

THEORY RADICAL HOUSING

ART, STRUGGLE, CARE

EDITED BY
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The logo for the Institute of Network Cultures features the text "Institute of network cultures" in a red, sans-serif font. The words "Institute of" are stacked above "network cultures". A complex, web-like pattern of thin red lines is overlaid on the text, connecting various points across the letters and between the two lines of text.



ART IN THE INTERIM: HOW THE ISSUE OF THE RESTITUTION OF HOUSING IN REUNIFIED BERLIN LED TO AN ARTISTIC REIMAGINING OF THE CITY

NICOLA GUY

*...the Germans once again need a bit of glitter in their hovels.*¹

– Franz Hessel

Berlin's relationship to art and creativity is long-standing, with its position as a cultural city arguably being secured in the Weimar period when it became a space of experimentation through the arts. Throughout history, the perception of Berlin as an artistic city has been pushed and used as both a disruptor and an agent of conformity, though it is only since reunification that Berlin has become one of the main centers of the western art world, home to over 400 galleries, the Berlin Biennale, Gallery Weekend and myriad other events and occasions that promote the contemporary art market.² Conversations surrounding art's complicity with the gentrification of Berlin are unavoidable, with good reason, as we see rents rise and more and more people being displaced from their homes.

Thinking back from the current perception of the city to look at the immediate period after the reunification of Berlin, we can look at how the relationship between art and urban space was used as a strategy by which the city might reimagine itself. This moment was marked by both uncertainty and change as different individuals and groups attempted to make claims on the city, with the dilapidated housing stock of the central neighborhoods being particularly contested through the controversial process of restitution. Looking at examples of autonomous and institutionally organized exhibitions, the contribution to the changing face of Berlin will be examined, we can seek to understand how these used the period of restitution as a means for their own intentions and the consequences of these efforts.

The dissolution of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) happened quicker and more peacefully than had been anticipated with the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the official reunification of the two Germany's just eleven months later in October 1990. The period that followed was chaotic, uncertain and full of a unique kind of energy and excitement that was associated with the rebuilding of the country, with Berlin once again at its center. For some, this excitement was due to the myriad speculative possibilities for redevelopment, regeneration and the opportunity to purchase real estate at cut prices in central locations³ and for others the reunification was a chance to explore Berlin again and push for a different kind of city.

1 Franz Hessel, *Walking in Berlin* (repr., Scribe Publications, 2017), p. 20.

2 Jennifer Allen, 'Made in Berlin', *Frieze D/E*, 2010, <https://frieze.com/article/made-berlin?language=de>.

3 Elizabeth Strom and Margit Mayer, 'The New Berlin', *German Politics And Society* 16, no. 4 (1998): 122.

The excitement and push for change were particularly apparent in the central and formerly eastern neighborhoods of Berlin where the majority of housing stock had been state-owned by the GDR. As that state no longer existed, the question of restitution was raised with urgency with the conclusion that the properties either needed to be returned to their original owners or sold off in an attempt to recover some of the debt that the GDR had accrued. Whilst this bureaucratic chaos ensued, in order to solve the situation other additional bids for spaces were made that looked at alternative ways that the new city could be imagined. Artistic activities, including performances and exhibitions, became a way in which these ideas could be highlighted and could utilize the uncertainties of this period in order to reimagine the *Wende* that was quickly becoming a westernization.⁴

Reunification meant that areas which had been on the peripheries of the city found themselves again to be inner city locations. For example, Prenzlauer Berg which had bordered the Berlin Wall on the eastern side was transformed into a central neighborhood again, just north of Mitte, which was also being touted as the centre of Berlin. These areas quickly became the most desirable since the ownership of properties was disputed, markets followed. The changes that would happen in these areas would showcase the new Berlin, be symbolic of reunification and the end of the division, and be scrutinized by the rest of the world.⁵ In these circumstances, central Berlin was hotly contested by developers attempting to purchase prime real estate at cheap prices via the controversial Treuhand Agency that administered the privatization of former state owned buildings.⁶ As well as others wanting to make a claim to these neighborhoods there were also protests against the redevelopment, with fears it would cause displacement and gentrification leading to Prenzlauer Berg becoming something of a battleground for these debates.⁷

These protests coincided and informed a resurgence in squatting in the city, with individuals and groups taking over the many empty residential and industrial buildings that were particularly plentiful in these newly central neighborhoods. Squatting took on a vital role in housing activism and claimed a key position in the politics of the city as it transformed by causing extensive disruption for the authorities with squats often becoming the sites of contestation or organizing hubs of these protests. Similarly, at this time, there was an increasing number of artistic events being organized alongside restitution, rather than in connection to the regeneration. These activities can loosely be split into either activities that were autonomous or activities that were institutional. Nonetheless, these two different approaches were reunified by their location of empty housing buildings and influence in the landscape of central Berlin neighborhoods. However, on some occasions intentionally, these events intersected with the

4 George J.A. Murray, 'City Building and the Rhetoric of "Readability": Architectural Debates in the New Berlin', *City & Community* 7, no. 1 (2008): 3.

5 Hilary Silver, 'Social Integration In the "New" Berlin', *German Politics and Society* 24, no. 4 (2006): 3.

6 Andrej Holm, 'Urban Renewal and the end of Social Housing: The Roll Out of Neoliberalism In East Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg', *Social Justice* 33, no. 3 (2006): 116.

7 Matthias Bernt and Andrej Holm, 'Is it, or is Not? The Conceptualisation of Gentrification and Displacement and its Political Implications in the Case of Berlin Prenzlauer Berg', *City* 13, no. 2-3 (2009): 315.

issues surrounding property ownership and restitution in the former East. Each approach built on Berlin's history as a cultural city and highlighted different possibilities for the neighborhoods that meant that even though temporary they impacted how the city was redeveloped, though with different methods and intentions often in opposition.

Restitution in Contested Times

When the Wall fell, the former east of Berlin was in a state of disrepair, with World War II bomb damage visible across the city and few renovations having been carried out on the older and predominantly residential buildings, of which there were many in the new central neighborhoods. In the further east of the city, Karl Marx Allee, for example, new housing blocks, *Plattenbaus*, had been built that visually altered the landscape. However, in Prenzlauer Berg there had been little updates to the residential buildings during the GDR, the majority of which were *Altbaus*, meaning that despite its dilapidation, it was visually continuous with the western sides of the city. In addition to this, it is estimated in Prenzlauer Berg that 10-20% of residential buildings were empty.⁸ The culmination of these conditions and its central location meant that it quickly popularized. It soon became one of the first subjects of a major redevelopment⁹ and by 1993 being designated a *Sanierungsgebiete* [urban renewal area].¹⁰ Additionally, when restitution was addressed in Prenzlauer Berg there were few claims made to the buildings, only 35,000 claims being made on residential buildings, out of which 10% were successful.¹¹ The result of this was that the properties could be, thus allowing the developers who had been keenly watching the progress to step in and make purchases and beginning the process of privatization.

Many Berlin inhabitants became cynical of the *Wende* as it unfolded into westernization rather than a true reunification, which led to increased activism and protest increased across the city and calls for a Third Way being made by a disenfranchised public. This dissatisfaction with the *Wende* was one of the contributing factors that led to a resurgence in squatting in the city, that saw many individuals and groups taking over the empty buildings in the former East Berlin. In the newly squatted buildings, this third way was experimented with as a way of living that drew on ideas from socialism without the authoritarian structure for which the GDR had been notorious.¹² This move by squatters to east Berlin went against the trend of people leaving East Germany for the West in attempts to secure better living conditions,¹³ and the non-conformity of moving instead eastwards heightened the anti-establishment atmosphere of the movement.

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- 8 Andrej Holm, 'Urban Renewal and the end of Social Housing: The Roll out of Neoliberalism in East Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg', *Social Justice* 33, no. 3 (2006): 115.
 - 9 Uta Papen. 'Commercial Discourses, Gentrification and Citizens' Protest: The Linguistic Landscape Of Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin'. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 16, no. 1 (2012): 57.
 - 10 Matthias Bernt and Andrej Holm, 'Is it, or is not?': 316.
 - 11 Mark Blacksell and Karl Martin Born. 'Private Property Restitution: The Geographical Consequences of Official Government Policies in Central and Eastern Europe'. *The Geographical Journal* 168, no. 2 (2002): 185.
 - 12 John Feffer, 'Squat Paradise: East Berlin in the 90s', *Slow Travel Berlin*, 2014, <http://www.slowtravelberlin.com/squats-neo-nazis-friedrichshain-in-the-90s/>.
 - 13 Esther Peperkamp et al., 'Eastern Germany 20 Years After', *Eurostudia* 5, no. 2 (2009).

Squatting was by no means new to Berlin in the 1990s, the city has a rich history of looking alternatively at housing, and squatting had been present in both east and west during the division. The two sides of the city had different approaches to squatting, and generally, different terms are used to describe each side's approach; *Schwarzwohnen* [illegal living] for the east and *Besetzen* [occupation] for the west.¹⁴ The squatters in the east side had been using squatting as a means of highlighting the poor housing conditions in the eastern properties, that went against the claims of housing being a fundamental right in the GDR. And in western Berlin, which in the 1980s had become an international hub for subcultures, there had been a strong wave of squatting in Kreuzberg, a neighborhood bordering the Wall, during the 1980s.¹⁵ After the fall of the Wall the potential of these scenes to meet and work together in the myriad empty buildings in the east could be explored and, more and more squats, were established across Berlin with Prenzlauer Berg and Friedrichshain being particularly popular.

While these new squats had been relatively left alone between November 1989 and October 1990, when many of the buildings and city institutions were stuck in bureaucratic confusion, the issue of squatting became a focus of the authorities soon after. On the 12th November 1990, a little over a month after Berlin was officially reunified, police visited a row of eleven squatted houses on Mainzer Straße in Friedrichshain, former east Berlin, with the intention of evicting the squatters who had been occupying the houses since the fall of the Wall. The squats on Mainzer Straße occupied a row of houses, around two hundred meters long, all occupied by different groups. Their presence was made known through signage and decoration to the façades, which covered all houses. The squatting scene in Berlin mobilized against the evictions and hundreds took to the street to protest in support of the squats and attempted to save them. For three days, a battle took place on the Mainzer Straße, with around 3000 police officers attempting to raid and clear the squats using violent methods, including employing water cannons and stun grenades.¹⁶ Eventually, the police succeeded in clearing the squats but the events saw over 400 activists being arrested and many casualties on both the side of the squatters and police. There were additionally significant and long term ramifications for the squatting movement more broadly, as both the authorities and activists recognized a need for a change of approach in how they were each working in their own fight for the city.¹⁷

For the state, the events had been high profile and messy, with previous non-supporters of the squatters making public statements against the police. In a newspaper report made the evening after the demonstrations, a participant is quoted as saying, 'I am not a supporter and I am not a sympathizer of the squatters [...] but I am against violence regardless of the reason'.¹⁸ While these opinions would not have been a concern for the squatters, it was a challenge for the state in this time of political instability. The protests that had led to the fall of the Wall had

14 Alexander Vasudevan, 'Schwarzwohnen: The Spatial Politics of Squatting in East Berlin', *Opendemocracy*, 2013, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opensecurity/schwarzwohnen-spatial-politics-of-squatting-in-east-berlin/>.

15 Alan Moore, *Occupation Culture*, New York: Minor Compositions, 2015, p. 138.

16 Susan Arndt, *Berlin Mainzer Strasse*, Berlin: BasisDruck, 1992, pp. 10-29.

17 Alexander Vasudevan, *The Autonomous City*, London: Verso, 2017, p. 168.

18 J Tagliabue, 'EVOLUTION IN EUROPE; Berlin is Rocked by a Squatters War', *Nytimes.com*, 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/11/15/world/evolution-in-europe-berlin-is-rocked-by-a-squatters-war.html>.

been relatively peaceful from the side of the protesters but violent from the side of the GDR police. This violence had served to gain the Federal Deutsche Republic more support as people wished to move away from the highly policed state.¹⁹ But the return to violence around the Mainzer Straße evictions so soon after reunification worked against this and caused an increasing feeling of public dissatisfaction with the changes being made in the city. This was not helpful for the state, which were attempting to keep reunification as peaceful and smooth as possible in spite of the precarious nature of the transition. Furthermore, the confrontations had caused a split between Berlin's Social Democrats and the Green Party, who had up until this moment been in the coalition, creating fundamental instability within the ruling parties.²⁰ Not wanting a repeat of Mainzer Straße and wanting to keep public opinion on the side, the authorities needed to work out a different way to deal with what they considered to be the squatting problem.²¹

One of the results of this was that authorities gave some squats the chance to legalize in certain situations if permitted by the buildings' owners. Often squats were able to negotiate a nominal or very low rent in order to remain in the building, though of course this came with conditions and many squatters found themselves being required to carry out substantial renovation work to the buildings in order to remain.²² As well as this, these contracts were precarious and often short term.²³ The benefits these arrangements had for the authorities are clear; it meant that empty buildings did not remain so, meaning they would be looked after and not at risk from illegal squatting. It also had the benefit of appearing to be an act of generosity, which helped to win back some of the public support lost during the Mainzer Straße protests. However, a harsh view was still taken of illegal squats and legislation was formalized in an attempt to substantially lessen the number in the city. Whilst appeasing the authorities was not the aim or concern of the squatters, remaining in their homes was. Therefore, working within the new legislation was imperative, and though precarious, this was a really viable opportunity for this to happen for the time being.

The Rise of the Art Squat

John Feffer, a former squatter from Mainzer Straße said of the squats, 'Mainzer Straße was also a place of culture and creativity. It was the only colorful street in the whole district. Today Friedrichshain is said to be the creative district. But in 1990 the creative potential was evicted'.²⁴ This quote highlights the focus on creativity in these squats which were offering an alternative to the dominant discourse of privatization that supported big businesses above the individual. An important factor is how the squats acknowledged their differences to passers-by

19 Wolfgang Mueller, Michael Gehler and Arnold Suppan, *The Revolutions of 1989*, Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2016, p. 122.

20 Andrej Hold and Armin Kuhn, 'Squatting and Urban Renewal: The Interaction of Squatter Movements and Strategies of Urban Restructuring in Berlin', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35, no. 3 (2010): 644-658.

21 Alex Vasudevan, *Metropolitan Preoccupations*, Oxford: Wiley, 2015, p. 169.

22 Vasudevan, *Metropolitan Preoccupations*.

23 Sandler, Daniela. *Counterpreservation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016, p. 2016.

24 Geronimo, George N Katsiaficas, and Gabriel Kuhn. *Fire and Flames*. Oakland: PM Press, 2012.

by covering the buildings' facades with images, messages in a refusal to blend in with the rest of the houses on the street. This was a marked development from the culture of squatting in East Berlin, where the squatters had previously attempted to go unnoticed, and soon, this visual display of the squats became the norm. This increased visibility made the presence of squats obvious to both anyone passing by in the neighborhoods and to the authorities. This tactic has arguably used a way of staking a claim on the space.

Similar creativity was extended to the activities and organization of the squats themselves, where including cultural events or artistic endeavors was becoming increasingly common. For example, Mainzer Straße was the location of the Tuntenhaus [House of Drag], a queer squat that had already been established in West Berlin in 1981 and later on Kastanienallee, Prenzlauer Berg. The Tuntenhaus organized infamous shows in their backyard and an annual Tuten Festival with drag shows and musical performances.²⁵ Even better known is the Kunsthaus Tacheles, a ruined building in Mitte that was squatted in 1989 as an art space which quickly became one of the main locations for non-mainstream arts events in Berlin.²⁶ Tacheles held exhibitions, events and had a cinema, cafe and bar as well as workshops that could be used. It also, importantly, soon established itself as a *Verein* (e.v.) [Association] which was key to its survival when later threatened with demolition and eviction in 1990. After a short debate, the building was secured with a Preservation Order and funding from the Planning Department to renovate the building.²⁷ Tacheles was one of the longest running spaces of its kind and was eventually demolished in 2012 with a legacy as an important art space in the city. The vibrancy of these spaces attracted an audience and created a lively scene around them. Their presence grew in neighborhoods as they showed the options beyond the privatization of restitution. Visibility was essential for this and further ideas and alternative practices were explored.

The Case of K77

An important moment in the history of the art squat in Berlin was in June 1992 when a group of artists and performers, working under the name Vereinigte Varben Wawavox [*Vereinigte* from the verb *to unite*] took over 77 Kastanienallee, one of the oldest residential building in Prenzlauer Berg. The entire process was artistic in its presentation, with even the procurement of the building taking the form of a piece of a performance art. On the first day of occupation, the group dressed as medical professionals and paraded through Prenzlauer Berg via Kollowitz Platz, where there were more squats, to the empty Kastanienallee 77. The group entered the building and hung signage on the house that declared a medical emergency.²⁸ The emergency was, they stated, that the house was dying and in need of a heart transplant through the lack of life running through the house. The transplant was complete once they took over occupation and made it safe once more for habitation. They declared that the building was no longer a

25 Azomoxox, 'Gender and Squatting in Germany Since 1968', in *Making Room: Cultural Production In Occupied Spaces*, Berlin: Other Forms, 2016, p. 170.

26 Janet Stewart, 'Das Kunsthaus Tacheles: The Berlin Architecture Debate of the 1990s in Micro-Historical Context', in *Recasting German Identity*, London: Boydell & Brewer, 2002, p. 54.

27 Stewart, 'Das Kunsthaus Tacheles', p. 56.

28 Vereinigte Varben Wawavox, 'Squatting Is Art', Pamphlet, Berlin, 1992, Papiertigre.

building and was now a 'social sculpture', using artist Joseph Beuys' term, and their actions were performance art. This additionally riffed off the history of Prenzlauer Berg as a cultural neighborhood, often cited as the place to find bohemia in East Berlin.²⁹

A week after their occupation, the group behind it distributed a pamphlet about their actions that proclaimed on the front cover 'Squatting is Art', which explained the performance and their intentions with the house. They wrote, 'We have to explain that it is by no means an occupation, but rather an art campaign and that art is under the protection of the Basic Law' (own translation). This decision to announce the project as art rather than a traditional occupation through squatting was conceptual but also served a practical purpose. By saying that their actions were an artistic performance rather than squatting, the group were able to transcend the law that had come into effect in 1990 that decreed that all squats must be cleared by the police within 24 hours of the building's occupation. Art gave the group freedom to occupy the building and from there negotiate their position in the house. The pamphlet goes on to detail what happened next, which was meetings with the Wohnungsbaugesellschaft Prenzlauer Berg [WiP], the housing management firm dealing with the area. The efforts were successful and an agreement was formalized in 1994 when they were granted a 50 year contract to stay in the building with the squat becoming known as K77.³⁰

In K77, we see a significant example of how art was being used as a tool with which to reimagine Berlin with art being a method and also the content. This went beyond using the squat just to show art but considered the building and the social relations it contained as art itself. Yet, their aims were relatively modest with organizers being mainly concerned with making the space habitable. Despite modesty, this contrasted with the state's focus on the houses being sold rather than on them being livable spaces. In these arts squats and the case of K77, we see exhibitions and culture being used as a means to push for a wider change in the landscape of Berlin. Even if these spaces were relatively small they were part of a larger network through which the status quo, in this case, the rapid changes happening to the city, could be challenged and those challenging it to find support. These cultural events also contributed to cultural discourses in the city, where we can see other cases of provocations for possible changes to the city being made through the lens of urban space.

Mitte and Prenzlauer Berg, were becoming a hub of events, especially music and parties, quickly transforming it into a fashionable neighborhood for young people, many of whom were involved in working in the creative industries.³¹ In addition to the network of squats, there were more clubs, bars and galleries being set up. There was a focus on maintaining freedom around these spaces, which was, of course, a natural reaction to the reunification, it also led to many different activities and community spaces being organized or established in the same areas causing fast-paced changes.³² The squats and arts events surrounding them

29 Philip Brady and Ian Wallace. *Prenzlauer Berg*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995. and Claire Colomb. *Staging the new Berlin*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013, p. 7.

30 Ursula Maria Berzborn and Steffi Weismann, *Kule*, Berlin: Revolver Publishing, 2016, p. 371.

31 Jochen Becker, 'New Mitte/Helle Mitte', *Inventory* 4, no. 2 (2001): 52.

32 Anke Fesel and Chris Keller, *Berlin Wonderland: Wild Years Revisited 1990-1996*, Berlin: bobsairport [etc.], 2014, p. 39.

were autonomous, meaning that they operated independently and then only worked with the authorities once established if it was necessary for their survival. Squats were also, in many cases operating in line with the ideas the autonomous movement; the Marxist ideology that has been born from the 1968 uprisings and become important in counter-mainstream political activities. The West German Autonomen had been involved in squatting in the 1980s, and as the movement progressed after the reunification, the movement continued working against fascism, racism and anti-Semitism, using squats as hubs for these political discussions.³³ These political underpinnings are important when considering practically how these squats operated, with their ideas being in essence against the state and therefore working as an independent.

37 Räume

Squatting not however the only way of accessing space at this time, and there were art events that utilized the empty spaces but procured them through legal means. One key example of this is the exhibition *37 Räume* that was also organized in the summer of 1992 and nearby to Kastanienallee on Auguststraße, Mitte. As the title suggests, *37 Räume* was held across 37 different venues along the street with each venue, or room, curated by a different Berlin-based curator, though its concept took its cues from the western art world rather than culturally specific histories of Berlin. There was no overarching theme for the exhibition the intention was to showcase what was happening in the contemporary art scene in Berlin at that moment. The project was conceived by Klaus Biesenbach, founder of Kunst-Werke, the Berlin Biennale and currently Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and organized together with Brigitte Sonnenschein. One of the central venues of *37 Räume* was 69 Auguststraße, now the home of the internationally known art centre Kunst-Werke (hereafter KW). Similarly to K77 the building of KW, a former, and at that time abandoned, margarine factory, had been empty Biesenbach was approached cultural administration with the suggestion he may take it over and in a similar state of disrepair.³⁴

Like many others, Biesenbach and his co-organizers took this moment of chaos as an opportunity to rethink what Berlin could be and use the empty spaces as venues for their suggestions. The fundamental difference with *37 Räume* is that it had been organized with support from the state, unlike any of the squatted art spaces. As well as the installations, there was also an events program that ran alongside the exhibition and this included a curator vs. artists football match. Among the spectators for this was Walter Momper, at the time the Mayor of Berlin, an SPD party member and a figure who had been heavily criticized for his links with the business sector and in the development of east Berlin, a figure, we can assume, would not have been supportive to or a participant in art events held at squats.³⁵

33 Geronimo, George N Katsiaficas, and Gabriel Kuhn. *Fire and Flames*. Oakland: PM Press, 2012, p.79.

34 Klaus Biesenbach, "'We Had To Create Something New': Klaus Biesenbach On Inventing The Berlin Biennale", *Artnews.com*, 2018, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/create-something-new-klaus-biesenbach-inventing-berlin-biennale-060717-10450/>.

35 S Stuk, 'Heftige Kritik an Seinen Kontakten zu Spreepark-Interessenten: Mompers Geschäfte Passen auch den Genossen Nicht', *Berliner Zeitung*, 2013, <https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/heftige-kritik-an-seinen-kontakten-zu-spreepark-interessenten-mompers-geschaefte-passen-auch-den-genossen->

In his introduction to the project in its catalogue Biesenbach writes that the use of the rooms being used was currently in question, suggesting that there was uncertainty in the future of the empty spaces, and that their use was up for debate.³⁶ Arguably this is similar to the motives of the organizers of K77, who were also using the uncertain state the building was in as a lever to call for its reevaluation. However, there was a difference in what they were suggesting and this played out through their activities. Despite using arts activities, the organizers of K77 were not suggesting that the buildings should be used exclusively as venues for art. The act of living in the space was still the main aim. In marked contrast, in his approach to *37 Räume*, Biesenbach was clearly raising the question of whether the predominantly residential buildings in which the exhibition took place should remain residential at all.

The exhibition *37 Räume* was realized with the support of Jutta Weitz who worked for the housing authority and used her position to support arts initiatives in the areas around Mitte by allowing temporary use of empty spaces. Likened to Joan of Arc and called the 'key figure behind Mitte's cultural development',³⁷ Weitz indicates the central presence of individuals within the authorities who wished to support something other than privatization. Indeed, Biesenbach cites Weitz as persuading him to use 69 Auguststraße so the building could avoid becoming another gym.³⁸ However, we must also look at what the consequences of projects such as these were and *37 Räume* has been attributed to being the catalyst for the development of Auguststraße, now entirely gentrified and one of the main streets for commercial galleries in the city. The spaces were only given over temporarily meaning that the exhibition was only open for a week. This was a relatively short time for it to be able to prove its value though it proved to be popular with some 35,000 people³⁹ visiting the exhibition and attending the opening, which was compared to a festival taking over the street.⁴⁰ The opening had been planned to coincide with the ninth iteration of the quinquennial exhibition Documenta, which takes place in Kassel, with the hopeful plan being that the audience would travel over to Berlin after the main event which worked and the exhibition and its organizers gained international attention. Like the Mainzer Straße protests had been a pivotal moment in the rethinking of the Berlin squatting scene, *37 Räume* had a similar effect on the Berlin contemporary art scene and remains an oft-cited reference in how Berlin was transformed into being a major player in the art world.⁴¹

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36 Klaus Biesenbach, *37 Räume*, Berlin, 1992, p. 7.

37 Anke Fesel and Chris Keller, *Berlin Wonderland: Wild Years Revisited 1990-1996*, Berlin: bobsairport [etc.], 2014: 178.

38 Klaus Biesenbach, 'Klaus Biesenbach Recalls the Founding of KW in Berlin 25 Years Ago, a Moment of "Radical Change and Freedom"', *Artnews.com*, 2016, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/klaus-biesenbach-recalls-the-founding-of-kw-in-berlin-25-years-ago-at-a-moment-of-radical-change-and-freedom-7370/>.

39 Klaus Biesenbach, 'Klaus Biesenbach Recalls the Founding of KW in Berlin 25 Years Ago, a Moment of "Radical Change and Freedom"'.
 40 Anke Fesel and Chris Keller, *Berlin Wonderland: Wild Years Revisited 1990-1996*, Berlin: bobsairport [etc.], 2014: 71.

41 Tara Mulholland, 'Berlin: Once East German Gritty, Now Slick, But Still Artsy', *Nytimes.com*, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/18/arts/18iht-scberlin18.html>.

Despite these successes, *37 Räume* was also subject to a number of protests throughout the short week that it occupied Auguststraße. Its presence on the street – the signage and many visitors – were interrupted through interventions by groups that disagreed with the exhibition and what it was perceived to stand for. Photographs taken at the exhibition,⁴² show posters were stuck over the branding with slogans such as ‘37 without rooms’ [37 Ohne Räume], ‘Art Whore’ [Kunst Nutte] and labels with ‘Room 38’ [Räume 38] were stuck to trash cans. The inhabitants of a building not involved with the exhibition affixed a sign reading ‘No art here today. 3 Easterners’,⁴³ which mirrors Biesenbach’s reflections that ‘all the area residents—and the organizers—were very happy that it wouldn’t continue’.⁴⁴ Reading these slogans, we can understand them as countering the intentions of the exhibition and considering this in light of the housing crisis that many were facing at this moment, and these statements asked the question; why fill empty houses with art when there are so many without spaces to live in?

The aim of the *37 Räume* was to showcase the contemporary art scene of Berlin, not just to the people living in Berlin and involved with the scene but with the wider aim of bringing a new audience to the city; it was thus for a different community as well. This differed from the work of the squats, who were looking to provide support for those already in the city and reimagine how it could be for them rather than how space could be used to benefit a new audience.

As indicated above *37 Räume* has had a clear and, in many ways, successful legacy. It paved the way for the Berlin Biennale, which was set up by Biesenbach and other curators in 1996 and held its tenth iteration this summer in 2018. KW is an internationally renowned arts institution that shows a number of high-profile exhibitions each year, often to critical acclaim. Auguststraße itself has been transformed into a desirable street full of commercial galleries, restaurants and expensive clothing stores. Both KW and the Berlin Biennial, which until this iteration was organized by KW though they are now separate entities, receive regular funding from the Bundestag as well as a host of other sources, including BMW. It is also demonstrated that contemporary art could bring a new audience to the city and their money with it.

Conclusion

Later, when the Treuhand Agency had closed, and it was considered this part of reunification was finished, the image of the city went through an overhaul as the ‘new Berlin’ was presented through advertising and strategies of place marketing in order to reestablish tourism to the city.⁴⁵ In this reimagining, art and culture were key, and Berlin was presented as a go-to destination for this. After reunification, the image of Berlin went through an overhaul as the ‘new Berlin’ was presented time and again through place marketing in order to reestablish tourism in the city. This included the utilization of DIY and artistic aesthetics and the politics that went alongside that but without attempting to engage with those politics, often cynically

42 I am indebted to Klaus Baedicker for sharing with me the photographs he took of *37 Räume*.

43 Fesel and Keller, *Berlin Wonderland: Wild Years Revisited 1990-1996*, p. 181.

44 Biesenbach, ‘Klaus Biesenbach Recalls the Founding of KW in Berlin 25 Years Ago, a Moment of “Radical Change and Freedom”’.

45 Claire Colomb, *Staging the new Berlin*, Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013, p. 26.

perceived by those who had been involved with the squats or art spaces whose images were being reproduced.⁴⁶ The activities in the early years of reunification that had utilized art as a tool for reimagining the city had clearly had an impact within wider Berlin. Whilst in the early 1990s it was possible to act autonomously to acquire space and set up venues that challenged in some way the status quo this has clearly been less possible as time has gone on.

Restitution had resulted in privatization and empty houses became fewer, affecting the potentials for squatting as the crack-down in laws had as well. Even those of the spaces that have managed to remain have had to radically change their organizations and are no longer able to operate. However, what was important about these spaces was that they experimented with an alternative and used creativity to force their visibility into Berlin neighborhoods and the history of this should remain important today. As Alexander Vasudevan writes, '[...] in the case of contemporary Berlin, a stronger awareness of these histories might still point us to an alternative beyond a city increasingly shaped by the logics of profiteering and privatization, displacement and dispossession'.⁴⁷ While it is no surprise that it was the commercially oriented ventures that were successful and the autonomous spaces that were closed down, all of these activities utilized the chaos of reunification to present alternatives at a time when it was possible to see them more easily. When comparing these approaches, it is, of course, far too simplistic to suggest that 'activists using art = good' and 'curators using art = bad', or to go further and suggest 'art = gentrification' no matter who is the organizer. This article proposes a critical look at how art has been used within the changes to neighborhoods to Berlin in order to consider how we may use it as a tool in future debates surrounding the city. In the same way that all of these events called upon different histories, we can call upon them today in order to reimagine art and urban life.

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46 Colomb, *Staging the new Berlin*, p. 240.

47 Alexander Vasudevan, 'Schwarzwohnen: The Spatial Politics of Squatting in East Berlin', *Opendemocracy*, 2013, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opensecurity/schwarzwohnen-spatial-politics-of-squatting-in-east-berlin/>.

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Theory on Demand #42

Radical Housing: Art, Struggle, Care

edited by Ana Vilenica

Housing space is a crucial locus of social reproduction, as it is a place where countless acts of care that sustain our lives take place. Yet, capital has forced its way into our homes, making them a battleground. Art is embedded and intermeshed in housing struggles in multiple ways. The essays and stage scripts in this collection engage with difficult questions around battles for home, the role of the arts and the aesthetics of struggle. What connects the contributions is that the authors think of housing struggles from both the internal and the external margins and from global and local peripheries. It is in this sights of resistance against housing precarity that radical housing is traced as it emerges, declines, and re-emerges on the way to our common future.

Divided into five sections, this anthology discusses subjects such as insurgent histories and radical care in art, hands-on strategies for action, fighting art-washing with tenants' power, politics of the past and of the future in the art of the housing struggle, the effects of financialization on artistic live-work conditions, the necessity of mourning losses, as well as the irreducible plurality of housing commons, holding one another accountable, and working with dirt. Launching a proposition about radical housing art, the book deals with common challenges and failures of practicing radical housing, expressing the beauty of art that moves from the tragic to the joyful.

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