with our concept. There are a lot of moments where we need to solve daily situations of a big community, like listening to loud music in the middle of the night when others want to sleep, cleaning etc.

The other important principle is that we create transparency of our work in order to make it controllable. We do keep files on each individual person at the house but different from most institutions that offer psychosocial support here inhabitants can read their files and change entries. Also when we change shifts, thus when we pass on information from one shift to the other, they can be present and hear what we are saying about them. All documents and phone calls that concern this person will be discussed with them. Transparency affects the hierarchy at Weglaufhaus. We are not trying to silence anybody or enhance a difference between residents and staff. There are also people working at Weglaufhaus who previously used to live here. A lot of people who used to live in the Weglaufhaus as residents become engaged in our association, are running the counseling service and are also part of the board of the association.

Q: How does Weglaufhaus finance itself?

Kim: Our institution is funded, but not very safely. It is actually funded on a daily basis, which brings precariousness into our work. There are two basic funding resources in Berlin when you are in a social crisis situation. Either you are getting funds as

a person with disabilities, mentally and physically, or because of being homeless. The crisis concept is a little in-between. It means you are in need of immediate help. People who want to come here have to either be homeless, or about to become homeless soon. If people want to come, who are not homeless, we need to take a closer look at their life situation. The situation has to fit the regulations.

We need to write a lot of reports. When someone is coming in, when someone calls and says "I am homeless, I am in a crisis, I need help right now", they come here and the first thing after talking to them is filing a report also in view of the question "Will that get funded?" Which is a difficult perspective from an activist standpoint. This dependency on state funding creates a situation in which whether people can stay or not has not that much to do with the story of that person but rather with the respective state department of the different areas of Berlin and whether they are willing to pay. That is a fundamental dilemma we are opposed to but we need to cope with.

Q: And the reason you don't use funding for people in difficult psychiatric situations is because you refuse to work with diagnoses, right?

Kim: Exactly. We are trying to hold the balance between our idealism and our anti-psychiatric principles on one hand, and being bound to state funds and regulations on the other hand.

Q: Do people need to be registered and have official papers when they come because you have to apply for funding?

Kim: People don't have to have papers if they are coming here. We are trying to make everything happen so people can just stay here. It is also part of our work to get involved with anything concerning their papers, the Immigration Office for instance when their residency status is uncertain.

Q: Is there a waiting list? Does it happen that somebody has a crisis and wants to come to you but you are full?

Kim: It happens but not so often. There is this flux of some people coming in but not staying long. Usually when we are full it takes another week until there is a place available.

Q: It is so astonishing that Weglaufhaus still operates in the way it does, that anti-psychiatric principles are being put into practice there. It seems like they have vanished, although this criticism on psychiatric violence and on diagnoses is so crucial.

Kim: There is a lot of idealism involved to keep the Weglaufhaus going. A lot of what we are doing to keep the structure working is a compromise in a way. Weglaufhaus is in itself an almost utopian space. The mere fact that Weglaufhaus exists is a political act. Of course it matters that Weglaufhaus supports people to improve their social well being. But its main objective is not to "help" people but to insist that this society must change to offer people space to be who they are and to be accepted as they are.

I have been involved with political groups, trying to reconnect communities that were allied in these struggles in the sixties and seventies and trying to reclaim discussions that by now have been delegated to experts only, focussing on feelings and emotions within us. How can we create community structures in political groups for people who can't cope with shit? Political activism is not only about fighting, but also about creating structures for ourselves and creating spaces for people to be who and how they are without violence.

We also got involved in discussions around psychiatry in the city. For instance a man got shot in the Neptunbrunnen in 2013. More recently, in January 2020, a woman was shot by police. I think a big part of political work and anti-psychiatry is about getting rid of that image that someone who is behaving strangely is possibly uncontrollable and a monster and is going to kill someone. That image is very strong. But violence is something that needs to be discussed separately from being mad. Communities have to deal with violence and discuss it, but it is something different.

I think it is important to bring these discussions back to a radical left movement: How can we acknowledge that some people don't know what is going on in them, or what they are expressing? That doesn't mean that we have to answer or treat them with force or with restrictions. The question is rather: How can we create space for people as a political act, where they can be how and who they are?

Q: What would you recommend if people around us, people we know, are living through crises?

Kim: There is not one solution how to be with someone who is going through a painful time or who is not feeling well. I think there's always a better solution than violence, and in psychiatry violence always takes place on different levels. One of the first things is to listen. To hear what they are telling you. And to step back. You can just communicate with each other and even if you don't understand something, you can ask: What do you mean?

Supporting each other is a lot about getting into communication and not being fearful of it. It is important to show your own boundaries and to communicate when you are overwhelmed. Probably you can't take care of that person every day because of your own life. When people are telling you about the shit that is going on in their lives, a lot of people already shut down because they think they have to solve this problem. But I would say, step back and listen. It doesn't mean you have to solve it. Taking up communication might entail that you share that you don't know what to do. It is more about giving your love and respect and acceptance. Trying to be a good companion in taking this journey together.

Weglaufhaus

www.weglaufhaus.de

***Gegendiagnose* was edited by Cora Schmechel, Fabian Dion, Kevin Dudek and Mäks* Roßmüller and is available (in German) here: <https://www.edition-assemblage.de/buecher/gegendiagnose/>**

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