

CANADIAN

art

Spring 2006 Volume 23 Number 1 \$7.95

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THE MAKING AND MAULING OF
THE READY-MADE

ISABELLE HAYEUR ANDY FABO SARINDAR DHALIWAL

Display until June 15





POSTMARK BERLIN

Canada's artists are finding

by SASCHA HASTINGS



Edith Dakovic. *Trying to make my work more sophisticated*. 2001. C-print mounted between alu-di-bond and acrylic. 25 x 34 x 2 cm. Courtesy pitm Gallery

"BERLIN ISN'T GERMANY.

It's the New York of Europe," the Canadian artists Laura Kikauka and Gordon Monahan tell me when I visit them at the Funny Farm East, as they refer to their studio in Berlin's Mitte district. Berlin, like New York, has always been a magnet for artists. It's edgier, grittier, raunchier, more tolerant of subcultures and more accustomed to expressions of creativity than other German cities, but unlike in New York, apartments are plentiful, big and cheap. Today, more than 15 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, thousands of artists, including a significant number of Canadians, call Berlin home. Last fall, I went to meet some of the Canadians who live in the city on the Spree to find out what makes it their creative capital of choice. Some of them are quite recent arrivals; others, such as Kikauka and Monahan, have been there for more than a decade. Although the city has undergone much change over that time, the artists I talk to all agree on one thing—Berlin is one of the best places on earth to be an artist.

Kikauka and Monahan first passed through the city in the 1980s. They travelled there separately—Kikauka as a tourist and Monahan as a performer (he's a musician as well as a sound artist)—but both became sufficiently enchanted to dream of returning. Then, in 1990, a new-media grant took them to Banff, where they met Michael Morris, Vincent Trasov and Attila Richard Lukacs, denizens of the Berlin art scene of the no-holds-barred 1980s. Regaled with wild tale after wild tale, Kikauka and Monahan packed their bags. Supported by a one-year grant from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), they landed at Tegel airport in 1992. The grant included a huge apartment in the former West Berlin, but Kikauka and Monahan soon realized that the

a home in Germany's capital

real opportunities for artists lay in the recently opened East.

Back then, says Kikauka, there was absolutely nothing in East Berlin—no bars, no restaurants, no shops, almost no phone service, heating and plumbing that were dodgy at best—but there was endless cheap or free space, and the liberty to do whatever you pleased with it. So Kikauka and Monahan, with a partner, took over an abandoned garage and transformed it into The Glowing Pickle, a conceptual bar-cum-store-cum-installation happening where they poured cocktails in test tubes and hocked “pre-capitalistic scientific-electronic surplus.” After the Wall fell, East Germans (or “Ossis,” as they were dismissively referred to by West Germans) discovered that most of their technology was out-of-date junk, and simply threw everything onto the curb. So Kikauka and Monahan toiled around in a van, picking up everything from transformers to defibrillators to explosion-proof telephones. They then put it all up for resale at The Glowing Pickle. Sometimes they’d hold auctions, and other times they’d refuse to sell anything, thus simultaneously sending up both capitalist and communist shopping cultures. Within a short time, The Glowing Pickle became the must-attend Thursday-night art event in Berlin.

“It was so mind-blowing,” Monahan recalls, “but we also knew there was a time limit.”

Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller in Berlin, 2005. Photo Mike S. Wolff



Indeed, they began noticing changes in Mitte by 1995, by which time the government had started building a modern infrastructure in the East—laying in phone lines, water pipes and new sewers. By then, The Glowing Pickle had already closed down, and art galleries were moving in, followed by coffee houses, restaurants and chic boutiques. Today, the three-storey walk-up where Kikauka and Monahan live is the only unrenovated building on the entire block, which bustles like Toronto’s Queen Street West day and night. Although rents have shot up, Monahan tells me that Berlin is still the only major art capital in the world where artists can afford to live, which is why they keep coming. That and the presence of an arts-educated population that participates regularly—“People go to openings here like they go to the movies in North America,” says Kikauka.

Edith Dakovic is another long-term Canadian resident of Berlin. She too arrived in 1992, to do post-graduate work at Berlin’s Universität der Künste or UdK. Dakovic loved Berlin’s roughness and intensity: “Toronto was just so nice and perfect in comparison.” After a year, she realized she wasn’t ready to come back to Canada, so she found an abandoned apartment in Prenzlauer Berg (the neighbourhood where the East German artistic and intellectual scene had been centred), where she still lives today. But, like Mitte, Prenzlauer Berg has been gentrified over the last ten years, a process that Dakovic laments slightly, even though she’s thrilled to finally have an indoor bathroom: “The old crumbling houses just screamed history. Now, everything looks new, like a facade in a Western movie.”

Dakovic’s current work involves what she calls “hybrids”—silicone-rubber spheres that look like a cross between a living creature, a sculpture and a rubber ball. The “hybrids” are the accumulation of her years in Berlin. Because many other artists, including international stars such as Olafur Eliasson, Thomas Demand and Tacita Dean, are based here, it sometimes feels like a struggle to get attention. So, for example, Dakovic photographed a hybrid dining with her at her kitchen table, complete with a place setting and wineglass, and called it *Trying to make my work more sophisticated*. In another piece, she lies on top of a hybrid in Berlin’s Tiergarten; this one is called *Trying to stay on top of my work*. Another challenge of the Berlin art scene, Dakovic says, is that there’s “lots of good stuff to look at that nobody buys.” Although Berlin is the capital of Germany, the biggest European Union producer, the city remains economically depressed compared to centres like Cologne, Düsseldorf, Frankfurt and Munich. So, while hundreds of galleries have opened in Berlin, they make most of their sales at international fairs to collectors from outside Berlin. On the positive side, the economic situation keeps the city affordable for artists. “I don’t think I’d be able to work as intensively in Toronto. Here, I can eat, sleep and live my work,” she says.

The photographer Stephen Waddell has a different attitude to what Berlin offers. He tells me that he can do the



Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller *The Berlin Files* 2003 Mixed media
Variable dimensions Courtesy Luhring Augustini, New York

**"SOMEONE TOLD ME THEY ACTUALLY STAMP
THE WORD *KÜNSTLER* IN YOUR PASSPORT!"**



Stephen Waddell *Boy on Stump* 2004 Light-jet colour
photograph 1.39 x 2.07 m

"EVERYONE GOES TO ART EVENTS HERE. AN ARTIST IS A VALUED PART OF THE SOCIETY."

kind of work he does in any city, although, when pressed, admits that roughly 80 per cent of the work he's still really interested in was shot in Berlin. Waddell came to Berlin after studies in Vancouver, a sojourn in New York and a scholarship to Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart, which was extended for a year to include an apartment in Berlin. That was 1997. Since then, he says, he's seen many artists come and go, and feels that if an artist is successful in Berlin, if they find a community and are able to do the work they want to do, they usually stay. When I ask if Berlin is more experimental than other cities, he thinks for a moment and says, "I think it pretends to be," adding that that's the persona the city has constructed for itself. He believes that, although many international artists use Berlin as a base, their work usually has very little to do with Berlin per se.

Waddell's studio is filled with work—from boxes and boxes of small prints to large-scale images of ordinary people engaged in everyday activities. Most were shot in Berlin—a businessman walking down the stairs of an underpass at Alexanderplatz, a young woman on the observation deck of the Siegestaule (the fluted triumphal column with the gold angel on top that featured so prominently in Wim Wenders's film *Wings of Desire*), a man in blue overalls laying asphalt. Waddell is interested in photographing the figure in the city, catching people in moments where they are simultaneously part of a group and isolated within themselves. For example, another photograph shows a boy with

a walking stick sitting on a stump next to a lake in a Berlin suburb. The boy is resting, but he's also clearly thinking about something, and we get a glimpse of the world that exists inside of him, which gives him a metaphysical weight we might not otherwise apprehend. Any city permits this kind of encounter, says Waddell, but Berlin is unusual for a European city in that there's still so much empty space, which makes it easier to catch people in these moments of active stasis.



Laura Kikauka and Gordon Monahan in Berlin, 2005.

One reason for Berlin's sense of space/emptiness is economic. Another is the huge strip of empty land that cut through Berlin where the Berlin Wall once stood (the Wall was actually two walls separated by a barren piece of land known as the "death strip"). Much of that land has been gradually filled in with new government or corporate buildings, including an almost-completed new main train station. Not too far away is where Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller spend approximately six months of the year. I visit them in their enormous apartment/studio in a former military-uniform factory that now houses artists, architects and designers. Cardiff and Bures Miller first came to Berlin in 2000 on a DAAD grant. When I ask why they stayed on, Cardiff laughs and says, "Not because of the weather"—Berlin winters are notoriously depressing—but then adds that they love the curiosity of Berlin audiences and the overall awareness of the arts. She notes that, on the whole, the arts are taken more seriously in Germany than in Canada. "Everyone goes to art events here," Cardiff says. Bures Miller adds that "an artist is a valued part of the society."

They also tell me that Berliners seem to relate to their work because of its multidisciplinary nature. "Lots of people here are interested in cross-pollination," says Bures Miller. As a result, people are more open to working with others from outside their particular creative disciplines, and Cardiff and Bures Miller have had opportunities to collaborate. Their video walk *Ghost Machine* takes place at the Hebbel am Ufer (HAU) theatre and employs the talents of the Canadian dancer Laurie Young (who usually works with the cutting-edge Berlin dance company Sasha Waltz & Guests) and the actor Lars Rudolph; it premiered at the Berlinale 2005 film festival. They are very conscious of how exceptional the Berlin arts scene is. When I ask how long they plan to stay, Cardiff shrugs and says, "We go with the flow—with what stimulates us, with the opportunities that present themselves and..." she laughs, "...if people find us apartments!"

I first meet Germaine Koh in an apartment that she calls "the unofficial Canadian Embassy" because of the number of Canadians that pass through (and because it was previously inhabited by another Canadian artist, Alex Morrison). Koh was near the end of a one-year residency at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, but she was already hatching plans to return to Berlin and make it a European base. Like Cardiff and Bures Miller, Koh appreciates how artists are an identified social group in Germany—"Someone told me they actually stamp the word *Künstler* in your passport!"—and she loves how international Berlin's art scene is, something that saves it from degenerating into the "local popularity contest" that can threaten some Canadian cities. Koh also mentions that, while people occasionally tell her that Berlin was more interesting ten years earlier, it's still so physically incomplete, so full of possibilities



Germaine Koh *Fallow* 2005 Site-responsive installation at Künstlerhaus Bethanien with plants and soil transplanted from nearby fallow land Photo Andree Wachnowski

and therefore not static. Berlin continues to rebuild, people come and go and opportunities abound for temporary projects, be they art installations, galleries, nightclubs or even underground cooking collectives. I wonder aloud if Berlin has affected her practice; Koh replies that it hasn't in any fundamental way, but that the conditions of life in Berlin certainly complement her work, which is concerned with change, temporary situations and social behaviours.

Later I visit Koh's studio, where she shows me one of her Berlin works. *Fallow* is an installation that she literally grew from an empty lot behind her studio that was once part of the "death strip," digging up turf and weeds and transplanting them inside. Then she took the door off its hinges to turn the room into a public space, and waited to see what happened. By the time I got there, the floor was covered in waist-high grasses, mushrooms were sprouting and a little path had been trodden down where Koh walked through to water *Fallow* and where curious passersby had wandered through. Koh tells me that she'd wanted to create the piece for some time, but that the residency in Berlin gave her the time and space to do it.

Berlin has done the same for the other Canadian artists. It is what keeps them coming. ■