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Exhibiting A New City: Representations of radical politics and activism within contemporary art exhibitions in post-unification Berlin

This project looks at different ways in which Berlin's specific history of a radical spatial politics has been represented within contemporary art exhibitions in Berlin after its unification in 1990 until the present day. This research aims to support those who were not represented during the westernisation of the city that came immediately after its unification.

Berlin has a longstanding history of activism relating to the space of the city, including having a long-established squatting movement, which had a second wave in the 1990s. As well as this there have been many grassroots campaigns seeking to protect space in the former east Berlin from development, for example campaigns against the demolition of the *Palast Der Republik* and the recent occupation of the Volksbühne. Many of these campaigns have been in protest against what is often perceived as a continued gentrification and depoliticisation of the city and particular efforts have been made to protect public and cultural spaces. After the fall of the wall east Berlin was quickly built up, with many significant buildings being quickly demolished as attempts were made to erase the problematic history of the east. The architecture of reunified Berlin has been western rather than a unification of the two halves and there has been many protests against this, with eastern Berliners feeling that their experiences and struggles have been erased as they have been pushed to adopt an increasingly Westernised identity.

Whilst the politics of these protests have remained largely within subcultures the aesthetics have become mainstream. In 2003 Klaus Wowereit, Mayor of Berlin, coined the term 'poor, but sexy' to describe the city. This idea has been commodified and can be seen within the focus on alternative culture in tourist attractions in Berlin; walking tours of the city show visitors street art rather than historical landmarks; abandoned spaces such as Plänterwald and Teufelsberg have become go-to spots for 'ruin lust' and the walls in cafes and bars have been stripped bare in an attempt to fit in with this notion of the city.

Although these representations are far removed from their political roots similar references have also been made within exhibitions of contemporary art, which is often argued to be a platform that allows for more nuanced discussion of political thought and a close ally of alternative culture. Indeed many of the squats and activist spaces being formed in the former east Berlin in the early 1990s were also undertaking arts activities, including setting up exhibitions and other events as part of their political actions. There are also crossovers with the individuals organising these activities and many of the established arts venues in Berlin have been born from DIY or independent spaces.

This project takes specific sites of exhibitions in the former east Berlin, including both large-scale exhibitions such as the Berlin Biennale as well as independently run project spaces, whose audiences are already situated in the city. Using these sites I will look at what the possibilities and limits of these representations are and what they can do for communities within contemporary Berlin. I will question whether it is possible that through acknowledging radical politics in exhibitions that an alternative collective identity can be offered or whether is it a case of political appropriation that only adds to the continued gentrification of Berlin.