

*Remembering and transforming: a study of art and culture in Berlin since 1989*

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## ***Remembering and transforming: a study of art and culture in Berlin since 1989***

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### **Abstract**

I recently read an article in the New York Times entitled *Berlin: Once East German Gritty, now Slick, but still Artsy*, which considered the development of the internationally renowned art scene in Berlin since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Shortly before German reunification, Berlin became a popular destination for new artistic talent, challenging the boundaries of art as much as the wall had challenged the boundaries of freedom. Since being named Cultural Capital of Europe in 1988, Berlin's reputation for its avant-garde art scene has developed to the international stage. I moved to Berlin in August 2013 to study at the Humboldt University on the ERASMUS programme, and I have been struck and impressed by the variety of cultural activity in the city. Whether an art, music or theatre enthusiast, there is something for locals and tourists alike and the repercussions of its modern history are very influential to its artistic allure.

My paper considers the important role that contemporary art plays in remembering Berlin's turbulent history and also how the art scene and the urban landscape of the city are being transformed as a consequence. To refer to a quotation from *Memorylands* (McDonald, 2013) "Memory has become a preoccupation [...] implicated in justifications for conflicts and calls for apologies for past wrongs". Berlin is a relevant case study in this research; there are particular images and stereotypes relating to WWII which the German society still clings to as long, collective memories. In order to narrow my focus of this wide-ranging topic I use several *Kunstdenkmäler* and the establishment of Berlin's art and graffiti scene as case studies. From my perspective establishing any kind of art is a paradox; the unestablished, gritty vibe the city offered artists was initially its attraction, and the establishment of something so vibrant and varied could be seen as an attempt to restrict and enclose it. This brings into question the contention of time in Berlin; history is pulling it back into memory while gentrification is driving it forwards.

### **Keywords**

Berlin, memorials, art culture, gentrification, graffiti

### **Introduction**

Within the last century Berlin has not only changed dramatically as a result of its modernisation and economic growth but also its turbulent history. During WWII Berlin was strategically bombed by the allies and eventually captured in 1945; by this time, 1.7 million people had fled the city (Overy, 2014). The bombing destroyed vital infrastructure, cultural heritage sites and took the lives of many. The Cold War was a new breed of world conflict; Germany became the centre of sustained military and political tension between Democracy and Communism. Berlin found itself on the fault line between East and West, torn in half by the Berlin Wall. The fall of the Wall in 1989 marked the end of an era but by no means the end of economic, political and emotional struggle.

If someone had not seen Berlin since 1989, they may not recognise the city today. Through a massive influx of artists, businesspeople and developers, Berlin has evolved from a city wounded to a flourishing cultural and entrepreneurial capital. The artistic landscape of Berlin has changed almost as drastically as its political one over the last two decades. The Berlin Wall, which was once a rift, created an opportunity to unite two very individual artistic cultures. They were able to exchange ideas, learn from one another and participate in collaborative initiatives like the creation of the East Side Gallery memorial. The East/West political turbulence attracted a lot of artistic talent from overseas in the early 1990s; a crucial factor of art is embracing the causes, course and consequences of conflict and freshly reunified Berlin provided a very unique stage for just that (Imperial War Museum, 2014).

Reunification was for most a difficult political and emotional process. It is understandable that many felt temporarily without identity after 28 years of coming to terms with a divided existence. This identity crisis was particularly pivotal for those born during the Cold War who had never experienced a unified world before 1989. Much of this crisis was channelled into art, with a focus on freedom of expression. The two 'memory-obsessed' decades to follow also saw a number of newer artistic memorials and initiatives to commemorate historical events even further in the past, namely the Second World War. The Holocaust Memorial and the Stolpersteine Initiative are examples which will be discussed in this analysis.

Berlin has remained a 'cultural, artsy' city- edgy and young. However, there have been many changes in the last decade which have caused yet another shift in the artistic development in the city. Modern artists and art collectors have flocked to the eastern districts of Berlin- specifically Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain- causing property prices to rise and demographic transition known as gentrification. *Kunstdenkmäler* or artistic memorials stand on every street

corner commemorating Berlin's darkest historical episodes. Art and cultural festivals like the Biennale Berlin are now fully established and graffiti which was once treated as a credible art form in Berlin is falling back in favour to no more than transgressive social behaviour.

How do graffiti and artistic memorials shape the expectations of the countless tourists flocking to Berlin, and the psyche of its inhabitants? And what is the future for a city being pulled into the past by memory, and tumbling forward into gentrified establishment at the same time? In this paper I wish to consider these opposing aspirations for art: the development of preserving memory since 1989 and the effect of *Kunstdenkmäler* on Berlin and Germany alongside gentrification and graffiti. My focus will be on visual art, sculpture and memorials; the incorporation of other art forms like music and theatre would be relevant but unmanageable. Through this analysis, I hope to expose links between current economic changes and gentrification, a modern 'memory epidemic' and art in Berlin.

## Berlin

Berlin's landscape still tells a thousand stories. One could claim it is 'scarred'; monuments like the Kaiser Wilhelm Gedächtnis Kirche on Kurfürstendamm still exhibit the gravity of bomb damage suffered during WWII, and the line of the old Berliner Mauer is still etched into the ground for all to see. Artistic and entrepreneurial development in Berlin over the last few decades has created a very unique vibe. Thought-provoking exhibitions of modern history like the Jewish Museum and Topography of Terror bring in many national and international tourists every year. It has become an expectation that a place like Berlin, which has experienced so much, should showcase its past to tourists and visitors. In this way it has become a centre where Germany as a whole can engage in monumental debates about its relationship to its political past (Young, 2002).

The city has been the stage for intense political and military conflict on many occasions. WWII and the Cold War are the obvious examples but the 1968 Student Revolution in Berlin is also a good example, particularly when one considers the causal arguments; the students were protesting against capitalism and fascism as they believed that the importance of something like WWII, with all of its destruction, collaboration and pain, should not be deliberately swept under the carpet as if it never happened. Berlin is now a living example of this; its history is past, but not forgotten. This adds in part to the city's charm and identity because Berlin feels like somewhere which has experienced all that it has. It does not claim to be a city reborn from the ashes but a city... as a consequence of what it has suffered. It sits precariously on the fault-lines of memory, urban life and development: past, present and future.

But even if you have not visited Berlin you will no doubt have heard about the changes it has been undergoing. Since 1989 its popularity as a haven for all things artistic, historic and rebellious have caused development in art culture and business. Rent is rising and the population is ever growing. Despite this there is still a sharp, social focus on past events and commemoration: a society's collective memory. This and the use of *Kunstdenkmäler*, artistic memorials, will be the first focus of this paper.

## Memory

The world is becoming a "Memoryland" (McDonald, 2013), obsessed with keeping historical events alive through expression and thought. Berlin flourishes and suffers as a consequence of this. On the one hand tourists flock to the city to visit preserved relics of WWII and the Cold War in the same way as they flock to Rome to see the preserved remains of Roman civilisation. Memory is in this way a source of income, reputation and business opportunity. However, another equally applicatory result of this is the inability to move on; even generations of Germans born since WWII and the fall of the Berlin wall are burdened by war guilt. My question relating this phenomenon is: do the innumerable artistic memorials to victims of suffering during WWII give strength to this collective memory?

Memory has become romanticised as something we **have** rather than something we **do**. The timing of the so-called "remembrance epidemic" (McDonald, 2013) is no coincidence; modern focus and awareness on psychology and psychological disorder has intensified in recent years. There is also growing concern about the loss of social memory as the generation of those who experienced WWII first-hand, quite naturally, diminishes (Nora, 1989). There are now two generations born since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. This is a perfectly natural process of growing old, birth and death but within these generations of Europeans lies deeply entrenched trauma.

There are stereotypes about every nationality: the British tend to be rowdy and boozy, the Dutch drive everywhere and the French only ever drink their own wine. All of these stereotypes are based on truth and are playfully over-exaggerated and widely accepted as friendly banter. But the fun stops with German stereotypes when thought strays from Lederhosen, beer and beach towels on sun loungers to the world wars and National Socialism. For the most of us these are 'after-images'; the post-Holocaust generation can only remember these events through the countless novels, memoirs, poems, documentaries, photograph and movies that exist (Young, 2002); a valid question here would be

“what happens to history when it ceases to be testimony” (Kaplan, 1986) and becomes subjective and associative? In a recent article on the (in)compatibility of guilt and suffering in German memory, Aleida Assmann describes memory as an arduous process which has to overcome many different forms of resistance (Assmann, 2006). This research is relevant to the manifestation of post-1989 art and memorial in Berlin, and I wish to consider it with reference to two very different artistic memorial initiatives: Peter Eisenman’s Holocaust Memorial inaugurated in 2005 and the Stolpersteine initiative started by Gunter Demnig in 1992.

## Kunstdenkmäler

Innumerable Denkmäler are scattered all over Berlin. They range in size, shape and of course in popularity; some are far better publicised than others and are sites on major tourist trails through the city. Well over half of the Denkmäler in the city, like the Holocaust Memorial and the Stolpersteine initiative relate to World War II but what is most striking is that 90% of these were installed since German reunification in 1989. Some consider this to be a positive sign that East-West social division caused by the Berlin Wall is being overcome. Sites of recent Denkmäl-projects have become places where Germany as a whole can engage in open debate about its relationship to National Socialism (Young, 2000), and other more local projects in Berlin have connected the populations of East and West Berlin at a community level. Finding metaphorical common ground in a ‘new’ physical common ground is a political and private hurdle often underestimated. Art has been a therapy to many of those caught in the aftermath of historical trauma. It can also be considered from a negative angle: if so many memorials are on view all over the city, how are the younger generations supposed to escape from the implication that this is somehow, as part of their culture’s history, their fault? And why the recent, post-89 resurgence in memories of the war? In 2003 Germany as a whole experienced an unpredicted flood of memories of German guilt and suffering (Assmann, 2006); innumerable media on the topic were published during this year and in Berlin a number of the most widely publicised Denkmäler, like the Holocaust Memorial, were built. The memorial is meant

“to honour the dead, preserve the memory of the Holocaust, warn future generations not to violate human rights, defend democracy and the rule of law, and resist dictatorship”<sup>i</sup>  
(Bundestag, 1999)

Its intended purpose was collective and inclusive, and in some way the memorial fulfils these requirements. The layout of the memorial allows visitors a large amount of interpretive freedom; unless a person was to visit the museum found under the open-air exhibit which explains the meaning and significance, they are able to form their own opinion on what the blocks symbolise without historical context. It offers intellectual, artistic and physical accessibility and it is used very differently by its many visitors. I walk past the memorial nearly every day and have borne witness to tour groups, photographers, small children playing and people even picnicking among grey stone slabs.



There is of course another side to the argument. If a further aim of the memorial was to “present a picture of German identity to a national and international audience” (Assmann, 2006), then the name *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* is openly problematic; indeed it contradicts the aforementioned aims by dedicating it to a specific social group. The name is also somewhat misleading because of its ambiguity. The Jewish persecution and genocide which occurred 1933-1945<sup>ii</sup> was by no means the first example of Anti-Semitism in history, the first examples of which are recorded thousands of years ago. The conflated connection between the new generations of Germans to the foundations of this branch of racism can be seen as unfair. Günther Grass extends this point further in the following section of a speech made in 2001:

It is strange and disturbing how late and still hesitantly the suffering of the Germans during the war is remembered. The consequences of the thoughtlessly begun and criminally led war, especially the destruction of German cities, the death of hundreds of thousands of civilians by blitz bombing and resulting 12 Million East Germans are only of background importance. A wrong did not make a right, but another wrong.<sup>iii</sup>

This statement could even be considered as a rebuke against those who have labelled the German people as responsible and guilty for WWII; both sides were at fault and both sides had casualties.

It is undeniably important that WWII and the Holocaust are never forgotten, but by the same token it is also irrefutable that the building of such iconic, artistic and though provoking memorials under its name would not affect the process of German memory, particularly in Berlin. Generations of innocent Germans too young to have even experienced the war still feel the guilt cast over the country because of stereotype and collective memory.

Gunter Demnig's Stolpersteine initiative differs from the Holocaust memorial on nearly every level. *Das Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas* is vast, a popular visit site for tourists and is publically funded. The Stolpersteine on the other hand are tiny, found all over the streets of Berlin but barely noticeable to any who does not seek them specifically. The initiative itself is privately funded, indeed any family member or living friend of someone who died during the Holocaust on groups of physical or mental disability, social 'inferiority', sexuality or religious belief can pay for a stone to be laid to honour and remember them.

Both memorials are valuable in their own right but the artistic contrast between them shows the multi-layered history Berlin exhibits. The Holocaust memorial was sanctioned and funded by the German government as a memorial representative of the German people, where the Stolpersteine provide a more personal memorial with three intentions: to mourn and honour the dead, to educate their audience and to represent contemporary **European** citizens (Stolpersteine Ethik, 2012). Something the memorials both share is critical reception; representative nature of the two media has been heavily contested by some but it is always incredibly difficult to find a completely cohesive means to commemorate such an event.

Over 2000 of the small gold plaques can be found on the streets of Berlin, outside perfectly ordinary apartment blocks, mansions, government buildings. To plural observers of Berlin they are often overshadowed by large, architecturally striking sights but for this reason they retain their anonymity and personal appeal. Geographically the initiative is also limitless: Berlin may be a centralised hub for Stolpersteine but they are found all over Europe: Croatia, the Czech Republic and France to name but a few. The lack of information provided at their unexpected locations allows them to remain relatively personal, but they have had the tendency to surprise and even irritate passers-by.



The term 'stumbling stone' is a biblical metaphor implying both a potential catastrophe; we trip and stumble on the journey towards righteousness and the stone becomes a cornerstone of the good who stay on this journey despite downfalls.<sup>iv</sup>In this sense the purpose of the modern Stolpersteine are a physical, artistic manifestation of this biblical metaphor. They act as a means through which those persecuted in a very great downfall will not be forgotten.

The designers of the Stolpersteine never claim to represent the nation in the sense of "standing for" Germany; they consider themselves as a grass-roots project which represents, as far as it can, the individual victims of the Holocaust (Jennifer Jordan, 2013). This brings one back to the same question that needed answering right at the very beginning; how can newer generations commemorate something like the Holocaust, especially so far into a future? And why the sudden craze to do

so?

## Gentrification

The focus of this paper will now shift from past and memory to future developments for art in Berlin. This will primarily concern gentrification and the establishment of the art scene and graffiti culture.

Gentrification is the process of social, urban shift towards an increase in new business, wealthier residents and higher property prices and rents. It is typically the result of community investment, be it from community activists, government or business groups. In Berlin there were many factors at play in the development of gentrification, but the more significant was governmental, having received a cash injection in the early 1990s to rebrand the capital;

"After 1989, political leaders in Germany sought to re-establish Berlin as the German capital, without the baggage of either Nazi Berlin or the divided Berlin...to accomplish that, the Federal Government moved most of its institutions from Bonn to Berlin and initiated reconstruction of large sections of the city infrastructure to accommodate a growing population and increasing travel between east and west...." (Jennifer Jordan, 2013)

The effect of gentrification is twofold. On the one hand it statistically kick-starts economic improvement and development in an area. This attracts new business; areas which were previously run-down undergo a total renovation. As new enterprises become established and the area's reputation grows, visitors bring in a new source of wealth and income. Crime rates tend to drop and quality of life improves.

On the other hand new businesses which can afford hiking rent rates usually attract a more affluent customer base, reducing accessibility to the poor. In extreme cases poorer pre-gentrification residents unable to pay commercial rent are priced out of their own homes and move towards to the outskirts, which not only causes serious social and educational issues, but disturbs any previous attempt at social integration and diversification.

Although this is exactly the threat gentrification poses artistic development, the relationship between the phenomenon and arts and artists is paradoxical; they can be both negatively affected by gentrification and considered "marginal gentrifiers" themselves (Lees, 2010). In his analysis *The new Middle Class and the Remaking of the Central City*, David Ley states that "the artist's critique of everyday life and search for meaning and renewal are what makes them early recruits for gentrification" (Ley, 1996) and more likely to risk buildings in serious need of renovation. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989-90 many old, dilapidated buildings were taken over by artists and became squats.

A famous example is Kunsthaus Tacheles in Berlin Mitte. Huge graffiti murals decorate the outside and 'Tacheles', Yiddish for 'straight talking', gives a clever insight into the building's history as a Jewish department store and the ethos of the new occupants simultaneously (Kunsthaus Tacheles, 2014).

Artists are quintessentially city people (Ley, 1996) but their cultural emancipation from a bourgeois lifestyle means their inner city lifestyle seeks to completely juxtapose conformity. In the 1990s-2000s when our great artsy centres like New York and London were becoming "pay-to-play" (Liam Boogar, 2013), Berlin retained its low prices as well as its vibe and intensity. But this is where the paradox kicks in. Art is not only an attraction for "committed participants but also sporadic consumers" (Lloyd, 2006) and as more affluent, 'indie' residents move to Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain, the faster the rent hikes and eventually artists which began the movement in the first place will be pushed out.



Reaction to gentrification is generally negative; graffiti around the city like the famous example in this image thematises gentrification and the term is a buzzword in innumerable, scathing news articles. Why? Because Berlin's atmosphere and population are changing so fast that people are beginning to question their own identity. Here lies the fundamental link with an 'identity crisis'; roots and history are bound to be unearthed as a population begins to search for why they feel tied to a certain place and its culture. Ironically, through throwing Berlin forward, gentrification also throws it back in time as residents, visitors and artists scabble around in the deep, dark past to find answers.

The first part of this paper dealt with how a second or third generation on from WWI can commemorate events like the Holocaust successfully, having had no first-hand experience of it themselves. However, the fact that such significant events of the past are still part of contemporary discourse and debate proves only that it is just as relevant and important for a modern society. If one takes the view that art is a form of expression and a freedom to exhibit individual thought and feeling, then it is not a question of first or second hand evidence but a personal

interpretation, however detached or obscure.

## Developments of the Art Scene

It is of course important to mention here that there are subjective interpretations at play in analysis of an 'art scene'. In this particular paper I wish to consider the art scene as a kind of ingrained and therefore conventionalised

establishment of visual arts. This includes the creation of art institutions and the commodification of art in tourism as well as private sale.

Not all artists, art enthusiasts or experts would consider this as a correct definition of the art scene but then definition itself is controversial. The definition of art is fundamentally difficult; naturally one must define it to give it semiotic and social meaning but all forms and examples of art have, by nature, an ambiguous and interpretative meaning. Definition is both necessary and threatens to restrict something which openly tests boundaries and definition itself. This penultimate section considers this difficult balance.

'Establishment' can be defined in a number of ways:

1. The action of establishing something
2. A public institution
3. A business organisation (Oxford Dictionaries, 2013)

The first speaks for itself but the second and third are of interest in this context. Floods of people arrived in Berlin when the barrier between East and West came down. Berlin became an island-city: a home for anyone from other German cities and further afield who did not feel at home elsewhere. This naturally included artists, rebels, gay and lesbian communities; those who did not feel accepted, appreciated or able to express their opinion. Berlin's mish-mash subculture originally served as further attraction for artistic talent promoting freedom of expression.

Berlin belonged to everyone equally but this idea of "art for art's sake" is under threat from a current contemporary society. Granted this is an ideal considered characteristic of the 1980s culture, which championed an anti-establishment lifestyle free from materialism and bureaucracy. Art belonged to them and unique interpretation belonged to each individual.

Things are not quite the same as they used to be in Berlin; the general population protests against the current society less frequently, unemployment is very low and only a fraction of the artist squats remain. Art, however, is also more regularly regarded as a commodity. Pictures of the Stolpersteine and the Holocaust Memorial as well as East Side Gallery can be found on T-Shirts, coasters and postcards in every shop selling tourist merchandise. It begs the question to whom the art work and memorials belong: are they public institution or business organisation, or do they fall into both categories?

Surely the original artwork belongs to the artist, who is free of course to make the decision to sell or gift their art work to a business or public institution. Issues of course arise as a direct consequence of this situation. In 2011 a group of artists who helped to create the East Side Gallery tried to sue the city of Berlin after the original paintings were to be covered and replaced in a huge renovation project. The creation of the memorial in 1990 and 1991 was the biggest artistic project of its kind, uniting creative minds from both sides of the wall who refused any kind of payment in the spirit of peace. They filed their case to the court after they

"...were offered €3,000 (£2,700) each by Berlin council to recreate their original murals after the site was overhauled for the 20th anniversary of the fall of the wall two years ago. The artists were told if they refused to comply, an urban renewal firm contracted by the council would whitewash their work and get someone else to re-create – or "forge", according to the aggrieved artists – the originals. It is not unlike a London borough destroying a piece of Banksy graffiti and then getting it re-created in order to keep the tourists coming. Many of the Berlin artists deemed €3,000 an insultingly low amount, especially as it was public knowledge that Berlin council had put aside a total of €2.2m for the renovations." (Pidd, 2011)

This example gets to the very heart of the matter. The memorial was created for peace; it was meant to represent to visitors of the horrors the wall caused. The art created was both a metaphor for and a medium of freedom of expression. Those suing Berlin were not denying the original agreement that their piece was created free of charge but were insulted by the idea that their work is worth so little in comparison to the overall, commercial renovation designed to keep the tourists coming rather than keeping the meaning of the memorial alive. When the artists made their mark in the early 1990s, they made it public institution but they still identify with the work as *theirs*. The ownership of the art may be in question but the real crime would be if the significance of the work was undermined by its commodification.

An art establishment is also responsible for representation and education and can often be a hostile environment for those artists under represented. Many artists cannot make a living from art but carry on anyway because it is what they feel they can do to express their emotions. It is very hard to judge what is art and what is not and there is ever more argument about who has the right to judge this difference. Art establishment is beginning to dictate what art is, albeit subtly, because it controls art education. It therefore controls what art is and how it should develop through teaching.

## Graffiti

For those who cannot or do not want to make money from their art, many turn to graffiti. Graffiti is a very special art form, a pioneer of anti-establishment ideas. As an insular, rebellious centre Berlin welcomed graffiti and its creators. The artists themselves usually choose to remain anonymous but there are many artist 'tags' which make the work as

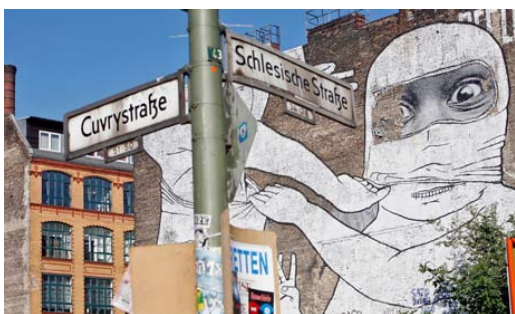
## *Remembering and transforming: a study of art and culture in Berlin since 1989*

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one by a specific group or individual: no-one can really know which. The protection of their identity is their greatest defence.

The idea of graffiti is very simple: put your art or opinion in an eye-catching, controversial place to raise awareness through dispute. They act as signs; in pre-gentrified graffiti artists became authors of the landscape and through this contested the ownership of the surroundings. They claimed no ownership of their artwork, partly to protect themselves from prosecution for 'vandalising' public space but also to allow art to prevail for art's sake. Berlin was a special



place for graffiti because, despite stereotype that Germany has a strict control on bureaucratic, legal obligation, many local governments took the view that some of the graffiti work was in fact art rather than or as well as transgressive social behaviour. This cannot be said for every example. Take for instance the two pictures below:

The image on the right states a political opinion, featuring language not considered appropriate to show before the Watershed on television. It may be considered a transgressive example of vandalism as a result. That on the left is very different: it is a detailed design which must have taken a lot longer to produce and required a deal more artistic talent and consideration. It is also a form of vandalism from many people's perspective; it is a violation of law to graffiti public property without permission. However, I will not go any further in the debate as to who dictates the ownership of public space because this is a different area of enquiry.

This accepting perspective has changed as gentrification has become more ingrained in the city; the newer, wealthier philosophy is not that graffiti is a celebration of individualist art and freedom, but an example of this transgressive social behaviour. There are still groups in Berlin to try and protect the unique, underground graffiti culture which has helped in part to secure Berlin's artsy and edgy reputation. Tour companies like 'Alternative Berlin' run graffiti tours to showcase the most interesting examples of graffiti around Berlin and educate visitors in the unique, turbulent history behind it. They aim to show tourists

"...the unusual places and people you might not discover by yourself [...] an authentic local experience of Berlin's famous underground subcultures, alternative lifestyles and street art and graffiti scenes in a safe and respectful way." (Alternative Berlin, 2014)

Tours like these give anyone an opportunity to learn about the history of graffiti culture and Berlin itself as well as giving visitors a unique insight into meaning and interpretation of graffiti art. On the surface it is the perfect compromise to facilitate education and understanding of graffiti as a true art form rather than transgressive behaviour. However, graffiti artists usually remain anonymous and if this is the case then it is likely that the interpretation which features in the tour is subjective to the companies' employees rather than the intentional meaning of the artist. It is the establishment of an art form traditionally celebrated by an anti-establishment subculture; tours like these are lucrative business organisations which profit from art work which is public domain but artists' work. The business itself may pay its licence fees but does this give them the right to provide visitors with an educational experience based entirely on company opinion?

This form of art establishment may be that which serious graffiti artists are trying to avoid but by placing their message, by authoring the landscape so publically, the graffiti becomes a public institution and a business organisation in one fell swoop.

## The future?

Since German reunification, Berlin has remained a 'cultural, artistic' city: edgy and young. But the wealthier gentrifiers who follow the artistic sub-culture, Denkmal art on every corner and an ever growing gallery and private collectors' community: these are all symbols of Berlin as a tourist attraction, and the establishment of the art scene. The fundamental issues in all of this is whether establishment detracts from the meaning and significance of the art produced.



So far, as the article which first aroused my interest in this topic details, it appears that Berlin's artistic subculture is simply adapting to these developments and growing alongside them. Artists who no longer enjoy the 'mainstream' vibe of Kreuzberg or can no longer pay the rent there are moving to cheaper areas of the city. Some are relishing this new dispersal of talent: photographer Annika Rixen described how "it's kind of nice that things are branching out, that it's not just everyone crowding to Mitte" (Mulholland, 2010). Artists who are flocking to the areas still considered gritty and pre-gentrification, like Neukölln or Wedding, are being reeled in by the cheaper rent and the spaces available. These are usually different to those found in Kreuzberg, more commonly huge warehouses in more industrial and less residential surroundings which provide artists with a newer and therefore original space in which to work and exhibit. The phenomenon of "apartment galleries," is becoming a new craze; these are basically a modern, slicker version of an artists' squat where creative minds make agreements with art lovers with large, cheap apartments who let them exhibit their work.

This in itself is Berlin's anti-establishment art scene fighting back. To quote the same article, "this is a very particular hands-on Berlin model...If artists here aren't given an opportunity, they create one for themselves." (Mulholland, 2010).

The scene is diversifying and the younger arts scene in Berlin is still relaxed, happy to be inspired by surroundings and live in the moment like their forefathers. Their work is, however, still endangered by these developments; there will come a point at which cheaper options run out. The creativity of those who come to Berlin to produce art in a positive setting which promotes the new and unique could easily be suffocated. Berlin then risks losing its edgy and artsy reputation to conform to trend like other 'pay-to-play' capitals like London, New York and Paris: famous for their art and fashion but also infamous for their prices and mainstream chicness. "At some point Berlin is going to become completely gentrified, it's not going to stay this mecca forever" (Mulholland, 2010).

## Conclusion

This paper deals with two different sides to Berlin's artistic culture: the past and memory, with a focus on memorial and commemoration and the future through gentrification and accelerated art establishment, with a focus on graffiti. Berlin is being pulled back by memory and forward into something yet to be fixed upon. Other artsy cities in the world are still losing raw talent to Berlin; many move from New York or London to live or at least exhibit among fresh ideas. This is, however, just accelerating gentrification as these people, as well as other immigrants searching for job prospects in the growing start-up scene, require further infrastructure and business.

Is there a way around this paradox? Tara Mulholland's article from the New York Times suggests it is sad that Berlin cannot stay a "Mecca", a place of solace from modernisation, but it also that artists in Berlin are so intent on staying they are simply thinking on their feet, branching out and looking for new solutions in other areas of the city. For now they can adapt but the question is whether this will be an option when the space runs out.

Overall I would suggest that the position Berlin is in in terms of its artistic development is a gift. It has served as a battle ground on several occasions but its scars add to its charm and its historical interest. It still acts as a fault-line between Western and Eastern European cultures and a historical, psychological fault line between past and future. It is not only important to celebrate Berlin's visual art scene because it showcases the political and historical scars the city bears but also because it is these gritty, edgy origins that gave Berlin its name as the cultural capital of Europe in 1988. Without the memory of past events, they could reoccur. Similarly without the memory of where visual art began to develop, there is no foundation for its maintenance in an ever more gentrified, touristy world. The purpose of art was freedom of expression: a symbol of peace, knitting together the past, present and future. The wounds of division have healed over but one cannot let art become entirely commercialised and purposeful to the point at which freedom of expression is lost. In this way we can see Berlin as a warning to tread with caution in the future; the risk is that gentrification and the establishment of the art scene in Berlin will detract from the gritty edge it retains. The need to turn away new talent would be a crying shame.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> The exact citation reads: 'Beschluss des Deutschen Bundestages vom 25. Juni 1999 (Auszug 1.1 Die Bundesregierung errichtet in Berlin ein Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas. 1.2 Mit dem Denkmal wollen wir: die ermordeten Opfer ehren, die Erinnerung an ein unvorstellbares Geschehen der deutschen Geschichte wachhalten, alle künftigen Generationen mahnen, die Menschenrechte nie wieder anzutasten, stets den demokratischen Rechtsstaat zu verteidigen, die Gleichheit der Menschen vor dem Gesetz zu wahren, und jeder Diktatur und Gewaltherrschaft zu widerstehen'.

<sup>ii</sup> Adolf Hitler was made Chancellor of Germany on January 30th 1933 and the persecution of the Jews began from this point in time. It was not limited to the time period of the war alone.

<sup>iii</sup> Günther Grass, 'Ich erinnere mich', in Martin Wälde (ed.), *Die Zukunft der Erinnerung*, Göttingen 2001, pp. 27-34: *Merkwürdig und beunruhigend mutet dabei an, wie spät und immer noch zögerlich an die Leiden erinnert wird, die während des Krieges den Deutschen zugefügt wurden. Die Folgen des bedenkenlos begonnenen und verbrecherisch geführten Krieges, nämlich die*

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*Zerstörung deutscher Städte, der Tod Hundertertausender Zivilisten durch Flächenbombardierung und die Vertreibung, das Flüchtlingselend von zwölf Millionen Ostdeutschen waren nur Thema im Hintergrund [...] Ein Unrecht verdrängte das andere.*

<sup>iviv</sup>Original bible verse: NIV Bible. 1 Corinthians 8:9: But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

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### Author Biography

My name is Lucy Tallentire and I am a student in my third of four years reading German at the University of Sheffield, UK. My study is focused primarily on literature, art and artistic developments in Germany. My ERASMUS year abroad study programme at the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin has also provided me with a unique insight into new developments at the source of these

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debates. After completing my BA in Sheffield next year I wish to pursue further study in Contemporary Art and Art History in Europe.

My interest in Art and Art History stems from trips to Berlin and Vienna as a child; I was always bowled over by the concept that such a variety of media and styles could all be labelled by just one term. Gustav Klimt and the Wiener Secession are a source of inspiration to me as, since developing the knowledge to begin asking questions like how and why at university, I believe Art should not become a confined and suppressed entity but a valued, diverse expression of freedom and personal perspective. Their motto *Der Zeit ihre Kunst, der Kunst ihre Freiheit* plays an important role in my evaluation of Art and its social importance.