

*Photography and Eating*  
Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff

Like all of these stories, it began with a problem. We watched as a young CEO in jeans explained to a reporter in a learned, excited tone: “We were looking for someone to go mushroom picking with in Berlin because we wanted to make a mushroom risotto and we couldn’t find anyone who could help us with that.”

The reporter nodded, following with the question “why did you choose Berlin for Gidsy?”

At 11am on Monday standing on Neue Schönhauser Strasse, we ring the bell for Roomsurfer. Leslie answers the door and gives us a quick tour of the two-room office. “So what are you taking the photographs for?”

The wall near the door is covered in post-it notes with words scrawled in marker. *Wine, Love, Travel, God, Salad.*

“Like Couchsurfing meets Facebook.”

“We bring people together with similar interests.”

After accepting a glass of water from Leslie, a delivery arrives from Amazon. “My French keyboard,” one of the guys sitting in the first room exclaims, smiling. The space is small, with fluorescent lights suspended above three groupings of desks. Talia from Spain sits in the far room with a vase of daffodils and two computers open. She explains the concept behind Roomsurfer, who uses it, and why Barcelona is their second largest market behind Berlin.

“Yes, I totally use it when I travel. And all of us at the office are hosts.”

Walking into the next room Talia says on script, “Roomsurfer is an online community whose final aim is to share memorable experiences, build new, meaningful connections and offer and find accommodations,” her hands moving quickly as she talks. We nod, focusing the camera on her colleague hunched over his new keyboard.

Later that evening we scroll through Roomsurfer listings. “There she is.” We stop at a photograph of Talia’s apartment on Skalitzerstrasse. Another vase of daffodils, a tan couch with a pink throw and a poster of a Greek island, maybe Santorini. “Let’s book a night with her.”

We continue scrolling. A friend of ours, Ilias, is renting out his one-bedroom off Hasenheide.

On Tuesday, with a backpack resting on his knee, a young entrepreneur describes an “a-ha” moment, starting again with a problem. The interviewer from Der Spiegel offers a cigarette. The coffees arrive, and the

conversation shifts towards nightlife.

Two years ago the entrepreneur was given 100,000 dollars to drop out of school and focus on his startup.

The interview continues.

“The expanding frontier of communication,”

“Alexander Ljung from SoundCloud,”

“Paloma Bar.”

1300 Internet startups have been founded in Berlin since 2008, 500 just last year. “All Berlin knows is change and disruption, and there’s nobody defining what the city should be, or what an entrepreneur should be,” he says, leaning back against his chair, stretching his arms out.

We get to Team Europe around 3pm after stopping off at an Ullrich for bananas. Kristov greets us hurriedly. We wait with the receptionist while he finishes an email.

“We’re an incubator, which means we create a space for young startups to thrive; resources, advice, capital.” The hallways are lined with photographs of smiling people above short blurbs. *Kevin of ChicChickClub is from Toronto and loves Ruby on Rails.*

Behind us on the wall, a t-shirt hangs with Delivery Hero’s logo. “They’re worth about 80 million now,” he says, motioning to the shirt and moving our cups to the sink.

Kristov pauses during the tour to show us a retractable wall in a boardroom. “After work we like to open it up and have a team beer.” Over coffee in a brightly lit kitchen I promise not to take any embarrassing photos.

The office stretches out over the entirety of the fifth floor, each room filled with young people on computers. After cheerfully chatting about the company, Jared from 9Cookies asks if he should look at the camera.

“No, just act normal.” He shrugs and returns to coding.

On the 50th anniversary of John F. Kennedy’s Berlin speech on the steps of Rathaus Schoeneberg, the American Embassy organized a panel on the future of economics in Berlin, with a focus on the budding tech scene.

“All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin.”

Flanked by flowers and microphones the keynote speaker begins: “Now more than ever, in a post-war, post-wall Berlin, innovation and open markets pave the route to freedom.”

Erin, having studied theater in high school and college, is the mouthpiece for the photo sharing network BamD. “The conversation we are having today begins and ends with community, but for us here in Berlin,

and particularly at BamD, it's about a global community." She pauses and looks at the audience. "It is true, we are all Berliners in some way..." She passes the microphone to Giorgio Betolini, the CEO of Ploonge.

"Why is Berlin important to you and your company?"

"I think Berlin is like a child waking up after an inspiring dream. It's full of young people from different social backgrounds willing to challenge themselves." Erin rolls her eyes. Next, Lenard Krawinkel, the founder of Zoobe, responds. "Berlin is a city that carries you. It provides space to explore."

The presentation concludes with a slideshow of co-working spaces around Berlin; smiling young people on computers, sun-drenched desks below graffiti murals of logos.

Later that week, in an airport bar, Erin rips the cover off of a CNBC magazine, folding it in half and sliding it into her laptop case. In loopy blue cursive just below the Gidsy cofounder's chin, it reads: *BRATS: borderless, restless, agile, tech-savvy... and your deadliest rival.*

"In the rise of the micro-multinational age, the agile are poised to inherit the earth -- *Rise of the Roving Empires,*" she reads aloud sarcastically making the bartender look up from washing glasses. Erin liked to joke to her father over Skype that she had joined the 3%, referring to the number of females in Berlin's tech industry.

The BamD office, where Erin works, has an open layout with only a few glass-enclosed rooms with bright furniture and steel tables. "This type of floor plan," Nathan, the CEO explained to *Der Zeit*, "is because ideas travel between people, not walls."

There's a foosball table, free Club Mate, massages on Wednesdays, and a large mural of the slogan *NEVER STOP EXPLORING* above the human relations desk. Leading down the hallway to the roof deck is a series of framed photographs, "highlights from the BamD photo streams, each in one of our custom filters."

Meanwhile in California a German government plane lands. The Minister of Economics and Technology, Phillip Rösler, unbuckles his seat belt and expresses his excitement to the six entrepreneurs traveling with him.

Berlin's unemployment rate is nearly double that of other German cities, but the tech scene is rapidly expanding and as Rösler stated in his speech at Startup Camp Berlin, "We are counting on you to boost future growth, increase prosperity and create jobs."

The government plane is taxiing towards Peter Thiel, German-born billionaire, cofounder of PayPal, and the man behind the 100,000 dollar incentive for the young entrepreneur to drop out of school. In an interview with *Der Spiegel* the Minister had said that he prepared only one question for dinner that night with Peter Thiel. "What makes startups successful?"

With an oyster resting in his hand, Thiel answers the Minister, quoting himself: "It's something you have to

do around the clock, and that doesn't compute with our existing educational system.”

“This is a conversation of youth.” He slurps the oyster.

On Wednesday morning we walk up the stairs to 6Wunderkinder. Vivian, from New Zealand, buzzes us in, commenting on the sunlight. We nod and say, “Perfect for shooting.”

“The space is sort of a mess, we're moving to the top floor next week.”

We chat about their long-term plans to move to The Factory, a partially Google-funded complex on Rheinsberger Strasse which “aims to bring established companies and startups together in a unique work-play environment, which will even have a basketball court.” She adds, “But it's behind schedule -- probably late next year.”

“Yeah, we'll expand to upstairs till it opens, it has a terrace, it will be good for summer.” Later that week eating falafel, we stare up at the Firefox banner hanging from the scaffolding on the future ‘Factory’ and debate taking a photo.

“Help yourself!” Vivian motions towards a pan of käsekuchen surrounded by beanbags.

She tells us briefly about her reasons for moving to Berlin; her boyfriend is German and she loves the city.

“We develop Wunderlist, which is basically a task management system that you can use between all your devices. Whether you're planning an overseas adventure, sharing a shopping list, or simply keeping track of your daily to-dos.”

We nod, smiling. “And we just rebuilt the app to be native for all devices, Android, etc...” We photograph four guys in front of their MacBooks overlooking a construction site.

Created in 2010, Wunderlist is regularly ranked as one of the top productivity apps on iTunes, with over 9 million downloads. In an interview with The New York Times one of the cofounders states that “in the next two years we will have a multi-billion euro company here in Berlin.” Looking out the window Vivian tells us, “It's exciting, I wouldn't want to be anywhere else.”

In an interview over coffees at St. Oberholz, a former Apple employee describes Berlin as the last affordable metropolis. Picking at a muffin he goes on to describe the kind of “counter culture” vibe Berlin has for people who live in places like San Diego.

“It's this crazy green field... There are a lot of creative people, and if you give creative people green fields, they build amazing things.”

Erin is seated on a modular cube in front of a line of yellow letters spelling out: *If you have a brain you are a startup*. Nathan, the CEO of BamD, is flipping through his iPhone with a flushed face. Erin reassures him,

“It does something entirely different,” referring to Instagram’s new tagging feature. Nathan’s been jumpy ever since Instagram changed their terms of service to allow them to sell users photos to advertisers, and BamD has been scrambling to absorb those who deleted their accounts.

BamD is a community photo platform, not unlike Instagram, but it has a more versatile interface for user communication: “facilitating conversations, through text and photo.”

Erin accepted the job after a string of Skype meetings with Nathan, who thought she was “personable and an excellent writer, with a unique voice.” We meet Erin for the first time at a bar near Kotbusserdam. With a smile, she approached our table, “Can I borrow a chair?” We nodded and she picked up the chair, returning to a group of guys in jeans and Nikes.

The second time we meet Erin is at the BamD office, her feet resting on the chair across from her. When she sees us, she perks up, flipping her iPhone facedown and extending her hand. “Hi.” Her brand of enthusiasm is cautious but brassy and she, like everyone else, is “happy” to let us photograph her.

We exchange glances, remembering her from the bar; the one who asked for the chair.

“Do you want me to look at the camera?” We shake our heads.

“BamD is a photo sharing platform.” She gives us the tour while twice reminding us that she doesn’t normally give tours, but Cassandra from human relations is out with something. She is a writer.

Later over beers Erin explains that like Cassandra she is expected to absorb female duties at the company. She attends dinners that don’t apply to her job because it’s “better to have a balanced group” when out with investors.

“I fell into it. I was studying creative writing and my roommate in college was running a startup out of our apartment, I wrote the copy for him instead of paying bills. He just sold the company.”

She points to Nathan. “That’s our CEO.”

We photograph her sitting at her desk, she moves a tupperware out of the frame. I ask her if she likes Berlin, she says yes.

Looking directly at the camera she asks us if the art scene here is interesting.

We say yes. We ask about her writing.

“The type of writing I do here is all over the place. I have a specific way of saying things, structuring sentences, engaging people through plays in language. Also I guess I’m behind what’s been described as the ‘certain directness’ which gives BamD its ‘edgy’ tone.”

“Are you the only writer?”

“No, but I end up having to rewrite and oversee everything to make sure it stays within the voice.”

“Can you describe the voice?”

“Maybe we should get a drink sometime and I can tell you about the voice,” Erin says smiling and returning to her desk.

Germany was voted the second most innovative country in 2013 according to GE’s Innovation Barometer, largely credited to “the growing startup sector.” 2013 is also the year the government came forward with its plans to support the “Silicon Valley phenom on the banks of the Spree.”

Two buildings up from the Soho House, German Chancellor Angela Merkel blankly stares at Holly, who is fresh from California and working at Wooga, a game design startup. “What do you mean by barriers?” Merkel asks, coolly.

Holly describes the difficulties of registering her address with the Bürgeramt in Prenzlauerberg. “You’re lucky if someone speaks English.” Later she tells a reporter from Der Spiegel that she “fell in love with the city” and is really a musician.

“We don’t want money from you, but we want a more welcoming atmosphere,” says Jens Begemann, one of the Wooga cofounders. In a turquoise blazer the Chancellor responds. “Have you spoken with the mayor about this?”

“Yes,” Begemann says, “but everything that you do to help Germany develop a more welcoming culture really helps the industry.” Merkel nods.

They take her on a tour of the office.

“Who takes care of the work contracts?” “How many can play the game?” “What are the characters called?” “What did you study?”

Begemann explains that the money comes from sales on the premium version of the game. “What benefits are there to the premium version?” she asks, staring at a three-eyed fish giving a thumbs-up on an iPad.

“One could, for example, get magic dust more quickly to help beat opponents. Magic powder.”

“People pay for that?”

“We hire two new employees each week.”

Later in an interview with The Guardian, Begemann explains that he chose Berlin because “compared to other European capitals the costs for food and accommodation are really low. That attracts young and cre-

ative people from all over the world.”

We get an email from Erin.

*How about Nobel Olfe this Tuesday? Around 7?*

At the bar, Erin is antsy. Her copy is due in two days to introduce a new ‘graph’ feature onto the BamD interface. “Simply put, it converts your friends photographs into easily digestible analytics. It’s not earth shattering, but in terms of communicating with photographs it’s very new.” Erin had spent the day reading the language of other photo sharing websites. “The annoying part is that Nathan doesn’t want to use the word ‘graph’ because of Facebook.”

We laugh. “Any good synonyms?”

“Chart, diagram, linear representation, layout. I don’t want to talk about it.” Erin says, turning her head towards the bartender.

We ask her if there’s a lot of turnover in Berlin.

“It’s all about holding on to talent.”

“How?”

“It’s a migrant work force, where the fuck are any of these people from? And anyway if they’re good they can just stay at home and do this from their parents basement.”

She sips her drink. “A couple of days ago, I met with one of the best JavaScript front-end developers I know. He’s based in Poland. He told me that a couple of years ago, he would have had to move to Germany for a job. But now he basically sits at home in Poland, picking up a massive daily rate and not moving.”

“Then why are they coming?”

“Berlin is still cool so people are willing to move here, it’s always been cool to tech kids, compared to somewhere like London.” Erin quotes Peter Thiel and rolls her eyes. “This is a conversation of youth.”

Knocking back the last of her vodka soda, she adds, “If you can’t find the talent you want here, whoever they are, theyre probably willing to move here. And you don’t have to compete with companies like Twitter.”

“There was something like 900 million Euros in investment funds last year, but it’s still chump change. Everyone will flare out if bigger money doesn’t roll in.” She pauses. “Berlin is ranked 15th in startup ecosystems in the world, there’s a long way to go.”

We ask what brings big money, she talks about SoundCloud, about SXSW, about Angel Investors and the

“retards” at Startup Engine.

“This city has a vampire thing right now. It attracts all these young people with ideas, and everyone’s caught between lifestyle and idealism with their projects, and then it all just gets sucked out of them basically for free.”

Erin motions to the bartender. “All setbacks are learning experiences, everything is exciting, fuckups are challenges, customers are friends, and the future is always fun. That’s the type of attitude,” Erin says chewing on an ice cube. “It’s a language game about lying, you have to be so adaptable you’re never telling the truth.”

“It seems like you just have to be really positive.”

“That’s not, not true.” Erin says throwing her head back laughing. “Look, let’s do this again, it’s really nice to be around people who aren’t in the tech scene, but I’ve got to finish this Linear Layout Diagram.”

Before leaving Erin pulls her phone out of her pocket saying “You should check this out,” emailing us a link to Photo Hack Day Berlin. “Last year the winner was TouristEraser, which lets you take pictures without people in them by stitching and erasing anything that moves.”

Cutting his pizza in half at Il Casolare, Alexander Ljung, one of the cofounders of SoundCloud, describes Berlin: “It isn’t proven, the city itself is a startup in that way.” SoundCloud, a social music platform with over 38 million users, has become the poster child for Berlin startups since it moved from Sweden in 2007.

On Wednesday at noon, we follow an old man with a handtruck full of Club Mate and mineral water to SponsorPay. Sarah from human relations greets us and looks over the photo release form. A young intern is assigned to follow us, we apologize for taking up her time but she doesn’t seem to mind as she leads us to their second building.

“Just please don’t photograph the CEO.”

SponsorPay has had a 126% revenue growth just last year. “Value-exchange advertising is consistently increasing in its popularity thanks to its ability to drive meaningful engagement,” CEO Andreas Bodczek said in his usual chipper tone to Venturebeat.

Bodczek is doing a phone interview when we arrive. Finishing his lunch, he describes SponsorPay’s 300% growth in mobile business since January of 2012. He declines sharing the exact user growth and briefly touches on his time incubating SponsorPay at Team Europe.

“You could say it was good timing.”

Three floors of massive rooms filled with computers and calm faces. Wearing headphones, a guy asks if his

screen is in the shot and he closes Tumblr. Everyone else ignores us. The intern describes her move from Munich. She's been at SponsorPay for two months. "It's been very interesting."

There is no cheerful curiosity towards our camera equipment, or questions about what the photographs will be for. Everyone is sitting, silently staring at screens.

"They've been hiring about a dozen people a month, something like that," the intern says to us in the hallway. Looking through the viewfinder at the "second fastest growing digital company in Europe," we feel for the first time impenetrability.

We discuss this with Erin at the bar after she gets off work. Perched on a stool Erin laughs, "The slip from startup to something static, a real company?" She puts her glass down and looks at us, "They don't need you, that's what you're talking about."

"Need us?"

"Yes, need you. Everyone is everyone and you have to be young and relatable, it's a system where the press is everyone, where the investor is everyone, where the customer is everyone."

She points to her iPhone emphatically, "Everyone."

"The other ones you've seen, they are all still 'potential models' which will either become real or blow away, even BamD, it's why I had to be happy to see you."

At 3pm we arrive to the office of Toast, situated in an altbau apartment building on the same block as the future Factory. Toast is another list managing startup, this one for gifts.

"In late 2011 we really started analyzing gifting as it is a deep-rooted social tradition that has a major positive impact," Frank, the CEO, says to us, his hands making circles in the air.

"So many people told us the same story: 'My boyfriend doesn't know what I like,' 'I hate giving gift cards, they're so impersonal,' 'My mom asks me what I want for Christmas and I never know what to say.' It was obvious that we needed to build an app to make sure you can send and receive the perfect gift."

The office is in one room of a shared space. Frank gives us a tour. In the kitchen a job interview is taking place, a young woman describes her skills in Microsoft.

Silicon Allee, in a room in the back, is a blog founded by "a couple of expatriate Berlin based entrepreneurs." The blog hosts regular breakfast meetups at St. Oberholz, where the young tech community "networks over coffee."

The six men working at Toast are all between 25 and 30 and willing to be photographed, except for one guy in a hoodie with flushed cheeks. "I just don't like pictures."

We talk a little bit about Toast, and about the Factory, which you can see under construction from the kitchen window. “The exciting prospects of Berlin’s tech future.”

“It’s interesting because it will be built directly on the line of the Berlin Wall.”

We nod.

“Rent is cheap, and people have time and space to really focus on their ideas.”

In a video for VentureBeat, Simon Schaefer, one of the main investors of the Factory, stands on the building site, his hand extended, pointing towards Wedding then towards Mitte. “This is the line of East and West.” He then points upwards towards the windows of a building nearby. “They used to sit up there and spy on the West with binoculars.”

Erin is already waiting at the bar, already one drink in. The light of her computer illuminates stickers of startup logos. “I’m fucking pissed.” I pull myself up to the stool next to her.

“What’s up?”

“Just have to re-write a bunch of stuff because Nathan is scared.”

“Of what?”

“Of sticking to the idea, he’s always trying to roll other shit in, it’s like we are good at what we do, we just need to keep sharpening, not adding.”

She closes her laptop and I order two vodka sodas. “How much do you get paid?” I blurt out.

“Not enough, that’s the thing, because the cost of living is so cheap here all these guys are getting paid basically nothing... and it’s ok. Everyone’s happy, so the standards are set low. But after this round of seeding we will be worth more, and he knows he can’t lose me.”

She asks me about my studio and I describe the Atelierhof Kreuzberg. “Rent is 320 for our big room, you should come by.” Erin likes our photographs and we plan on giving her one of the images from BamD. She likes hearing about fabrication, pricing and art fairs.

“There are a lot of similarities between the art scene and the startup scene,” she says, looking me in the eyes.

Erin knocks back another vodka soda and puts her hand on my leg. She turns her head toward me, her red sweater falling off her shoulder. “You know, I did theater in high school.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah, I did a lot of improv.”

I tell her about starring in West Side Story in middle school.

“Improv is different.”

I listen, holding my drink near her hand on my thigh.

“The first rule of improv is you never say no, you’re always saying yes, always waiting for people to say yes back to you.”

“Right.”

“For a story to be built, if it’s going to be a long one, then the participants have to agree to a basic situation. Never shut people down and never ask real questions because it forces things into smaller representations.” Erin’s hand is still resting on my leg. She continues, her voice getting louder.

“Focus on here and now, never forget that everything that matters will happen directly in the scene to the people in the scene, nothing more and nothing less. Also, the best scenes take place somewhere specific, so choose a good location,” she gestures towards the bar.

Slamming her empty glass down, she smiles. “Improv is about character change, there has to be change, all we can do is change. Mistakes, revelations, experiences, ramifications. It won’t be interesting without change.”

Looking me dead in the eyes, Erin moves closer. “This thing all of us are doing here, the startup thing, it’s the same.”

“Just say yes,” she whispers into my ear.

She takes her hand off my thigh and grabs my drink laughing.

“Come over for dinner next week, it’s my turn to host a BamD night.”

“Sure,” I say, sliding off my stool without knowing what ‘BamD night’ means. “Let me know what I should bring.” When I return from the bathroom her computer is open, and she is typing furiously.

*DINNER*

*Ritterstrasse 17 at 8pm*

*Bring wine*

*x Erin*

*Perfect, see you then*

*xmnc*

The next morning at 10am we climb the stairs to Nxtbgthng. Paul answers the door extending a handshake. The office is on the top floor of a building on Oranienstrasse, sandwiched between furniture manufacturers and architecture studios. “We just moved in, so there isn’t much set up.”

“We build apps for iPad, iPhone, basically anything Mac related.”

Two men sit at a computer in each of the three rooms, which are divided by glass bricks. Paul moves a cookie package out of the frame and adjusts the brightness of his screen. “Can you see what’s on it?”

“We’ve worked with SoundCloud, Carhartt, Red Bull, Sleek Art Guide Berlin -- actually, you might be interested in them.” Paul reaches for an iPad velcroed to the wall and shows us the Sleek Magazine website.

“We designed their app so that foreign visitors could download it with hotel wifi, and continue to use it on the road without a data plan.”

We pack up our tripod and tell them we’ll send the photos when they’re scanned.

Angela Merkel was a chemist before entering politics, a fact that is celebrated during her visit to ResearchGate, ‘Facebook for scientists.’ Merkel, in a green blazer, looks directly at the chief investor sitting near the window and asks, “is this your money you’ve invested or your parents?”

After a quick tour of the space, Harvard grad and ResearchGate cofounder Ijad Madisch lists the company’s success stories. Merkel nods in approval.

Like Gidsy, ResearchGate bloomed out of an acknowledged problem. “We began when two researchers discovered first-hand that working with a friend or colleague based on the other side of the world was no easy task.” Pausing, Madisch looks at Merkel who is checking her watch. “We strive to facilitate scientific collaboration on a global scale.”

“We love Berlin, it’s a city which fosters experimentation.”

Offering a few words of support and thanking them for their time, Merkel exits the office with her security detail.

It was 3pm and we were late to Blinkist. Jan tells us over the phone that it will be easiest if we just meet him in the Betahaus café underneath their office. Betahaus opened in 2009, and aims to provide a co-working space that combines “a Vienna-style coffee house, a library, a home office, and a university campus.” Sitting by the window eating a pretzel, we eavesdrop on conversations in American English.

Jan bounds out of a door with a large smile, then leads us up a winding corridor of offices and plywood furniture. “Blinkist stepped up to solve a problem most people face. There are so many fascinating books out there, but so little time to read them. Their insights lie beyond our reach. We offer an easier way to discover

great books and access their knowledge,” Jan says without missing a beat.

His partner, Derrick, wearing a plaid shirt, chimes in: “really what we do is compress books in clear and memorable ways so that people can enjoy them, it’s a tool. That’s Ariel, she’s one of our interns.” Ariel was seated with a copy of Good to Great resting next to her Jansport backpack.

We move the camera up to her. “Do you want me to look at you?”

“No, it’s usually best if you just ignore us.” She smiles and returns to typing.

At 4pm, standing outside of a Turkish restaurant, we see the sign for Loopcam. Oskar buzzes us in to their white brick office draped with colorful banners. It’s Friday, and we have Erin’s dinner later that night.

The Loopcam kids are young, early twenties, and we talk about Berlin, about Sweden, about SoundCloud, and a bar on Hermanstrasse. “You know we had this idea, but it was really the SoundCloud guys who pushed us to go to the next level.”

Loopcam is a gif generator, like Vine, but with photos.

“We are in the process of expanding into a full-blown social network.”

They want to know about the art scene in Berlin, and we ask them questions about investors. Shortly after our arrival the Versatel Internet technician shows up to wire something in the corner. “Do you know Erin, from BamD?” I blurt out while photographing Karin. “Yeah, blonde? We met her at one of the meetups last year.”

As I focus the 4x5 camera Oskar asks if it’s ok to make a ‘loop’ of me photographing. “Of course,” I respond, muffled by my jacket, which I’m using as a dark cloth.

They invite us to their party the following weekend, and we promise to swing by.

“Rosé?”

“Or White?”

“We should probably just get Vodka.”

Walking down Reichenberger Strasse towards Erin’s house with a bottle of Svedka, we listed all the start-ups we wanted to visit next week. Erin answers the door in a tight blue cardigan. “Welcome to BamD night, bitches!” The door swings open onto a crowd of twenty-somethings standing around a table.

“I hope it’s ok we only brought Svedka.”

“I prefer Grey Goose,” she responds, grabbing the bottle.

Erin re-introduces us to Nathan the CEO, Cassandra the head of HR, Daniel the head programmer, Patrick their designer, and Sebastian their CFO. “This is the main team, we are BamD!” Nathan says with a smile. A couple of interns and part-time programmers don’t warrant introductions.

Gesturing towards the table with a beer in his hand, Nathan continues, “we trade off hosting a dinner once a month, which acts as a kind of ‘team chill’ moment and content generator for our BamD foodie stream.” He holds his beer up to Erin, “and by the end of this week, all of the past years dinners will be converted into ‘Pictograms.’”

Erin looks at him smiling, “there you have it, from the man himself. Pictograms.” She opens the vodka bottle and lists what’s in store for the evening.

“First, lentil and chickpea salad with feta and tahini, and hummus -- here, it’s good, try some,” she says, handing us a bowl of pita triangles. “Then carrot ginger soup, lamb cassoulet, and especially for Nathan, spaetzle. And finally, vanilla ice cream with rhubarb compote.”

“This looks beautiful Erin,” Nathan calls while photographing the flowers on the dinner table with his iPhone.

Erin pulls me into the kitchen to do a shot of vodka. “Never stop exploring!” she laughs, quoting the BamD motto and touching her shot glass to mine.

“So tell us about your work,” Patrick says, dipping pita into the hummus bowl.

We talk for a while, describing some of our previous projects and our relationship to photography. Nathan raises his glass, “You know I just think it’s so great that we have fine art photographers here with us for this dinner.”

Erin returns with two large vodka ginger beers. “Almost like a Moscow Mule,” she says winking. Nathan asks her to hold them closer to the candles, zooming in with his index finger and thumb. “Perfect.”

“You should have seen last month.”

Sebastian explains the concept of the beer chicken while flipping through the BamD stream on his iPad. “This was insane,” he says pointing to the screen. “It’s cooked with a can of beer in it, you open it before putting it in and it just absorbs into the chicken.”

“But it was a bitch trying to get canned beer here.”

“It did get a lot of likes,” Patrick says handing out napkins.

“Ok, ok, ok, it’s time!” Erin enters carrying a large metal pot filled with carrot soup. “Wait, let me get it!” Cassandra holds her phone up, the flash bursts as Erin makes duck face behind a cloud of steam rising.

“Got it.”

Everyone is seated around the table, laughing and mumbling about things related to work. Sebastian tries to bring up soccer with us but quickly realizes we know nothing. Daniel tells us about studying photo in college.

“Hasselblad usually.”

“I’m excited for Cologne.”

“There’s a big tech conference.”

“We’re on a panel, and we all get put up in hotels.”

Erin ladles the orange liquid into bowls, garnishing them with a dollop of crème fraiche and a pinch of sesame seeds. Holding up his beer, Nathan makes a toast. “Here’s to another month at the best startup in Berlin.” Erin smirks at me, gulping down her drink.

Looking at us Erin says, “Nathan was nervous to have you guys here for this, but I told him you’re not journalists and you’re not responsible to get it ‘right’.”

Nathan blushed, “No, no, it’s just this is supposed to be intimate. But Erin made me realize you’re artists, and BamD is really about sharing art with your network.”

“One happy creative class. Maybe I don’t really get what you guys want, but I also don’t really care, like I said, you’re not journalists,” Erin says adding pepper to her soup.

I pause, looking at Erin. “I thought you said the press was everyone,” pointing towards her iPhone. Erin responds with a dry smile as she reaches for the bread.

“Did you read that Guardian article on Gidsy?” Patrick asks, breaking the conversation.

“There’s no way they made 1.2 million in the first round of seeding.”

“Of course they did, they did.”

Everyone at the table takes their phones out before picking up their spoons, styling their dishes. “Nathan, lean in to your right!” Sebastian’s flash goes off. Daniel spoons the chickpeas while describing the flammkuchen he made in October. “It was really good, I mean Sebastian’s German and he liked it.”

Patrick asks who’s going to Berghain with him later. Cassandra laughs, looking at us. “Patrick goes to Berghain every weekend, it’s not even a question anymore.”

“Did you see the thing about Klout becoming a social network? A kind of self help/Ask Jeeves thing.”

“Klout Experts.”

Cassandra holds her phone up for a close up of the lamb.

When the final glob of rhubarb compote is heaped on to the ice cream Nathan announces, “another successful dinner, 120 collective photos for the stream!” A small round of cheers is followed by a pause as the table collectively holds their iPhones above their dirty dishes.

We take it as our cue to say goodbye and stumble out towards Kottbusser Tor.

Three days later we walk to Paul Lincke Ufer to visit the eelusion office. Climbing the stairs to the fourth floor, Claus opens the door smiling. “Welcome to eelusion. We develop avant-gardist digital games which combine the latest digital trends, like geo location and augmented reality.”

The office is one large room with windows on both sides. Rows of computers break up the space, a mixture of men and women sitting, quietly chatting, and pointing at their screens. A group of six gather near a whiteboard and discuss the route of a video game character, plotting his movements with dotted lines.

“Berlin is really good to us,” one of the young women says while drafting an email. We photograph her, focusing on her peace sign ring resting on the computer mouse. “I mean, we could have been anywhere.”

Angela Merkel looks at her notes on stage in front of a large banner reading Internet & Startups in Deutschland. Her big move towards acknowledging the startup community is taking place in an old brewery in Prenzlauerberg. “Meine Damen und Herren. Ich will lieber nicht gleich so weit gehen und ‘liebe Freunde’ sagen, man muss sich ja vorsichtig annähern.” (*“Ladies and Gentlemen, I’d rather not go so far as to say ‘dear friends’ straight away. One must be cautious when approaching one another.”*)

I send Erin an email and thank her for dinner. She responds with an image of me eating soup and grinning.

Erin, wearing red lipstick, sits quietly in the audience with 175 other startup developers and investors. To mild applause, Merkel informs the room that they represent collectively 120,000 employees and 20 billion Euros. Nathan whispers to Erin, “and how many emails.” Pausing, Merkel looks out at the audience and calls startups the “yeast” of the economy, a light joke about the setting of the brewery.

After the speech, over drinks, someone from WoodO chimes, “At least she acknowledged that were going to be the ones to save Berlin.” The table laughs. A half dozen or so men in sports coats discuss with an online magazine the reality of any governmental change.

“What’s difficult is you have the same legal system for large corporations as you do for small companies, when you are only six to twenty people you need very different contracts and tax structures.”

“The truth is if Pinterest was started in Berlin right now it wouldn’t have been funded, it would have been

blown off as another cool idea.”

At a different table, Erin speaks with a reporter from The Guardian. “There is an attitude that there’s limitless potential, but the reality is we’re 30 years behind Silicon Valley, and even with 850,000 people working in IT in Berlin, there’s 40,000 vacant tech jobs.”

“Well that could be seen positively,” the reporter says, looking up from his notes.

“Not in terms of long term growth, or the attraction of big investors,” Erin responds, putting on her coat.

“Also it’s a question of failure, Germans have it in their mind that if you fail you’re finished, there’s no spirit of learning from mistakes. That has to change before anything will be able to really grow.” She thanks him and sends me a text.

*Merkel called me yeast, lets get a drink?*

*Sure*

*in 30 at Olfe*

*k*

Erin recounts the talk while finishing a vodka soda, pulling out her phone to show me images. “It was actually kind of exciting, maybe this is just the beginning.” I flip through images while she orders two shots of tequila.

We clink glasses as Erin says “I like it here.” I nod, not sure if she’s talking about Berlin, or me, or Mobel Olfe.

On Monday we walk to Gidsy, situated right off of Adalbertstrasse in a large loft space. We’ve seen a half dozen or so interviews with Edial and Floris, the two brothers from The Netherlands who founded Gidsy, so we already know the layout of the office. Sarah greets us at the door, cheerfully asking about the type of photographs we want to take and if we need anything from her.

Gidsy is a peer to peer network, “stemming from the culture of collaborative consumption,” she tells us, “people often call us the Airbnb of experiences.”

A row of bikes line one side of the office, and a large wooden dining table sits in the middle of the space with a centerpiece of wooden letters spelling out GIDSY. “Those are freelancers for Etsy, they work here sometimes,” Sarah tells us as we move our tripod towards their side of the room. We photograph them from a distance.

Sarah describes why the company is based in Berlin, “It’s a hub -- for Europe, for all types of people, energy and experiences. It’s a perfect match for Gidsy.”

While typing on her computer, she explains the variety of ‘experiences’ one can book on Gidsy. “Cooking

classes, tours of neighborhoods or gallery crawls, supper clubs, craft workshops... Basically as a guide or 'experience provider' you create your event, set your prices and its open to the public. It's a great economic engine for a city as diverse as Berlin."

We watch through the lens as Sarah adds a photograph of eggplant stir-fry to the Gidsy blog. "It's really all about making connections with people in a real and meaningful way."

*2013*