

March 2, 2008

HEADS UP | BERLIN

One Wall Down, Thousands to Paint

By ANDREAS TZORTZIS

SPRAY cans clink in Ali's bag as he walks down a cobblestone street in [Berlin](#)'s post-hip neighborhood of Prenzlauer Berg. He stops in front of a grocery truck parked near a children's playground and pulls out a can. With a fluid motion, he strokes his name in bubbly, bright red letters, before leaving his mark on a telephone booth, a dozen doors and a concrete wall next to the train tracks.

"It's a great feeling doing a piece at night and coming back the day after to look at it," said Ali, 31, an industrial designer who was dressed in baggy pants and a black hoodie and didn't want his surname used to avoid prosecution. "I also see it as reclaiming the city and shaping my urban environment."

Apparently, many Berliners feel the same. The city's skyline might be defined by a Sputnik-era TV tower, bombed-out churches and the ghost of a certain wall that once split the German capital. But its streetscape is largely molded by graffiti.

Nearly everywhere you go, from the cafe-lined streets of Kreuzberg to the leafy schoolyards in Grunewald, hastily drawn "tags" stream across the sidewalk and crawl up the side of buildings, in an elaborate zigzag of cartoonish graphics, puffy letters, photo-like wheat pastes and bold stencils. Parts of the city look as splattered as a [New York City](#) subway car from the 1970s.

And it's not just no-name graffiti writers who are contributing to the visual assault. With no shortage of vacant buildings, weedy lots and creative nomads, Berlin has become a blank canvas for graffiti artists far and wide, turning the German capital into arguably the most "bombed" — slang for graffiti-covered — city in [Europe](#).

Banksy, the [art](#) world mystery, has left his mark, including a stenciled rat in a police uniform along a curb in Mitte. Os Gemeos, the Brazilian twins whose cartoonish works have commanded \$20,000 at the Deitch Projects in New York City, have spray painted a five-story-high mural of a yellow man in an orange shirt on a building on Oppelner Strasse. And the shaking fist of the Berlin artist Kripoe swings from traffic signs, elevated train tracks and, perhaps most spectacularly, a piling in the middle of the Spree River.

"It's like everyone grabbed a can of paint at one point and just went for it," said the New York-based photographer Peter Sutherland, who has exhibited his work in Berlin. "It's become a real paradise for writers."

The roots of graffiti culture can be traced back to West Berlin in the early 1980s, when the American-occupied sector was the reluctant melting pot of anarchist punks, Turkish immigrants and West German draft resisters. Kreuzberg, a neighborhood surrounded on three sides by the Berlin Wall, blossomed

particularly well, with miles of wall space and little police scrutiny.

The first so-called writers were heavily influenced by the New York City scene. Works about the time, like the 1983 film “Style Wars” by Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant, and the 1984 book “Subway Art” by Mr. Chalfant and Martha Cooper, enjoyed a cult following.

But while the west face of the Berlin Wall was blanketed with graffiti, the east face was orderly and gray. The notorious Stasi police kept graffiti under wraps, and writers in East Berlin risked imprisonment or worse if they were caught red-handed with spray cans — assuming they could even get their hands on paint.

All that changed, of course, with the fall of the wall in 1989, which opened up vast new blank walls virtually overnight. Artists, musicians and young people flooded East Berlin, heralding a shift in the youth culture from west to east. The pockmarked walls of Mitte, Friedrichshain and other gray neighborhoods were soon carpeted in colorful squiggles.

“It was kind of like New York,” said Thomas Peiser, an owner of Overkill, a graffiti supply store in Kreuzberg, a gritty area where working-class Germans share the sidewalk with Turkish women pushing grocery carts. “It was paradise to us.”

Paradise had some unofficial help. The police were painfully slow to respond to graffiti, and a special task force formed in the early 1990s remains largely ineffectual. According to Marko Moritz, the current head of the antigraffiti task force, the city processes about 15 arrests a week, with offenders typically fined anywhere from 100 euros (\$150 at \$1.50 to the euro) to several thousand.

“We know we’ll never be able to completely eliminate graffiti,” Mr. Moritz said, adding that the property damage caused by graffiti is estimated at 35 million to 50 million euros a year.

Graffiti may be vandalism, but it is also celebrated as street art and even regarded as an integral component of Berliner Strassenkultur.

Shops like Overkill operate in the open, selling spray cans and markers in every conceivable color, along with paraphernalia like safety masks, aerosol caps and sketch pads with outlines of subway cars. Fans can also shop there for urban wear like Grace Jones T-shirts and limited-edition Puma sneakers.

Galleries like Circleculture, a stark storefront in Mitte, regularly exhibit internationally known street artists like Anton Unai, who often works with objects he finds on the street, and Shepard Fairey, the creator of “Obey, Giant” and, most recently, a popular poster of [Barack Obama](#).

Indeed, Berlin’s buzzing art world has been closely intertwined with graffiti. Since 1986, the [Cologne](#)-based artist Thomas Baumgärtel has been stenciling Warhol-like yellow bananas outside his favorite galleries. Several hundred galleries have received the yellow seal of approval, offering gallery hoppers a highly regarded rating guide to the city’s art scene.

Keeping tabs on the thriving subculture are several Berlin-based publications like Artistz Graffiti Magazin and Lodown Magazine, which offer both narcissistic photo essays on bombed U-Bahn cars and interviews with graffiti legends like Kaws.

Last summer, Adrian Nabi, a former publisher of the pioneering Berlin graffiti magazine Backjumps, organized a “live issue,” a two-month-long graffiti festival in the humid hallways of a former Kreuzberg hospital partly occupied by squatters. It attracted more than 15,000 people.

The opening reception, held on a warm Friday night in July, drew a mixed crowd of skinny jeans-wearing hipsters from Mitte’s art set, and Kreuzberg locals in baggy pants and baseball caps. As gangster rap [music](#) blared, the crowd sucked down Becks and surveyed the colorful works of graffiti artists eager to show they had evolved from subway trains to framed canvases.

Though Mr. Nabi respects the inroads that some street artists have made into the gallery system, he still admires the recklessness and audacity of the West Berlin graffiti writers of his youth.

“A writer is far more brash,” Mr. Nabi said. “They take the entire city for themselves.”

CANVASSING AN URBAN CANVAS

Overkill (Köpenicker Strasse 195a; 49-30-69-506-126; www.overkillshop.com) is a graffiti supply store in Kreuzberg that also carries a modest supply of limited-edition sneakers and sponsors an annual film festival.

Circleculture Gallery (Gipsstrasse 11; 49-30-275-817-80; www.circleculture-gallery.com), on a charming side street in Mitte’s gallery district, shows international graffiti and street artists.

The back of the East Side Gallery in Friedrichshain (www.eastsidegallery.com), the longest remaining piece of the Berlin Wall (about 0.8 mile), offers fine examples of local graffiti styles. Take the S-Bahn to Warschauer Strasse.

The east end of the Friedrichstrasse S-Bahn platform offers views of Kripoe’s giant fists, which rise from the boarded-up windows of an abandoned building.

A lot at Falckensteinstrasse and Schlesische Strasse in Kreuzberg offers a variety of styles from locals like Inka to the building-size murals of the Italian artist Blu and the French artist JR. The nearest U-Bahn stop is Schlesisches Tor.

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)