

»SHIP FICTION«

by Dorit Ehlers



introduces an imaginary ship world for everybody to participate:

»**Ship Longing Research**« is a project focusing on the longing for ships, making it the subject of a theatrical investigation. A public intervention with creative measuring tools, questionnaires and joyful interaction, which had been developed for the ELBFEST.HAMBURG (Sept. 2018) and took place during 5 months in different close-to-harbour sites in Hamburg, with sideshows in Salzburg; since April 2018 continuous online presence.

*The intention of the Elbfest is to give focus to all the traditional ships in the harbour and to all the people who take care of them, 2018's motto was "Harbour confessions" (Hafenbekenntnisse). Organizer of the Elbfest is "Kulturnetzwerk Maritimes Hamburg" under the direction of the **Stiftung Historische Museen Hamburg**.*

»**Postal Bottle Service**« emerged from »Ship Longing Research« as a project with autonomous quality. It is an analogue communication system between ship longers of different cities, harbour and non-harbour places, transferring the idea of a *message in a bottle* to fiction: Sheets of paper with the printed outline of a bottle, ready for handwritten questions and answers. A counterpoint to an accelerated and increasingly impersonal time and a soon-to-be flagship art project of the future German Port Museum: a weatherproof »Postal Bottle Box« will be installed at Hamburg harbour connected to temporary delivery spots all over the world.

*The **German Port Museum** (Deutsches Hafenmuseum) is a planned nationally funded museum to open in Hamburg with the focus on commercial and economic history of shipping and wider issues of globalization, worldwide trade and harbour myths. During the process of conceptualization there will be several actions to create its public appearance.*

About »Ship Longing Research«

: a community building topic

"Welcome to the Ship Longing Club!

Let us build an illusion to give us a whiff of the happiness that our longing imagines. Let us look for alternatives to the ship, when we have to do without it

Let us tell each other of our longing – let us go on an imaginary sea voyage together, sparing the oceans. Let's save our money and instead sail around the entertainment business. Let us entertain each other and converse together! Longing unites."

»Ship Longing« (Schiffssehnsucht) can catch everyone, independently of whether you reside at a port or dream of ships from a distance. It is a land-based topic bringing together ship addicts of all kinds and ages, professional or amateur, or simply dreamers.

the project idea:

Everything started with a personal observation ... I now reside in the Austrian mountains, but I found that whenever I visited my birthplace of Hamburg, a trip on board the *Elbe ferry* was my ritual, it immediately triggered a feeling of happiness. At some point this ship pleasure became the subject for a theatre idea: How could this feeling of happiness be "brought on land" ...? How could an illusion be created through obvious theatrical tricks and magic, to make people believe they are on an imaginary ship so that they could experience a surrogate ship pleasure for a precious glimpse of time ...

»SHIP FICTION« by now has become my personal signature. Under this label, the topic of 'Ship Longing' continuously evolves into different project ideas of different formats with different artistic means – as some kind of »criss-cross cruise« (Kreuz&Querfahrt).

The basic idea is rooted in theatre and relies on the joy of imagining and playing. As an interaction with an audience that is willing to agree to a fictional proposition for a certain time. On another level the shared pleasure always leaves room for more serious questions, insights and reflection.

A website with a blog has been set up to accompany all live appearance. It serves as a reference and docking platform for the public, but it is also like a program booklet for the theatre experience. A guide to a fictional world that functions with its own vocabulary and claims the expertise as real. Each proposition about »Ship Longing« always stays within the realm of fiction and every personal encounter is an invitation to play along and to join and enjoy the proposed world.

www.schiffssehnsucht.com

: a theatrical fiction

The public appearance is framed by a fictional character and a fictitious science:

Miss A. Ship ...

Ship longing researcher and expert on »Ship Fiction« (Inland Ship Illusion)

... and Ship Longing Research:

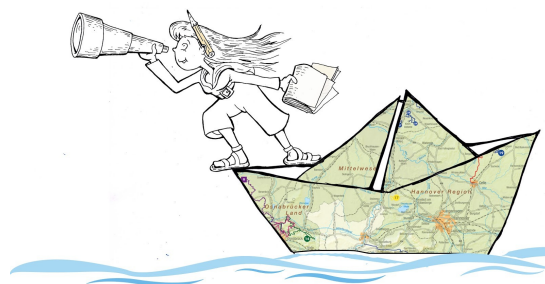
“LONGING or yearning can be an outlet for pain – or it can be a wonderful feeling: knowing that something has grown so dear to my heart, that I painfully miss it when absent. A strong emotion setting the wish machine in motion ... and once the power of imagination takes over, everything becomes even lovelier – and soon the object of longing is part of a fantastic world.

RESEARCH means figuratively: to track ship longing. It is about the myth, about subjective perception, a sensory phenomenon. Not to be confused with reality, neither as comparison nor as measurement. The facts derive from people’s minds, not necessarily from real conditions.

Each individual expertise is required: What is longing made of? What are the characteristics? At what distance or at what maximum time limit does it occur? And what else is there to know ...?

*The study of **Ship Longing Research** arises from verbal narrative, the thousands of stories, projections, fantasies, memories, ... and invites into a shared universe of imagination.”*

The creation of a real space where people could linger, stir up & explore their emotional bonds to ships and seafaring was the objective of the project »Ship Longing Research«, which took place in Hamburg in 2018. A container on a public harbour terrace was transformed into a **Ship Longing Research Lab**, which for a period of 5 weeks invited passers-by to step in and forget about time and duties ... It was a room that, also in a figurative sense, gave *Ship Longing* a space of its own.



Miss A. Ship

Illustration by Arthur Zgubic

: an interactive research lab

A container equipped as »**Ship Longing Research Lab**«, where people are invited to get entangled and share their experiences on the subject of ships. Inside: a collection of creative measuring instruments & tools, the essential idea here is to seduce the senses. The "ship feeling" is – on the one hand – defined by our senses (shaky ground, odor, noise, visual impressions, haptics). On the other hand, longing is composed of feelings, associations, dreams, hopes and many other things. But how aware are we of that? All stations are a mix of inventions, inquiries and playful ideas in order to fill the room with longing and make it "tangible". A suggestion to explore, stimulate, quench or share your longing. In the appearance of statistics, surveys, measurement results, official names – and research outfit like white coats, scribble book and pen ...

the equipment: (see also picture gallery <https://www.schiffssehnsucht.com/presse/>)

- »Bestsmeller list« (odor samples: machine oil, sardines in oil, rigging lines, rum, salt water)
- »Longing bottle post« (messages to leave & take in empty bottles)
- »First-aid station«: *Sailor's yarns Training kit* and *Paper rescue boat for Longing emergency* (do-it-yourself instruction for paper boats & prepared sheet with ready-made wake)
- »Sway-o-Meter« (measuring device to determine one's personal »Swaying Amplitude«)
- »Crossing-the-line ceremony« (Äquatortaufe), a tribute to Joachim Ringelnatz, poet and seaman
- Galley with hardtack and wish list for sea meals
- »Snippet Suitcase« (collection point for all completed documents: »Ship Longing Confession«, »Personal Ship-shape-ness«, »Shore Leave«, »Self-assessment«), guest book, postcards
- »Underwater suitcase« (audio-visual installation by Salzburg artist Hans Pollhammer)
- »Ship's deck« (swaying deckchair by Salzburg artist Fritz Rücker + ocean&ship sounds)
- »Ship Imagination Regulations« (onboard rules by Salzburg journalist Martin Stricker)
- »Postal Bottle Service« (see last chapter)

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practice: »Consultation hour« with Miss A. Ship for deeper insight into one's longing:

- »Micro-second Visions« (magic drawing board for instant sketches)
- »Heartbeat word file« (collected words from all test persons)
- »Longing type-determining-Method« (either-or-questions)
- Club membership tattoos (small anchor / paper boat stamps)

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social media: Instagram account for chain stories and bottle post gallery

Please, step inside ... (examples & experiences)

Whoever stopped was interrogated immediately and thereby became a test person / a proband. Hereby the positive effect of ships could already be proved: most of the time those interviewed were in a good mood at the end of the »Basic Anamnesis« and had become curious ...

Basic anamnesis

Do you like ships?

Do you like being on a ship?

Do you miss something when...

a) ... you are not on a ship?

b) ... you can't see a ship?

c) ... far and wide – there's no ship around?

Do you know the feeling of "ship longing"?

[598 interviewed persons said they like ships. Of these 353 people knew 'ship longing' = 59%.]



The typical person who stopped?

It was not possible to find any common tendencies, whether sex or age. The whole range: families with small children, pensioners, people in work during their break, residents, groups, individuals, ship spotters, real seafarers, locals and tourists ... Everybody with a personal connection to ships. As a result of the 'study', it seemed, however, possible to identify the following recurring types *:

S1 Yarn spinner ("Long live fiction")

S2 Sundeck dreamer ("I can plunge in completely")

S3 Specialist ("I've been to sea / I'm a pro")

S4 Symptom rookie ("I have just realized that I long for ships")

S5 Super speedy ("I like ships, but I'm in a hurry... ")

S6 Ship denier ("I don't need this .. ")

* part of the questionnaire »Self-assessment«, which was developed at the end of the project

: a theatre practice

Most of the applied tools are analogue and create a virtual experience through the most fundamental and old fashioned of theatre devices: imagination. That is combined, with a conscious selection of social media to help support the virtual reality.

Website functions, Blog, Instagram:

At the beginning of the project a website was installed as "research portal" and has been in regular activity since April 2018: a forum to share "results", to post events and basically to remain present.

- Every Sunday a new post appears on the blog »B-log book« (B-Logbuch).
- "Club members" can upload their favourite ship picture to a virtual pin board.
- You can get in contact with Miss A. Ship by e-mail or
- follow her on Instagram: only project-related images are shown here, never pictures of living persons. Serves as a gallery and a publishing platform for contributions, e.g. a chain story written by lab visitors or a port for "shipped" bottle post messages. (see »Postal Bottle Service«)

Backstage – some final reflections about the project:

How can you explore longing? Is it measurable? Which measuring unit should be used? Is it a positive or a negative feeling? And, if positive: What is more beautiful, longing or reality?

From a theatre perspective, these questions invite you to engage in an endless game of thinking: What kind of instruments can be invented to track the longing, by letting our imagination be the creative engineer? How can we together define longing? Can we get hold of it? ...

To explore and investigate longing basically means – to give it room. Everything is allowed: to dream, talk shop, fantasize, contemplate, spin yarn (Seemannsgarn), play, have fun, or, for a short moment, escape everyday life and embark on a fictive journey ... There's room for debate and ideas, room for memories of any kind, room for serious topics. Why not share them?!

In history, ships have always transported goods and people from one point of the world to another. They have always had the function of moving and mediating between countries and cultures, and thereby developing opportunities and networks that previously had not existed. Different peoples have created and shaped their own ship type. Maybe – vice versa – cultures could be reshaped by ships ...? So what if a new ship model is built on pure imagination? »Ship Fiction« could serve as a novel vehicle to connect people and open up thought spaces ... How would this then shape the people who get in touch with it and which traces might this ship leave behind ...?

About »Postal Bottle Service« (Flaschenpostamt)

Are you longing for a ship ... ??? Send a question in a bottle to the harbour!

*Imagine you are standing on a ship's deck – then think about a question that you want to ask someone ... All bottle messages will be transported to Hamburg harbour ... [quote from installation *]*

During the project time of *Ship Longing Research* the equipment of the Research Lab continuously developed. One of its interactive tools emerged as an outstanding and autonomous project: the »Postal Bottle Service«. Based on the idea of a post office for messages in a bottle and transferred into the fictional world of *Miss A. Ship: An installation created for a Salzburg exhibition** generated over 90 »questions in a bottle« to be shipped to Hamburg with the intention to find someone who would write an answer. All »answers in a bottle« were then brought back to Salzburg after the Elbfest was over and were delivered to the senders of the questions (everybody who had left a contact information received a personal answer by mail).

The next step: a daily post over a period of three months – welcome to »*Postal Bottle Cruise*«! All postal dialogues were published on Instagram. The project could thereby constantly reach out to a community and invite ship longers to come along on the fictive journey ...

The »Postal Bottle Office« was initially active from July 26 – August 16 in Salzburg and transferred to Hamburg from August 29 – September 23. It has already been reactivated twice, on October 13 during the Symposium »Ports: Nodes of GlobalizationHistory, Perspectives, Museums«, Hamburg (3rd International Symposium of the German Port Museum and ICMH Regional Conference**) and on October 29 in Salzburg at the closing day of the music festival *Jazz & the City*.

It has recently opened again:

On March 22, the public library of Salzburg celebrated the inauguration of an imaginary harbour, which includes the installation of a "Postal Bottle Box" – for an unlimited time.

In Hamburg, the partner *Deutsches Hafenmuseum* (German Port Museum) is planning to have a permanent »Postal Bottle Box« installed at a frequented site at the harbour, designed and produced by Hamburgian artist Knud Plambeck.

As part of a diverse programme of artistic and informative interventions during the planning and construction period of the future museum, which will open by 2025 – 30.

* "Shifting point(s)" curated by Summer Academy of Arts Salzburg, July / Aug 2018, at *periscope project space*

** <https://shmh.de/de/deutsches-hafenmuseum-symposium-haefen>

Future perspective: a »Postal Bottle Network«

The institutional support by the Port Museum provides a stable base for the artistic project.

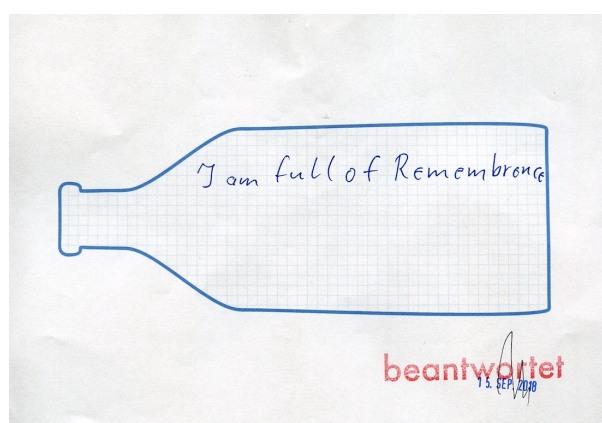
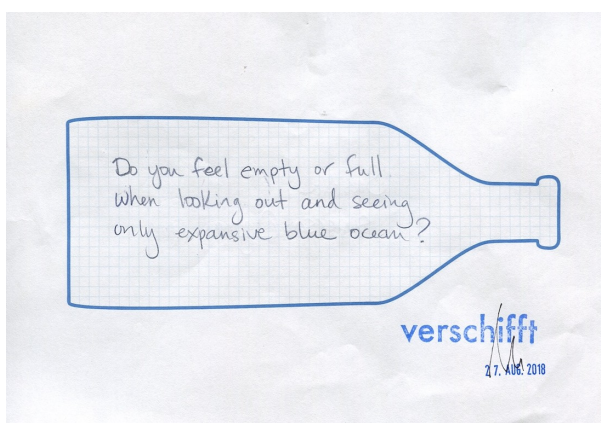
The »Postal Bottle Service« is conceptualized as a permanent project, which creates an extraordinary traffic and exchange between places all over the world inspiring people to send a message to an unknown person. A relation built exclusively on two people's personal longing.

How to transport the written messages? The idea is to use public events, like theatre festivals, city fairs, city marketing tours, ... for delivery – or to create specific "Bottle Post Parties" where ship longers can socialize, celebrate and also receive messages in a bottle from far away places.

Even if the message can be written and sent in solitude the delivery should be a personal action. It is a moment where fiction suddenly touches reality, a moment of here and now, an irresistible seduction to play along. A small and unexpected theatre moment ...

With already two stable Postal Bottle Offices, there is a good base for many more locations.

Mobile Service: The Postal Bottle Service is ready to travel and to bring & collect messages in a bottle to and from everywhere. As an autonomous project or included in a *Ship Longing Station*.



About the artist:

Dorit Ehlers (*1971 in Hamburg) is part of the theatre team »ohnetitel« (network for theatre and art projects) based in Salzburg, Austria. She has been a freelance actress and theatre maker since her graduation from *Scuola Teatro Dimitri* (CH) in the year 1997.

"My criss-cross cruise began around 2012 with some initial project sketches. In 2015, I was artist-in-residence at the Theatre of Research in Hamburg and I had the chance to develop a "test lab" with children to bring this ship feeling on land for the first time. The developments in 2018 have led to completely new horizons of an ongoing journey. Longing does not suddenly stop once you talk about it a lot – quite the contrary: experience shows that every step creates something new, a new idea or further development. Maybe one day even my vision of a »travelling ship's stage« (Wander<schiff>bühne) will become reality – a fictive ship adventure booth travelling the country, like a travelling theater, but slightly different ..."

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