

# Art in America



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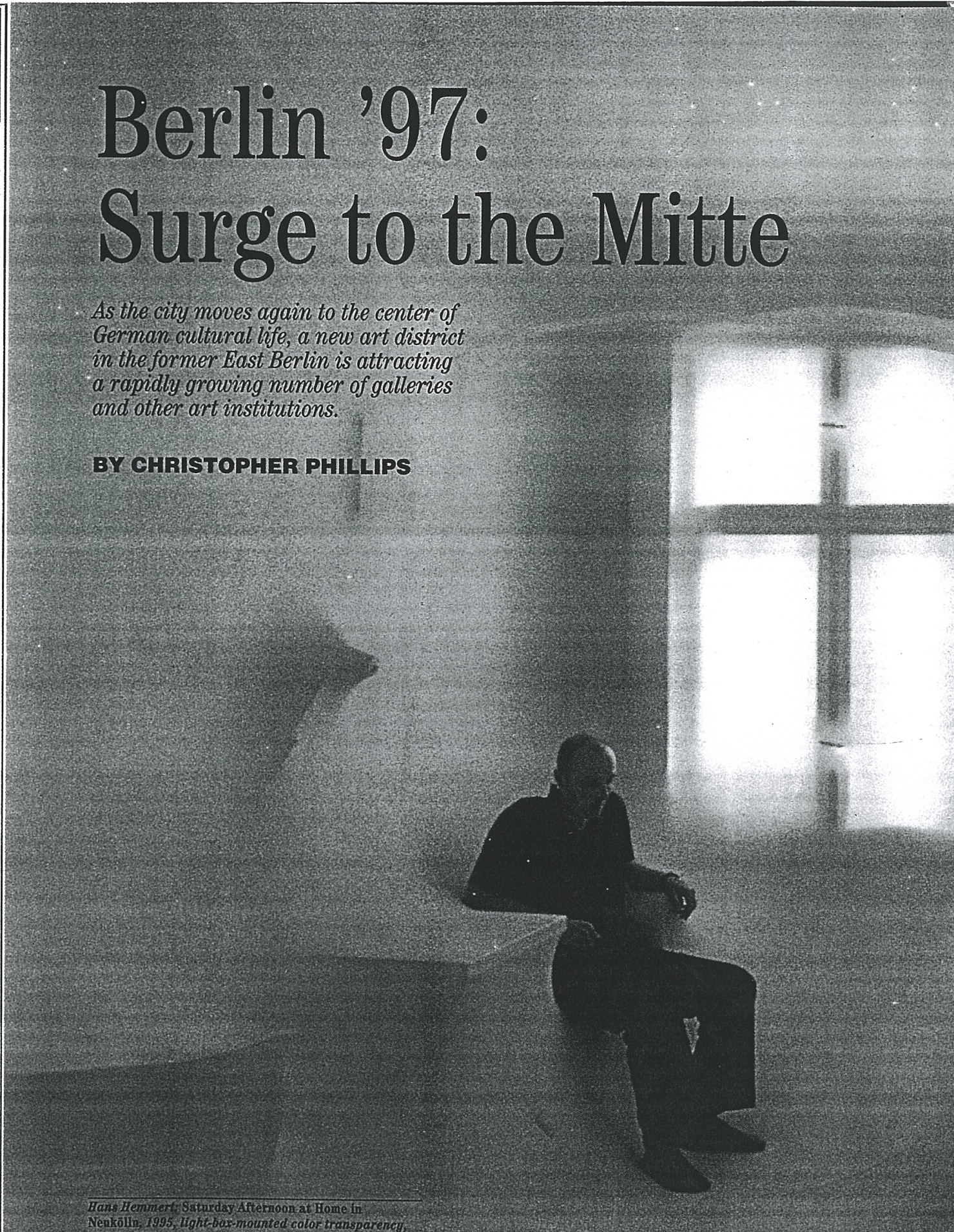
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# Berlin '97: Surge to the Mitte

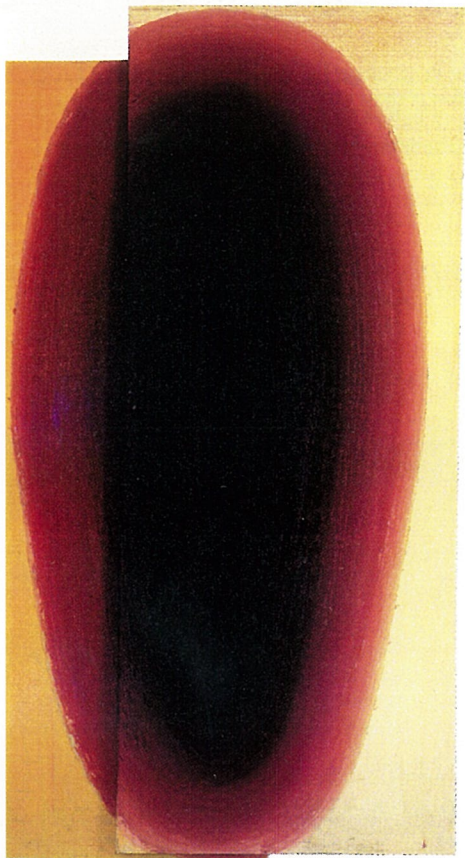
*As the city moves again to the center of German cultural life, a new art district in the former East Berlin is attracting a rapidly growing number of galleries and other art institutions.*

**BY CHRISTOPHER PHILLIPS**



*Hans Hemmert: Saturday Afternoon at Home in Neukölln, 1995, light-box-mounted color transparency, 16 1/4 by 23 1/4 by 1 inches. The artist, who works with inflatable materials, spent a full day inside a balloon that filled his living room.*





**Akos Birkás: Head, 1995-96,**  
oil on canvas, two panels,  
87½ by 56¼ inches overall.

and by the 1920s around half of the area's population consisted of immigrant Eastern Jews, Yiddish-speaking *Ostjuden* who often clung to Hasidic dress. Not unlike New York's Lower East Side during the same period, the area was the home of small-tradespeople, shopkeepers, urban factory workers and street peddlers. By the 1920s, it had gained a reputation as a picturesque enclave in the heart of modern Berlin, and served as a haunt for such literary flâneurs as Alfred Döblin, Siegfried Kracauer and Joseph Roth.

Needless to say, the Nazi accession to power in 1933 had calamitous consequences for the Scheunenviertel. In the spring of that year, a campaign of police terror was aimed at its inhabitants, who were stopped randomly on the streets, searched and beaten. By the late 1930s, when German Jews had been effectively stripped of their political and property rights, Joseph Goebbels and his aides debated whether to turn the area into an official ghetto for the city's remaining Jewish inhabitants or to expel them completely from Berlin. The latter course ultimately prevailed. In 1942 a home for the elderly adjacent to the cemetery on Grosse Hamburger Strasse became a Gestapo collection point where the remnants of Berlin's Jewish population were gathered for deportation to the death camps. (It was on this street, in 1990, that Christian Boltanski created a permanent installation, *The Missing House*, that recalls the area's former occupants.<sup>2</sup>)

In comparison to much of Berlin, which was virtually leveled by Allied bombing and the Red Army's assault on the city, the buildings of the Scheunenviertel and much of the surrounding area were relatively undamaged at

the war's end. Yet during the 50-year period when East Berlin was the capital of the German Democratic Republic, a policy of official neglect led to a precipitous deterioration of the quarter. While on the opposite side of Alexanderplatz a showcase socialist boulevard, the Stalin Allee, was constructed, the streets north of Oranienburger Strasse gradually slipped to the status of a red-light district, home now to a transient population of dropouts, prostitutes and transvestites as well as the elderly. By the 1980s, younger residents began to organize citizens' initiatives to save their decaying buildings from utter collapse. After the unification of East and West Berlin in 1990, the city government threw its weight behind plans to renovate the entire district.

At the same time, though, the German government adopted a policy of "restitution," which sought to undo the confiscations of the Nazi and the Cold War period by offering former property owners, or their legal successors, the chance to reclaim prior possessions. As it happened, over 90 percent of the buildings in the Mitte fell under this provision. These properties were turned over to a city residential housing agency, the Wohnungsbau-Gesellschaft Mitte (WBM). The WBM was assigned the complex task of preserving the area's dilapidated housing stock, searching out previous owners, encouraging renovation and, by the year 2003, moving all of the area's buildings into private hands. (Of the former owners who have been located so far, fewer than 10 percent have elected to actually repossess their property, with most preferring instead to sell.) It was the WBM that hit upon the strategy of bringing start-up arts organizations to the area by offering low-cost, multiyear leases on "transitional spaces" slated for privatization.

In fact, only months after the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, groups of artists began occupying abandoned buildings in the area, most notably the towering ruins of a condemned 1908 department store which was renamed Tacheles—Yiddish for "to talk turkey." Tacheles quickly became the center of an energetic, rough-edged underground scene which



**Neo Rauch: The Big Disturbance, 1995,**  
oil on paper on canvas, 9 by 6½ feet. Photos this  
spread courtesy Galerie Eigen + Art.

**Although the Mitte has not overtaken in importance the long-established gallery quarter in western Berlin, it has decidedly inherited the cutting-edge role once played by districts like Kreuzberg.**

eventually encompassed a dance club, experimental theater productions, artists' studios, jazz concerts and exhibitions. Not long after, Kunst-Werke, an alternative exhibition center and artists' studio program, moved with the aid of the WBM into an old-margarine factory on nearby August Strasse. In 1991 a group of artists founded the Milchhof Association in a former dairy; here, eventually, were studios for 30 artists and spaces for exhibitions, performance and sound recording.

The first indication of the Mitte's real potential as a culture district came in 1992, when Kunst-Werke organized a one-week event called "37 Rooms." A host of independent curators were turned loose in improvised spaces along August Strasse, and 30,000 people turned out to see the resulting displays. Also in 1992, through contacts with Kunst-Werke and the WBM, the Leipzig-based Galerie Eigen + Art opened a Berlin branch on August Strasse, not far from the district's first commercial gallery, Galerie Wohnmaschine. The same year saw the arrival of Allgirls, a gallery founded by Tina Friedrich, Tiger Stangl and Suzan Bayha; with their expenses partially offset by funds from city agencies, they were able to mix artists from Berlin and elsewhere in group shows bringing together up to 40 exhibitors. In 1994 the handful of galleries then operating in the Mitte began to sponsor a monthly evening of simultaneous openings; this *Rundgang*, or gallery walk-around, provided a focus that began to attract visitors from beyond Berlin. More established institutions began to settle in the area, among them the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, one of the city's two Kunstvereine, which moved from the Kurfürstendamm and now operates a modern, street-level exhibition space on Chaussee Strasse. The NBK has played a crucial role by providing Berlin's younger independent curators with an arena in which to sharpen their skills. Such curators, who include Kathrin Becker (organizer of "Pop Mix, Vol. 1"), Thomas Wulffen, Klara Wallner and Oliver Schwarz, have contributed powerfully to the city's increased visibility as an art center.

The Mitte's reputation as a launching pad for serious and innovative artistic projects has owed much to the continued vitality of Kunst-Werke. Guided by artistic director Klaus Biesenbach, who has taken as his models New York's Dia Center for the Arts and London's ICA, Kunst-Werke has grown into a multifaceted "institute for contemporary art and theory," with three floors of gallery space available for programming that typically plays off established international figures (Nauman, Kosuth, Mike Kelley, Gerhard Merz) and younger Berlin artists. One recent, much-remarked event at Kunst-Werke was the exhibition "When tekkno turns to sound of poetry," a 1995 show that first appeared at Zurich's Shedhalle. Devised by a working group of roughly 40 women artists, art historians and writers based mainly in Berlin, the show attempted to

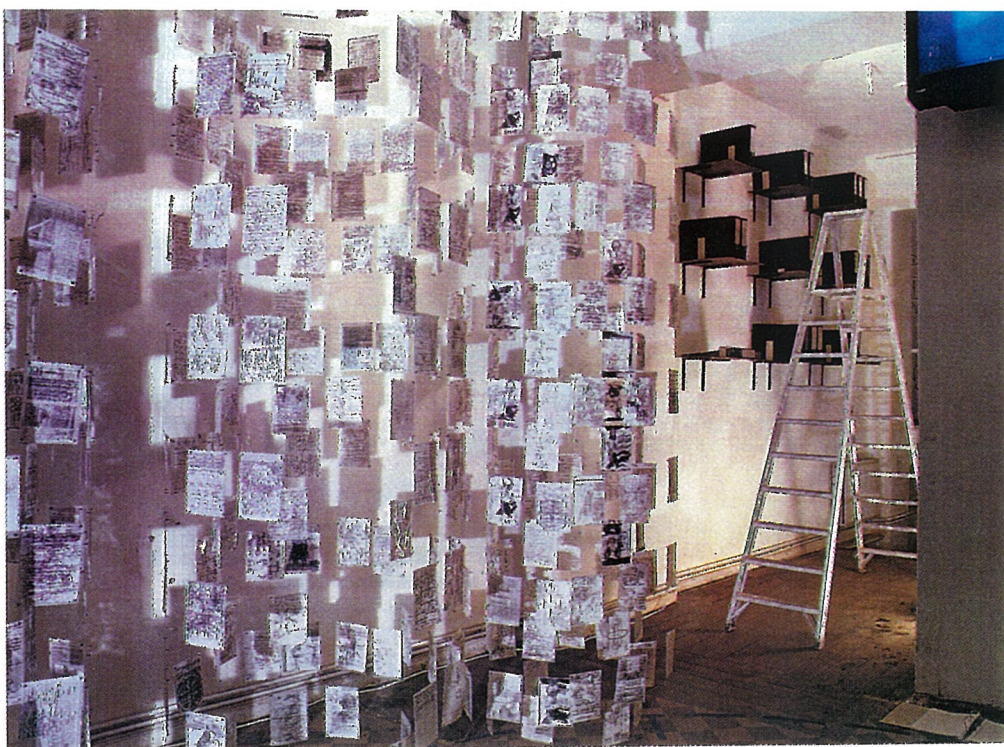


open up a "critical public sphere" for exploring the linkages between a number of hot-button topics—among them the embrace of new technologies by today's techno-rave youth culture, the role of contemporary art in legitimizing technology, and the feminist critique of genetic engineering. As seen at Kunst-Werke, the show filled galleries on three levels with a dense installation of art works and documentation. Exhibited pieces were all assigned numbers, and via these low-tech "links" viewers could refer to printed information collected on tables nearby.

Presently closed for renovations, which include the construction of a Dan Graham pavilion in its courtyard and the refurbishing of studios and living quarters for 12 visiting artists, Kunst-Werke is scheduled to reopen this summer. In the meantime Biesenbach has busily been laying plans for a Berlin biennial. He appears to have learned the Joachimides playbook by heart. A private sponsoring association has been formed, whose members include investor/collector Ronald Lauder (one of the principal backers of the new Checkpoint Charlie Business Center), Hugo Boss executive Peter Littmann and collector Rolf Hoffman. Financial backing has been obtained from the city lottery. And a curatorial team has been formed that consists of Biesenbach, peripatetic Swiss wunderkind Hans-Ulrich Obrist and the Guggenheim's Nancy Spector. The biennial, says Biesenbach, is being conceived to take maximum advantage of Berlin's distinct urban character; it will also seek to accommodate the most diverse tendencies of today's art, which can range from discrete objects to process-oriented events that open onto wider social spaces. Initially announced for this summer, the biennial has been moved back to 1998, a head-to-head competition with Documenta having apparently been judged premature.



Christine Borland: City Park: Strolling, Turning, Kneeling, 1995, one of six color photographs from the "Velocity of Drops" series, 46 by 33 inches overall.



Installation view of Jana Milev's exhibition "Exodus: Text = Asyl + Analyse," 1993, mixed mediums; at Galerie Eigen + Art. Photo Uwe Walter.

## Galleries: Wind from the East

The Mitte is often described as the site where the art cultures of the former East and West Germany are finally beginning to merge. Certainly the most interesting figures on the gallery scene are young dealers who grew up in East Germany. They stand out by reason of their high spirits, lack of pretense and determination to discover promising artists among their generational peers, rather than simply importing works by established figures. Friedrich Looock, for example, is an intense 28-year-old who is the presiding spirit of Galerie Wohnmaschine. Looock grew up in East Berlin and began his working life as a stage carpenter at the Maxim Gorky Theater. In November 1988 he opened his gallery on the corner of August Strasse and Tucholsky Strasse. The name Wohnmaschine, or "machine for living," was inspired by Le Corbusier's notion of a *machine à habiter*, a sensible enough choice given that the gallery was also Looock's dwelling. He estimates that his earliest shows, which featured East Berlin's young unofficial artists, were attended by perhaps 60 visitors. In 1989, after the fall of the Wall, Looock considered launching a nonprofit alternative space, but his artist friends encouraged him to become a commercial dealer—to represent them. In 1992 he showed his artists for the first time at Art Cologne, to an enthusiastic response, and established a project room across the intersection from his original space.

Looock sees his gallery as a "mirror for Berlin," and most of the core group of six artists that he represents today live in the city. Three each come from former East and West Germany—although, he points out, such distinctions are rapidly becoming irrelevant. Because, he admits, "Berliners don't yet buy art," Looock plans his exhibitions in thematic cycles to help attract the attention of curators, corporate art consultants and private collectors from around the country. In 1995, for instance, he staged a 48-week series of pre-

sentations, "Positions of Painting in Berlin," accompanied by a handsome catalogue. The show, which surveyed developments since the Neo-Expressionism of the 1980s, suggested that Berlin remains a city passionately attached to painting. To concentrate the experience, Looock displayed just one work each week, selected from a group of 12 artists. Most of the pieces reflected a Minimal and conceptual bent, as with the work of Gunda Förster, who transforms interior spaces by means of colored light projections. Maya Roos, a Swiss painter living in Berlin, showed small, immaculately executed square canvases; these included near-monochrome works and others featuring loosely concentric, targetlike rings in three or four hues, which in their calculatedly "off" color relations suggest an updating of Albers and Max Bill. Looock hopes to follow this exhibition, which received wide attention in the European art press, with a similar survey of recent Berlin sculpture.

The director of Galerie Eigen + Art, Gerd Harry Lybke, counts at age 35 as the grand old man of the Mitte's dealers. He is already something of a legend in Germany because of his gallery activities in Leipzig during the Cold War period. Lybke began exhibiting East German unofficial artists there in 1983 in a private apartment; two years later he opened a gallery in a building where he and a number of his artists lived together. He reports that he sold nothing between 1983 and 1989. He considered it a "point of honor," he says, not to engage in commercial transactions—and, in any case, private art dealing was legally forbidden and the secret police were busily compiling dossiers on the gallery's artists and visitors. During this time he supported Eigen + Art by nude modeling for art classes.

In early 1990, with the East German regime in its death throes, Lybke rented a booth at the Frankfurt art fair, becoming the first East German dealer ever to participate in such an event. He describes his experience there as a comedy of errors. Innocent of the ways of the commercial art world, he balked when prospective