



The Battle for Berlin

There are two kinds of young New York artists and curators who relocate to Berlin—those who make it, and those who end up in rehab | By Kimberly Bradley |

“Berlin is an artists’ town”—a simple declaration uttered to me by none other than Gary Shteyngart, author of *Absurdistan* and longtime New Yorker, while in Berlin in late 2007. He was jokingly lamenting the lack of a real literary scene in the German capital. But everyone knows he’s right.

His statement could be seen as a hard fact—according to the German Institute of Economics, 25,000 artists live and work in the capital city. Or it could be considered a bohemian cliché. If you believe the hype, anyone having anything to do with NYC’s creative scene has hightailed it to a magical land flowing with milk, honey and hefeweizen. A place, according to Gawker, where everyone lives “in a huge button factory on the Fingerstrasse for...about 60 dollars.”

Okay, there’s no Fingerstrasse in Berlin and the days of \$60 rents are long over. But Berlin’s rise as a creative capital has not gone unnoticed by New York artists who were born too late to score a cheap loft on the Bowery (or Bedford Ave.) and consort with Basquiat (or Barney). To them, Berlin represents an artistic autonomy that has been sabotaged by New York’s rampant gentrification and post-9/11 conservatism. What’s more, it’s a place for experimentation: a scene in which concept trumps commerce.

Although not a mass exodus, the New York migration to Berlin’s art world is palpable.

“When you say you’re from New York, they say, ‘Oh, you too?’” says 37-year-old David Levine, a native New Yorker who arrived in 2004. The experimental theater director was hired to set up the art department of a private liberal arts college. He claims Berlin was at first “a random spot on the map,” but has since become an inspiring home for the better part of each year.

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Indeed, New York references can be heard ringing in English over the din of the street parties that Brunnenstrasse or Kochstrasse gallery nights have become. Even *The New York Times*’ chief art critic Michael Kimmelman is now reporting from the German capital full time, and blue-chip artist Julie Mehretu is spending the next 18 months creating a major commission not at home in New York, but in Berlin.

Then there’s the young generation. When I arrived in Berlin in late 2003, I already spoke German and thought I could get work through intercity cross-pollination. (And I did.) What I didn’t expect was a “grass is greener” fascination,

whereby having gone from being one of 10,000 freelance writers in New York to a relatively rare English-language writer in Berlin, I was suddenly far more interesting to...New Yorkers.

“A lot of Americans who just finished studying are moving here instead of New York, which just gets harder and harder,” says John von Bergen. A graduate of SVA, the affable sculptor/draftsman ended a 12-year stint in the East Village five years ago to follow his then-girlfriend to Germany. Von Bergen now has gallery representation and time to create. “There’s enormous pressure when it comes to time and money in New York” CONTINUED...



Clockwise from top left: NY expats Laurie de Chiara and Kimberly Bradley in the factory-turned exhibition venue Kollektiv; David Levine in front of rejected headshots—part of his Culture Detritus project; artist John von Bergen and one of his drawings; Curator Emilie Trice at the door of the Bodhi Gallery.

...CONTINUED that you just don't have in Berlin," he says. Levine, for his part, notices less posing and far less ego. "You can go to openings in Berlin, and if you're not doing well, you don't feel like a loser. In New York, if you're not making 100,000 bucks a year and sleeping with a lesbian, you feel like an idiot." On top of time and the laid-back vibe comes space: Von Bergen's new studio, in the up-and-coming neighborhood of Wedding, is 1,200 square feet and costs \$570 per month.

These factors account for the reasons New York may be where the art is sold, but Berlin is, increasingly, where art is made. It's often referred to as a "production city." "Artists and galleries know they don't make more money here, but they'll have a presence," says Emilie Trice, a 26-year-old who arrived two years ago to open the Berlin branch of Chelsea's Goff + Rosenthal gallery. "And people are looking to Berlin for a creative renewal of the contemporary art scene. They know what's happening here is unconventional."

Alaska-born filmmaker-artist Reynold Reynolds, 42, has watched the influx of New Yorkers for the past few years. A pioneer of Brooklyn's revived Dumbo neighborhood, Reynolds spent a semester at the Berlin American Academy in 2004 and decided to stay after the stipend ran out. "New York likes it when someone hits somewhere else," he says. After winning a \$90,000 German Federal Culture Foundation grant, Levine's international star began to rise. His interdisciplinary project, which had an American actor farming a hectare of Brandenburg land for a month in 2007, got a fat write-up in *The New York Times*. Mention this, and Levine chuckles. "For the past six years there's been an article on Berlin every week in the *Times*."

He's probably right. But while some of the hype is justified, there are a few major catches that media trendspotters (along with enamored visitors or transient Fulbrighters) miss. Hidden behind Berlin's easy atmosphere and expat support system is a struggling city with 17 percent unemployment, Kafka-esque bureaucracy and interminably long, dark winters. Service is nearly nonexistent, decent restaurants rare and every New Yorker I know times trips home with haircuts. Because making rent is easier, a complacency can settle in. Some get sucked into the 24-hour-party-people vortex and find themselves lacking the discipline to become the next art star—or worse, in rehab. Others come but just can't find their groove, and leave. Or they live without work or residence permits, taking their chances until they get caught.

"I wouldn't recommend being illegal," says Trice, laughing. After leaving her first (legal) gallery job, she spent a year freelance writing without legal status (and on a weak dollar) before scoring her present position as manager of the



first European outpost of the Indian gallery Bodhi. "Being illegal made me realize there's this idealized, naïve, romantic fantasy of Berlin. I field five to ten e-mails a week from New Yorkers who want to move here. And I'm like, 'You don't have any idea what you're getting yourself into.'"

And not all Berliners appreciate the latest American invasion. "I was the first New Yorker to have a gallery," says 41-year-old Laurie de Chiara, who grew up in Queens and fell in love with Berlin's raw energy. She ran galleries in both cities for a year before settling in Berlin in 2002. "People didn't quite know how to deal with me, because I came with a bang," she jokes. "I can't really let it all hang out here, because everyone takes themselves so seriously. On the flip side, once you're in, you're in."

For all the coming and going, a core group of transplanted New Yorkers has stuck it out, welcoming newbies while placing bets on how long they'll last, or guessing whether Chelsea dealers are here scouting new artists or real estate. Those who put down roots see the heady rush of la bohème Berlin settle into a cycle of dark yet productive winters and verdant, easy summers, deeper discussions, and a sense of possibility—and often, camaraderie.

Trice's first show as a curator, *Highway Child*, went up in early September in a colossal, dilapidated brewery-cum-exhibition venue in Friedrichshain. Located in former East Berlin, the neighborhood is not unlike Greenpoint, Brooklyn, where Trice used to live. A group called Kollektiv runs the space. "Anywhere else this building would be condemned, but they've given it to a bunch of 25-year-olds. Kollektiv's about working for a common cause rather than individual ego," she says. "I'd rather be part of something large than make myself the star." Coming from a former New Yorker, this sounds almost blasphemous, or at the least like a postmodern take on an old political idea. But that's the kind of thinking that makes Berlin the artists' town it still is. **M**



From top: The iconic TV tower on Alexanderplatz (former East Berlin) helps newcomers get their bearings; a show at the Klosterfelde Gallery; a view inside the Art Berlin Contemporary show in the old Postal Train Station; David Levine's conceptual theatrical art project, *Opening Closing*, whereby gallery goers were locked out of the gallery.