

B e r l i n

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY:
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Berlin is unquestionably an artists' city. Thousands of them have moved here over the last couple of years from all parts of the world. Some intend to stay permanently, others remain for shorter periods of time, but as a whole they have become a considerable economic force. Materials, equipment, photographic services. Framing, fabrication, shipping—all of these are needed and contribute to the city's economy, even before a single piece is sold. Many artists produce work on a small scale, on shoestring budgets; others employ a small army of assistants. Ai Weiwei, for instance, has just bought a new studio in Berlin that stretches for 4,800sq m—larger than Tate Modern's Turbine Hall.

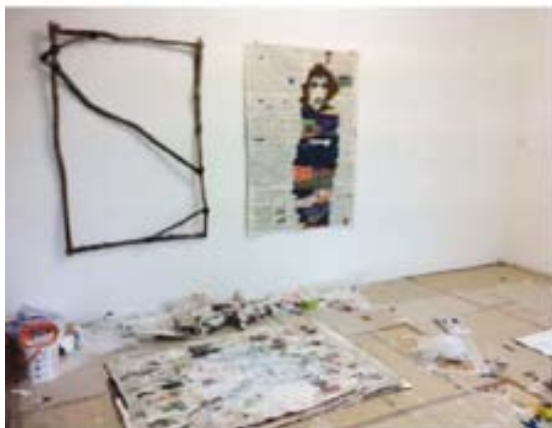
Why Berlin? Not all of these artists have been following the market (the local art market was never very strong anyway); more likely, the market has been following them. Even if all of Berlin's galleries henceforth only showed artists living in the city, not all of them could be represented, much less earn their living here. Of course, some of the reasons why people have been moving to Berlin are economic: rents are considerably lower in most other capitals, and there is still a good amount of space centrally available: Berlin is also quite easy to get to. But even these attractions apply to a few other cities. The nightlife—all those bars and clubs—is also a draw.

Perhaps all these elements work together. Price, availability, safety, fun! Or perhaps the biggest factor is the quality of life and the lifestyle: the slow pace, the relaxed attitude, the openness. Indeed, many of the artists who live in Berlin work elsewhere—realising projects or teaching—and spend only their 'free' time in the city, time to relax and to think.

Two upcoming events take advantage of and point to further growth in the city's art profile: *Based in Berlin*, instigated by the mayor's office as a showcase for Berlin art this summer, has three established curators (MoMA PS1 director Klaus Biesenbach, the Serpentine Gallery's Hans Ulrich Obrist and the Pompidou Centre's Christine Macel) selecting five younger curators to organise the show; and the 7th Berlin Biennale, in 2012, will be curated by Artur Zmijewski around the theme of 'political art', who has issued calls for artists who are not part of the usual art circuit to put themselves forward.

For this issue, and also for the next, we'll be visiting artist studios in Berlin. Some of the artists are established, some are very young; some have galleries, some don't...

BERLIN



When I visited Gabriel Vormstein, who moved to Berlin after finishing art school in Karlsruhe in 2001, his studio was rather empty, as he had just shipped a lot of his work—primarily figure-based drawings and paintings on unconventional supports—to Paris, where his solo show at Almine Rech Gallery was due to open on 1 April (running until 14 May). The floor was covered in newspaper, some of it daubed with paint—evidence of failed works, the artist explained, fragments of which he plans to integrate into pictures yet to be produced. Thus he recycles his own works, just as he uses recycled materials, and also as he recycles motifs from art history.

One of the most striking things about Vormstein's work is the material that he uses as a base. He is interested in time and transience, and his 'colourised' drawings, as he calls them, are often made straight onto newspaper. He glues together four double pages, which provides him with a uniform format; through the newsprint, which remains clearly visible as a graphic element and enters in a dialogue with the paint, the exterior world is integrated into the artwork. But newspaper is an unstable medium, one that discolours and ages quickly. And since this is something it shares with the human body, Vormstein's figures age together with the paper. Themes of time and fleetingness, then, are preinscribed in the material. (And today's news is of course already history by tomorrow.) Vormstein introduces another temporal dimension by using a diversity of references: he makes explicit reference to art history,



Gabriel Vormstein

Kreuzberg

frequently echoing or mimicking the figures of Egon Schiele as well as Toulouse-Lautrec, Minimalism, Pop and even ancient Egyptian art. These classic, familiar visuals leave room for the materiality of the works, whose trashiness is charged with the aesthetic weight of the past.

Newspaper, though, is not the only support that Vormstein uses. He also covers blue trash bags with white wall paint, mounts them on canvas and then draws on them. Quite unlike paper, plastic is anything but ephemeral. One is reminded of drawings on plaster, maybe the first stage of a fresco. These works derive their power precisely from the tension between the rough material and the delicacy of the drawing. Sometimes, meanwhile, Vormstein effectively 'draws' without any support at all, creating three-dimensional drawings or wall sculptures from twigs, adhesive tape and other materials (including icing sugar). Some of these are quite abstract, while others are actual landscapes. What they have in common with the drawings and paintings on newspaper is the fragility and transience of the organic materials. WW



right: Gabriel Vormstein, *The Butterfly Net*, 2010, pencil, marker and watercolour on newspaper, 154 x 111cm, unique, photo: Cary Whittier, courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York. Studio photos: Wilhelm Werthern