

## **Berlin: arm aber sexy?**

Marlou de Bont

**In the current cultural landscape artists increasingly have to seek alternatives to fund their art. That a thriving arts scene without governmental support is indeed possible proves Berlin, where most of the artists are working without structural funding since decades. How does that Berlin 'miracle' exactly work? And does it still function? Rekto: verso took a closer look.**

Berlin is seen by many as the Mecca of contemporary art, a centre of creativity where you can stumble upon innovative art projects and galleries with names like 'Mind Pirates' or 'Institut für alles Mögliche' on every corner of the street. Berlin received this image of a dynamic, innovative art city not so much because of its museums and opera houses, but in the first place because of the 'freie Szene'. This scene consists of all the artists that are not permanently employed in an art institute and that don't get structural funding. This amounts to 95% of all artists in Berlin.

Important platforms for these independent artists are the many project spaces that the city counts: art spaces that are distinct from galleries because they deliberately work non profit. As many as 64% of all Berlin artists exhibit in these project areas, whereas only 5% exhibits in galleries. No wonder that a lot of these spaces can be found in the German capital. The French art sociologist Séverine Marguin investigated their situation and estimates their number at 150 – a globally unique phenomenon. The project spaces are part of an alternative economy that doesn't function on money, but on solidarity and enthusiasm. But how long can this independent art scene survive in a city where there seems to be less and less room for art?

### **Contacts above money**

The importance of the Berlin project spaces and the independent art scene lies in the innovation that they bring. Since most project spaces are not focused on making profit, artists and curators can work freely without having to care about commercial interests and they get all the freedom to experiment. In this way it also creates a platform for art forms that can't exist on the commercial art market. Moreover, project spaces offer artists the ability to work spontaneously, whereas most funded institutes make their planning more than a year in advance.

There is hardly any money for these initiatives, but that gets more than compensated by the unbridled commitment of many artists: the study of Marguin shows that a large majority (71%) works voluntarily in the project spaces and in most cases (92%) the artists pay the costs themselves. In addition, the "freie Szene" uses several alternative ways of funding. For example, the members of the film collective nowMomentnow finance all their projects through crowdfunding or by organizing fundraising events for the people in their network. These events are not only meant to raise money, but also to make new contacts. According to artist and cultural journalist Andreas Koch, the independent art scene isn't so much about money – because there is no money in Berlin - but about enlarging your network and thus your social capital: "You get paid by attention."

Within these networks, there is a great solidarity: artists help each other when necessary and are interested in each other's work. This structure of networks also explains the diversity and the interdisciplinarity that characterise the free art scene in Berlin. According to Christophe Knoche, spokesman of the Koalition der freien Szene, this interdisciplinarity is also caused by the large

number of artists in Berlin: "As a dancer, you always know someone who is a painter or a video artist. The boundaries between the disciplines fade in Berlin, which creates an art that is hard to define. It is an art scene that completely merges and that is also very professional. "

This professionalism is an important point. The free scene is in fact often wrongly associated with amateurism, whereas it is actually striking that they have reached such a high level with such few resources and no structural funds. Presumably, this has something to do with the great importance of exchanging of knowledge and ideas, fuelled by the do-it-yourself mentality and the striving for independence that are typical for many of these art initiatives. The idea of sharing knowledge often has a social background. For the independent art practice, dialogue is central: between artists, between artist and audience, and between artist and curator.

### **Space and freedom**

That this free scene developed itself so strongly in Berlin has several reasons. The most obvious one is the fact that Berlin has relatively much space and low rents for a European capital. But there are more cities like that, especially in Eastern Europe. What causes the attraction of Berlin? Artists name amongst others the feeling of freedom and the absence of strict rules . Moreover, Berlin is a safe city, where people dare to start up new initiatives. Another reason that you often hear is the presence of an international art scene. This makes it possible to work internationally on a local level.

Enrico Centonze, artistic leader of the project space Grimmuseum, thinks the motivation of the people is the most important. "There is a certain desire to do things in Berlin. Everybody that comes here is motivated to realize projects, to be busy. Artists are willing to set up an exhibition without getting paid." And in Berlin not only the artists are willing, the public is too. However big the variety of artistic initiatives may seem, even the most obscure art form finds an audience.

All these factors are rooted in the specific historical situation of the city before the fall of the Wall. Both in the East and in the West there was room for improvisation. There were not only many empty buildings and vacant lots, but also many ideas to be tried out. The fall of the Wall in 1989 extended the possibilities even more. Suddenly there were a lot more free spaces. It was a time of euphoria and freedom: people lived in houses that were still full of furniture from the previous residents that had opted for West Germany, clubs and bars opened up in cellars.

### **An artist tourism**

That space and freedom were the basic ingredients of the independent Berlin art scene, but in the Berlin of 2013 it seems like they are become increasingly scarce. Kerstin Karge of the Netzwerk freier Berliner Projekträume sees the government strengthening its grip. "Since five years the city has become more and more organized, privatized and therefore controlled. The free spaces disappear, literally and figuratively." The rents and costs of living have also increased in the city, as a result of the growing gentrification and the profit-oriented real estate policy of the city government. This poses a problem for the art scene, because only a small amount of all artists in Berlin can live from their art, and the ones that can, work for a wage of only 2 or 3 euro's per hour. This is possible with a rent of 150 euro's per month, but if your apartment becomes much more expensive and production spaces disappear, this means an immediate threat.

In addition, it seems like the Berlin art scene is also suffering from its own good reputation, by the arrival of a new 'artist tourism'. According to Martin Steffens of Kunstraum T27, 'it is as an artist nowadays very good for your resume to have worked in Berlin for some months'. Where the scene was previously populated with artists who had their base in Berlin, now there are increasingly more artists who just come here to live the Berlin life and work on their career, and then go back again. This is not really constructive for a stable art scene. Moreover, it leads to unfair competition, because for artists from for instance New York or Oslo it is no problem to pay higher rents.

### **A notable demand**

For a free art scene that has always sworn by independence from commercial and government structures, it is all the more remarkable that artists have been lately starting up a dialogue with the Berlin politics. This trend began in 2009, the year in which the major impact of the financial crisis first left its mark on the art scene. The project space arttransponder then organized a meeting about how the project spaces could deal with the new social conditions. This meeting led to the formation of the Netzwerk freier Berliner Projekträume und -Initiativen, an organization that aims at more cooperation between the project spaces. In 2010 the artist think tank Haben und Brauchen followed, and in 2012 the Koalition der freien Szene, a collaboration between actors from all the different art fields and networks within the free scene.

It is striking that in the summer of 2012 a similar organization was started in Belgium, the Netherlands and France. This artist platform named Jubilee wants to establish an alternative art economy in which an exchange of knowledge and ideas is central, and seeks comparable goals as many artist initiatives in Berlin. It seems like the social consciousness of artists is growing all across Europe.

The Berlin artist organizations work together for more attention and recognition for the innovation that the free scene brings. Other important points are the social situation of the artist and the development of a new real estate policy. In addition, the artists want more money for the free scene. A notable demand in the current European cultural climate: while existing funding structures elsewhere are broken down, the independent art scene in Berlin asks for structural funds from the government. They substantiate their claim with the accusation that the city government has been using the creative image of Berlin in marketing campaigns for years (Berlin ist arm, aber sexy"), and therefore owe the independent art scene that has created this image.

### **Staying overnight for art**

Although there is much ignorance about the free scene by most Berlin politicians, these initiatives seem to be successful. The Netzwerk freier Berliner Projekträume meets on a regular basis with the cultural department of the Berlin Senate, with the result that since 2012, a prize of 30,000 euro's gets awarded to seven project spaces each year. Although the Netzwerk actually wanted a structural funding model, they see the prize as a first step in the right direction. Moreover, Ingrid Wagner of the Berlin cultural policy has confirmed that they are working on a new real estate policy. The Koalition der freien Szene sees a potential source of income in the Citytax: a tax for tourists that stay overnight in Berlin, that will be possibly introduced in 2014. Reportedly, 50% of that money would go to culture, and the Koalition does everything to get as much of that money as possible to the free scene.

Not all artists feel the need for structural funding. Séamus O'Donnell from Salon Bruit, a platform for experimental music, would rather be independent. "It's in the words 'Freie Szene'. When you get structural funding, you often encounter certain obligations and lose some of your freedom." The opinions are also divided about the future of the independent art scene in Berlin. Christian de Lutz (Art Laboratory Berlin): "If the rents here get as high as in other western cities, I do not think the art scene will survive much longer. People will go elsewhere. Therefore, the city government should keep Berlin attractive for artists." Others have a more optimistic view. They believe that the city will always continue to innovate and renew itself because of its unique history, mentality and structure, and that there will always be space left somewhere in Berlin.

### **Does Berlin remain Berlin?**

Berlin is currently standing at a crossroads: will the city follow London or Paris, or will she be able to maintain her experimental and open nature? Much depends on the future of the freie Szene, which is exemplary and (mainly) responsible for this nature. If the independent art scene disappears, it is not sure if Berlin remains that attractive. But in order to secure its future, much should change in the art- and real estate policy of the city. In the cultural department of the Senate there is a lot of goodwill, but to book results, the help of the entire Senate is needed. And unfortunately it seems like they do not yet see the importance of the independent art scene for Berlin. The big challenge for the free scene is now to make itself more visible for the Berlin government without losing its independence and diversity. This is certainly not an easy task, but the Berlin artists are making progress.

Whatever the future may bring, the free scene of Berlin remains an inspiring example in times of funding scarcity. Not only because of its alternative forms of artistic production, but also because of the active role that the Berlin artists collectively claim in the debate about the future of their city and the social importance of art. Much is at stake, not only for Berlin but also for the rest of the art world. If the Berlin government chooses to invest more in its independent art scene, it would at least signal that art is not so helpless and useless as the current climate in Europe often suggests. It is a fight that freie Szene shares with organizations like Jubilee in Belgium and the Netherlands. The art world is looking for alternatives, now politicians should do the same.

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