

## Forget the bubbly, this gallery is providing soup for people in need

By AGENCY

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Volunteer Christopher Goebel handing a cup of soup to a visitor. Photos: Federico Gambarini/dpa

A bearded man ladles some soup into a cup and grabs an apple and begins to head out. Before leaving, he turns around and tells artist Dennis Josef Meseg: "You have to stay here forever."

Meseg, who is standing behind a large pot of organic stew, smiles. But the sculptor and performance artist is a guest at this gallery, which at some point will want to revert back to more profitable activities in the art world, he says.

For now, he is providing organic soup from 5pm to 8pm every night in the Update Gallery, in the old town of Germany's northwestern city of Bonn, an alternative, historic district popular among students.

He started his two-month project in January, when the days are short, the nights bitterly cold.

The gallery owners were a bit surprised at the outset when he told them he was not planning to show any sculptures or other works of art, says Meseg.



Meseg stirring his soup in a big pot. For three weeks, he transformed the UpDate Gallery in Bonn's old town into a soup kitchen for those in need with his art campaign, 'Soup instead of Champagne'.

They liked the idea though, once he had explained it to them – though one neighbour, less convinced, called the local authorities to lodge a complaint.

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But plenty of others embraced the plan, donating money or food for people in need. All in all, Meseg sums up the general reception as positive.

People who go to galleries are usually higher earners, who want to support art and get invited to upscale venues for exhibition openings.

"That is exactly what I want to change," says Meseg. "Get rid of the rich people and the champagne and bring in the poor people and the soup."

He is renting the gallery for a low sum.

"I see it as an investment in my artistic training," he says. "And I also want to give a little bit back to the universe."

He moved away from home at a young age, he says and spent a long time living on the streets, so the project is deeply personal to him.



Visitor Olaf drinking a cup of soup.

Outside, snow is falling.

"I have told a lot of people about this and they are all excited about it," says one woman, as she is served a bowl of soup.

Initially, the gallery was relatively empty but then on the fifth day, it was packed.

"We gave out 20 litres that night," says Meseg.

He wound up serving around 100 bowls a day, his website says.

Some of the visitors who came in struggle with addiction. Others are refugees who speak little or no German. Some are homeless, some are simply people who have jobs who live nearby.

Inflation is soaring in Germany as in many other places. One middle-aged woman said she and her partner were struggling to pay the bills: "Electricity, gas, water, food, it's all gotten so expensive that we are happy to be able to have this soup."

Some say that they initially stopped by out of curiosity, and then kept coming for more soup. Most of the visitors have little interest in the artistic concept behind the idea.

Meseg, meanwhile, sees the art in the fact that a space has been repurposed for a different group of people.

"In a place where people usually buy expensive pieces of art, we now have a soup kitchen for those in need. On a small scale, it reflects what's happening in the wider world. Some people are sipping champagne while others can't even afford a bowl of soup."

One question that people keep asking in the gallery is whether it is ethical to use poor people for performance art. Olaf, a visitor, shrugs.

"I really have very little cash, so I think this is a good thing. I'm happy to act as an object of art." – dpa

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