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## BERLIN GERMANY

*Berlin—and beyond: Germany*



GREGOR HILDEBRANDT

**Führe mich sanft...**

(Tocotronic), 2010.

Bande magnétique sur toile /

Cassette tape, dispersion on canvas,

279 x 179 cm.

**...gib mir einen Trunktrank**

(Tocotronic), 2010.

Bande magnétique sur toile /

Cassette tape, dispersion on canvas,

279 x 179 cm.

Dyptique / Dyptich.

Like many European nations, Germany has a cultural history, that is an amalgamation of complex overlapping and contradictory narratives. Even if we look at the present moment, and limit our view to the art scene, it becomes obvious that this is still the case.

Historical causes, such as the traditional splitting of responsibilities between state and *Länder*, that has placed the funding of culture with the *Länder* themselves, have carved out a decentralized, but uniquely dense and varied cultural landscape, and this is specifically visible in the arts. Every *Land* will proudly boast their own public museums, communal galleries and *Kunsthallen* in their major cities and towns, as well as their local *Kunstverein* (an art appreciation society funded by members and the public, often with significant history going back into the early 19th Century, a good example being the Kunstverein Hamburg, which recently added its founding year to its official name "since 1817"), the most important of which rival the often larger contemporary art museums in their influence on current areas of discourse.

If we take a look at some of the main developments, there are three that come to my mind. One is the inevitable story of Berlin, the inheritance of Cologne's international standing in the art world, how it slowly took over as an important hub of the international art market, while at the same time becoming a favourite residence for young artists, who like seeing their new home in competition with London and New York for the title of art capital of the world.

Parallel to this we can note that what was once considered the German Über-Academy in Düsseldorf is trying to rejuvenate itself, with artists like Tal R. and Tomma

Abts, alongside a cast of seasoned art world veterans such as Georg Herold, Katharina Fritsch, Katharina Grosse and Peter Doig, just to name a few. Yet in the last few years the art schools in Leipzig and Frankfurt am Main have managed to steal the show, attracting some of the most talented students from all around the globe. First with a wave of neo-academic painting, and more recently with a renewed interest in conceptual strategies in Leipzig, while Frankfurt has increasingly become an elite art school that young artists from around the globe are flocking to. A relatively small school, it has acquired a reputation as a kind of an incubator and a place in which to start your career. Students often stay only for a relatively short period of a two or three semesters, to fine-tune their work, effectively turning many classes into postgraduate programs. If this is connected with young artist's hopes for a career boost that will propel them forward in the art market, it is not completely unwarranted. In this regard, the New York based magazine *art+auktion* titled an article on last year's Basel art fair: "Städelschule Mafia has Iron Grip on Basel's Art Statements", referring to the surprising ratio of five of twenty-six artists of Art Basel's Statements section with solo presentations being recent Städel-graduates, with Simon Fujiwara walking away with one of the two Basel prizes for "best booth" for his installation *Welcome to the Hotel Munber*. How much of this success is to be attributed to former director Daniel Birnbaum, who late last year moved on to direct Stockholm's Moderna Museet, will be left to be seen even if highly veritable art stars such as Simon Starling, Douglas Gordon, Tobias Rehberger stay on, while *Texte zur Kunst* editor Isabelle Graw runs the theory department.



The academy of visual arts in Leipzig has more than three times as many students as its Frankfurt counterpart, and until recently was regarded nearly exclusively as the hot spot for a specific style of painting, that openly favoured qualities such as figuration, composition and a specific understanding of painterly craftsmanship over conceptual approaches. Labelled the "Leipzig school", it features an all male cast of recent art market heavyweights like Neo Rauch, Matthias Weischer, David Schnell, Tim Eitel and Christoph Ruckhäberle were heralded as "the hottest thing on earth" by Joachim Pissarro, curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, at the time. Today the air around them has cooled off a little, but taxi drivers in Leipzig still tell stories about the glory days of American collectors descending on the city in droves for the degree show at the art school. Those days being over and this has allowed the local art scene to get back to work. And for out-of-towners Leipzig shines once again, with a new climate that allows visitors to see a recent development parallel to the top local galleries, such as Eigen+Art, Dogenhaus and Kleindienst. In the city's Lindenau district many young artists and curators choose to show more ambitious or conceptual work in young alternative art venues, such as D21 or A&V Galerie. Artists who were outsiders during the Leipzig painting boom are receiving more attention, with work that has a more conceptual trajectory, such as the lyrical painterly explorations of Julia Schmidt or Oliver Kossack's absurd bad-paintings. Or the ambitious high-concept art of the artistic threesome Famed, whose work combines institutional critique with formal rigour.

Still, however, the Leipzig painter-stars enjoy the warmth of their city, and stay on, giving back to the art community. Take Christoph Ruckhäberle for example, whose "Luru" cinema boasts only a few seats, but offers the option of buying one for life, with free entry to all films forever more.

Otherwise, few artists can resist the lure of Berlin. The traditional decentralization of the art world in Germany has been destabilized, with cities not only in Germany thinking about what they might do to keep whole student years of their academies from moving to Berlin.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 freed the German capital from the dark connotations of the Nazi era and the east-west schizophrenia of history, and turned it into a positive symbol that represents unity, the strength of the people and a release from the brooding anxiety of the world's dichotomy formed by the Cold War. Ever since, Berlin has been considered the epitome of freedom and of self-liberation—and the arts have been its perfect showcase. This has subjected the city's emerging art scene, with its early protagonists and budding institutions, to a politicized reading: Berlin is the place where everything seemed to mix, gel and take on new forms, without the slightest concern about what had come before, what genres there were and what channels were available.

As no less a figure than Liam Gillick observed during the first Berlin Biennial, the most interesting developments took place in the gaps between the usual formats: artists like John Bock and Jonathan Meese explored the space between performance and installation-based art and theatre, while Christoph Schlingensiefel took the opposite route, his theatre and film work more often than not leaning towards the arts. These days Schlingensiefel is gone (and very much missed), Meese has reinvented himself as a painter and a recluse, whereas John Bock is still going strong. His contribution to the series of artist-curated shows at the Temporary Kunsthalle, devised by Angela Rosenberg, was easily the art highlight of the year in Berlin. Titled "*Fischgrätenmelkstand*", he created his own perfect museum, by installing every single work he had selected by other artists in the pitch-perfect if highly subjective framework of a custom-designed space by creating

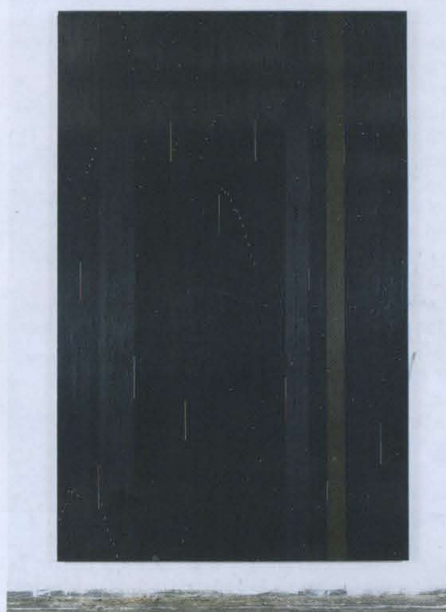
many different yet accessible containers, that he shelved in a huge scaffolding construction. Even if big is never automatically better (and doing something only because you can is no end in itself), the most important currency in this work was the artist's subjective and convincing vision.

And maybe this is one of the true qualities of Berlin: the fact that it recognizes this currency—because so many artists are here. Maybe it is the ubiquitous postwar promise of freedom that has in the long run convinced visitors and locals alike, making the experience of freedom in Berlin simply overpowering? Or maybe it is the mythology of Berlin, a city that has succeeded and created a new invisible wall, setting the city under

a glass casket, and is now in the process of turning it into a living museum, into merely a symbol of creativity and artistic freedom?

After reunification, the art scene in Berlin split into three categories: the art scene of former East Berlin, centered around a few communal galleries and the academy of Berlin Weissensee and its students and professors; the West-Berlin art scene, often connected to what is now abbreviated as UdK (University of the Arts), as well as artists, who in the early 1980s fled from the Cologne-New York axis; and, thirdly, a rather small group of young artists from all over the world, who were attracted by what they perceived as a vacuum in Berlin-Mitte. It was from this group that the most significant numbers of artists and art professionals were recruited in the following two decades, as they spearheaded a development that is still going on today. Young artists still move to Berlin, some for a few months, some for a few years, and others to stay indefinitely, but since the art scene has far outgrown its humble beginnings.

Recent research has shown Berlin to be home to no less than a staggering 20,000 artists, working on a professional level. Of these at least one third work in the field of visual arts. Around 500 galleries, many of which work on an international scale, are based in Berlin.



GREGOR HILDEBRANDT  
Because the night - Patti Smith,  
2010.  
Bande magnétique sur toile /  
Cassette tape on canvas,  
27 1/4 x 17 1/4 cm.



So, is Berlin turning into what Hollywood is to movies: an incredibly effective art-making machine, pumping artworks into the world, simply another branch of the entertainment industry? Recently the mayor of Berlin scheduled a representative survey exhibition of contemporary arts in Berlin, allocating more than 1.5 million euros to the project. Now anyone expecting artists to go out of their way to be part of a project like this might have been disappointed. Hundreds of artists (by the time you read this likely to be more than a thousand) signed an open letter to the mayor, accusing him of “a neoliberal rhetoric of efficiency”, and questioning the one-off event as not sustainable, with no transparent concept, and backed by questionable finance plans. The artists suspected an abuse of the arts in favour of short-term election campaign interests. This reflects a feeling of disenchantment if not outright frustration with the political reality of living in Berlin as an artist on a long term basis, fighting an uphill battle against a rather slow but nevertheless tangible gentrification process... Artists in other cities, however, only dream of this kind of recognition. Hamburg-based sculptor Stefan Kern grumbled that, when he was invited to participate in an artists’ evening by the mayor of Hamburg, for a discussion on how to improve the situation in the city for artists, nobody seemed to come up with any ideas or offers, nobody suggested, say cheaper studio spaces, “There is simply no interest for art in this place”, he muttered. Florian Waldvogel, one of the curators of the ill-fated Manifesta 6 in Cyprus (the Biennale planned as an open art school, cancelled in a spur of allegations, with the curator being sued for several million euros in damages, charges were dropped after an outcry from the international arts community) and current director of the Hamburg Kunstverein, agrees: “If we see that many good artists, such as Tjorg Douglas Beer, Christian Jankowski, Julia Horstmann, John Bock and Jonathan Meese, all graduating from the Hamburg academy and going to Berlin, then it is obvious that something needs to be done.”

Today Tjorg Douglas Beer runs the most popular art club in Berlin, the “Forgotten Bar Project”, operating since 2008 with a small group of art-professionals. A tiny venue houses a working bar with an even tinier exhibition space, with shows switching daily, and more often than not including well-known names. Over the last few years it has even formed the basis for the much acclaimed first Kreuzberg Biennial that saw artists presenting works in shop windows, and public spaces in the district. The easy-going no-budget attitude contrasted favourably in the eyes of many viewers to what was broadly perceived as a stodgy 6th Berlin Biennale. After two years and still going strong, it will be difficult to find an artist whose name has never graced the invite of a “Forgotten Bar Project”—related endeavour, including painter Shila Khatami, for example, who simply arrived with three of her boldly concrete paintings on masonite, and put them up, just before the first guests arrived; she took them back home in a cab the very next day. Her work can be seen as representing a new wave of painting, that aspires to a more conceptual approach. She sees herself in the trajectory of artists like Mary Heilman, sharing a painterly interest in minimalism with another veteran of this alternative “off” institution is Gregor Hildebrandt, whose cassette tape paintings manage to infuse this demure material with auratic and poetic qualities, hinting at often autobiographical stories.

Yet it would be wrong to speak of a “Forgotten bar” scene, for this is only one of many easy-going and loosely connected art venues, that thrive successfully in parallel with the major galleries and institutions, such as Cussler, Autocenter, Grimm Museum, Oqbo and many others. In this sense it is simply due to the sweeping range of the art

world in Berlin that new talents are quickly found but also exploited.

Today still not every interesting project is active inside the art world. This is maybe where Berlin is developing a unique form of energy, the fact that the gaps in between genres are still producing interesting projects. Keren Cytter, video artist and writer, founded her dance company (!) D.I.E. Now (Dance International Europe Now) and has showed her work in theatres around the world. She also ran an impromptu poetry academy, even handing out certificates, showing how easily and independently one can click into the scene here, without resorting to well-trodden paths. Klara Liden started her artistic career building a house with found materials on the banks of the river Spree, collaborating with two street artists nearly ten years ago. Now she is back, and nominated for the Preis der Neuen Nationalgalerie, alongside Andro Wekua, Cyprien Gaillard and Kitty Kraus—all Berliners, if originally from four different countries.



This reflects another aspect of the myth of Berlin as an art-capital of Europe: its international attraction. With its still quite affordable rents, large studios and a huge international artistic community, without showing anything at all, you can still be a part of the artistic community, shifting endlessly from one opening to the next. And it is hardly surprising to notice that the rest of Germany is quite busy nurturing all the Berliners, giving them jobs in their academies all over the country (if not all over Europe—the author is writing these lines from a desk at the art academy in Helsinki), giving them shows in their Kunstvereine, galleries and museums. The idea in the 1990s idea seemed to be that, whenever there was an empty site (of which Berlin famously boasted many, and even the casual observer today will find that, in the inner city, now they have all become construction sites), an artist would come and adopt it as a studio, club, informal academy, or just some other “project”. Today Berlin does not feel much like Germany, and, if we make the comparison, it feels a lot like Facebook, a virtual place, inhabited by an international crowd, that can just as well move on, when it is no longer hip to be there any more. However, once you leave Berlin, at least by land, you suddenly enter Germany; orderly, clean, very bourgeois and in some places harsh. There won't be so many artists. Many museums, though. And more to discover!

JOHN BOCK

**Vue de l'exposition / Exhibition view**  
**FischGrätenMelkStand curatée**  
 par / curated by **John Bock**,  
**Temporäre Kunsthalle, 2010,**  
**Berlin.**