

NAME DROPPING - NINA HAGEN

In 1995, my writing on the first draft of this manuscript was interrupted for about a week when Nina Hagen came to make an exhibition of her collages and a few impromptu, more or less unplugged recitals of her latest songs at Vorwerkstift, the artists' house I lived in in Hamburg. The idea, I was told, was to re-grunge her image a bit.

In this way I was able to experience the workings of name, fame, and image firsthand and at close quarters. The content of her collages consisted exclusively of popular West Coast celebrities (herself, Kurt Cobain, Angelyne...) and faces cut out from the glossies, laced with doodled marginalia, the whole framed in pieces of dayglo gauze and diffraction foil. Cheap, shrill, and indistinguishable from the standard underground fare except for the fact that it was the work a superstar. The best thing to be said for these collages is that they were to be auctioned off for a prison charity.

Nina herself was remarkably at ease, open, alert, balancing effortlessly on the taut thread of attention that stretched from person to person. It was all so natural that I forgot to ask her for an autograph. She was not even fazed when I stepped into the bathroom just as she was removing a wig from her completely bald head. A born performer, she has a remarkably versatile voice and face that she keeps using to clownish effect. She was, as they say, in her element and gave her all on stage and off. Her mother Eva-Maria Hagen, who showed up occasionally, had been a noted stage actress in her day, and her fifteen-year-old daughter, Cosma Shiva, also present, wants to be a star as well. Unconventional identities can run in the family and take the most conventional routes.

Hagen is the name of a city in the industrial far west of Germany. The name invites an easy word play with the noun "Unbehagen," also a family name. Nina used it for the title of one of her earliest albums: it means emotional uneasiness verging on anxiety. I regret not having asked for her autograph, because I don't know what her signature looks like.

