Berlin's Trashy Urban Imaginary

By

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If cultural innovation is a phenomenon of cities in crisis as Stuart Hall suggests, there are few cities that better demonstrate this phenomenon than Berlin and its trashy urban imaginary. The "poor but sexy" image of the city, first articulated by Berlin's then mayor Klaus Wowereit in an interview with a financial magazine in 2003,[1] and used in subsequent advertising campaigns, is central to the ways in which we define Berlin and Berlin defines itself. As one of the city's most symbolic counter-cultural landmarks, the Kunsthaus Tacheles – a dilapidated yet vibrant arts complex located in the former East Berlin (and now at the center of the city) – has played a large part in forming the city's contemporary reputation. Standing as an icon of defiance and refusal against the amplifying forces of gentrification and global finance capital, the site is a central component of the debates regarding Berlin's transmedial "poor but sexy" image, and provides a useful lens through which to consider material and social understandings of the term "trash."

In its lifetime the Tacheles has served as a department store, a Nazi prison, a Soviet exhibition hall and an archive, and its future ownership is currently being determined in legal proceedings. At the moment it stands as an active arts complex and squatter success story representative of Berlin's subcultures. The building itself was partially destroyed by bombing during the Second World War and never reconstructed. Further sections were demolished by East German authorities to make way for roads which were never completed leaving the building largely abandoned. The imposing facade and grand staircase remain largely intact in its contemporary incarnation, if graffittied, while the crumbling rear of the building leaves stone, cement and steel exposed. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, artists quickly moved in to recycle or re-appropriate the building and laid claims to this space which very visibly highlighted the social problems of poverty and gentrification.

My intention in this paper is to consider the example of Tacheles as a lens through which to explore our ambivalent relationship to "trash." As both a material and cultural concept, an exploration of the term "trash" – as a quality, a symbol, a signifier – leads us to scholarly areas of convergence through notions of hygiene, cultural theory, urbanism and commodification. The appropriateness of the term lies in its ability to link the material with concepts of social, theoretical and aesthetic transgression. With sensitivity to an understanding of how a material problem has been transformed into a social and aesthetic issue, Tacheles allows us to consider a specific site of physical and social disorder and its relationship to the ways in which we theorize, manage and are implicated in waste.

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1 The phrase continues to prove popular and used as an advertising slogan in the spring of 2009 ("'Poor, but sexy' Berlin is a hit"). It is reputed to date back to an interview Wowereit gave for the FOCUS-Money magazine in November 2003 (Erstmals stellte Wowereit diesen Zusammenhang in einem Interview des Magazins FOCUS-Money im November 2003 her. Er wurde gefragt: „Macht Geld sexy?" und verneinte daraufhin einen Zusammenhang zwischen erotischer Ausstrahlung und Reichtum: „Nein. Das sieht man an Berlin. Wir sind zwar arm, aber trotzdem sexy." (online Focus Politik, 19.10.2006, http://www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/wowereits-berlin-slogan_aid_117712.html).

Social Order and Public Health

In the seminal text *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, anthropologist Mary Douglas identifies "dirt" (a somewhat catch-all phrase that may be understood as an extension of "trash" but may also include "garbage," "refuse" and their further extensions (White Trash, Eurotrash) as "matter out of place" (14). According to Douglas, any understanding of the role of residue relies upon the culturally defined categories of "pure" and "impure," a distinction common to all cultures that contributes to the creation and maintenance of socio-cultural order (ibid 14). This distinction is developed and supported by a process of constant selection and rejection of elements and assumptions of what is "pure" and "impure," which in turn impose and protect cultural order. Dirt, or trash, therefore, is a by-product of systematic ordering and classification of matter, a process which is constantly renewed and re-created according to our changing conception of what accounts for trash. Douglas' systematic ordering and classification of matter involves a consistent rejection of "inappropriate elements" which when broadly classified as either "trash" or "dirt" allows us a more thorough interpretation of the term "trash" as it relates to social phenomenon. For Douglas, "dirt" and "trash" is matter that collects in the margins, people or material that is discarded and never stolen, and despite its removal, always reappears.

The metonymic chains of terms such as "trash" and "dirt" evoke an association with the negative, the defiled and the deviant. It links the poor to dirt and disease, poverty to production and consumerism, supports racial and social designations, and establishes a binary opposite of the Protestant values of cleanliness, godliness and social order. It inhabits a space in the semiotic periphery, where the labelling of an object or person as "trash" or "trashy" changes the status of the object or person. It is through such a designation that the person or object is stripped of its name, function and distinction, and ultimately its worth.

If "dirt" or "trash" is "matter out of place," boundaries are transgressed which threaten social and conceptual order. Since the sixteenth century the management of waste has been of concern to the modern urban individual, and has been made manifest in top-down efforts to domesticate waste and purify speech (Laporte 96). Yet it is within the space of the urban that filth assembles, where products are consumed, and physical difference and disorder prominently emerge. Early efforts at "trash containment" (for example the slums of urban modernization and industrialization) engendered to protect the physical, moral and racial "health" of the bourgeois classes by instilling social hierarchies supported by economic wealth. Yet by the nineteenth century, public health, in all its forms, had become public interest. Emerging social-biological theories of urbanization[2] supported a growing hostility toward the city as a threat to the German *Volk*, and linked urban sickness, declining birth rates of the middle classes and perceived moral depravity, to urbanization. Public health thus came to refer to the physical and psycho-moral constitution of urban dwellers (particularly the poor), and has continued to frame and support the metonymic link between material and social trash.

These discourses and debates on public health, which emerged so powerfully in the

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2 See the theories of Georg Hansen and Otto Ammon in Andrew Lee's *Cities Perceived: Urban Society in European and American Thought (1820-1940)*, 142-144.

nineteenth century, placed the responsibility and maintenance of cleanliness and social order in the hands of the municipality and state. In a material sense, this was accomplished through pavement, street cleaning and sewers. Yet on a social level, legal and moral categories of cleanliness (and its opposite in trash) played into explanations of failure or refusal to conform to societal norms and standards. Those touched by social contagion, those delineated from the mainstream – by economic status, non-participation in purposeful labour production, or by perceived social or aesthetic preference – were often portrayed as drunks or idlers, essentially asocial citizens that were outside of, and therefore dangerous, to the social, economic and political logic of trash production.

As people who had failed society, or whom society had failed, deviance of social mores has manifested itself in the notion of the asocial as excess, despite shifting notions of what precisely that may constitute. Across Europe, the asocial lumpenproletariat of Marx and Engels were designated as the unproductive members of society. In Germany under the Third Reich, Jews, the unemployed, the homeless, prostitutes and homosexuals were seen as threats to social mores and therefore considered undesirable and expendable in the name of Aryan hygiene. Furthermore, during the Cold War, "parasites" on the Worker's State, those not involved with purposeful production, were targeted for "normalization" under the ideals of full employment and assumed standards of living. However, the dysfunctional situation of West Berlin in the 1960s and 1970s complicates this trajectory. In West Berlin, the asocial were active agents in sustaining the isolated and stagnant city, and incentives for the asocial to migrate to the city (such as exemption from military service) were instigated by the West German government in an effort to re-populate the city. These efforts had a specific affect on the city's demographics, and not surprisingly, Berlin became a centre for German social, political and aesthetic activism. In both social and economic terms, Berlin was a place where "trash" assembled.

The geographic and political situation of Berlin on the social fringe invariably had implications for the city post-unification. After reunification, mounting unemployment and a growing disparity between the rich and poor only served to exacerbate the difficult material conditions of the "deviant." Despite the existence of a welfare state which aimed to serve as a protective social "net," the social and economic dysfunction of the city became more apparent in terms of social and material waste. In a renewed capitalist atmosphere, those who failed to produce were once again signified as "residue" or "trash" which city management had to address.

The Hip Factor, or the Utility of Waste

These designations, and the adherent material conditions of Berlin in the twentieth century have been used by artists to great effect and are a central contribution to the city's trashy urban imaginary. The erection of the Wall physically and socially marginalized central districts of the city, and these abandoned, disused fragments of the city were re-appropriated (or recycled) by the socially and economically marginalized, becoming both locale and symbol of deviance in Berlin's nascent subcultures.

The systematic social, political and geographical isolation of these indeterminate spaces[3] was exacerbated post-unification by the passage of centralized control over land, planning and resources to systems of western development. The restitution of nationalized private property resulted in large tracts of land suspended in the mechanisms of the legal system. As a result, artists, social activists and the otherwise designated as "deviant" flocked to these indeterminate spaces in search for the possibility to live and create in an atmosphere somewhat isolated from the spreading influence of global finance capital.

At Tacheles, it was the seemingly unproductive or asocial who transformed the building and its surroundings into what has become one of the most recognizable locations in the city. Initiated by a group of artists from East Berlin, at Tacheles there is a clear affinity for the trashy. Here the marginalized is valorized, in both a physical and metaphorical sense. The "trashed" building is made iconic in its contrast to the gentrifying forces in the neighbourhood, and a number of resident artists self-identify as "trash artists" who aim to provide commentary on contemporary consumption and the adherent theoretical and material implications of their work.[4] Their delineation from the mainstream is dependent upon consumption made possible within a welfare system (as true poverty is never sexy), and is both voluntary and participatory at its roots. What began as a response to the material practicalities of space in the face of the increasingly corporatized and regulated gentrifying city, today the artists of Tacheles also clearly identify with a desire to distinguish themselves with alterity, the asocial, the trashy, and actively position themselves in opposition to existing cultural formations. Their location and practice signal a refusal or violation of the social order, to which the status of "hipness" or "subcultural capital" (Sarah Thornton's extension of Bourdieu's "cultural capital") may be attributed.

Through voluntary participation the artists subject themselves to the selection and rejection of emerging mores and values, and are active agents in the consistently changing ideal of what is considered "trashy." The city itself has been representative of a cluster of values – for freedom from convention, tolerance, opposition in the face of authority, the asocial, the trashy – since the Weimar era. By the 1990s, the imaginary of Berlin as an attractive hub for creative activity once again spread across the globe, with Tacheles at the center of this unique haven. This urban imaginary was deeply dependent upon prior interpretations by artists, writers, musicians and actors, and it was this social legacy which Tacheles so effectively re-claimed both physically and symbolically by re-signifying the site and creating value.

Tacheles' subcultural roots preclude the growth of a mass audience, yet some efforts were made to translate the crumbling site into a "poor but sexy" commodity for urban consumption. At Tacheles, subcultural capital has been converted into economic capital where the symbolic is often commodified. As such, Tacheles has evolved as part of the growing creative industries that have become so important to Berlin's urban economy, and to tourism in

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3 See Cupers and Miessen *Spaces of Uncertainty* for details of their use of the term. See also Rubio.

4 There has been an outpouring of work in recent years exploring the symbolism and aesthetic of trash that may be traced to the historical avant-garde's creative dialogue with trash. Examples include Brazilian film, the performances of the 'Garbage Girls,' which included a ballet of garbage trucks and the items of Joseph Cornell.

particular. Within the complex are an array of bars, cafes, theatres, gallery spaces, residences and artist studios that stand in contrast to the official culture industry and blockbuster attractions of nearby Museum Island.[5] In recent years, the institutionalized spaces of Museum Island have increasingly sought expanded partnerships with both government and private industry in an effort to "officially" define Berlin for tourists. Yet Tacheles has also been "musealized" by its success. Its active subculture has become a popular tourist attraction to which some 400,000 "hip seekers" flock each year to consume its signs and signifiers. Therefore, as a niche market that speaks to locational history and established networks of creativity, Tacheles has become part of spectacular subculture which functions in service, and exploitation, of Berlin's trashy history.

Waste Management

Residents of Tacheles had initially agreed to a ten-year tenancy agreement in 1998 which allowed the artist-squatters to continue their work at the site with few regulations. While squatting was a fairly common phenomenon across Berlin in the early years of reunification, once the initial agreement expired in 2008, the path was cleared for the planned development of luxury apartments. Unexpectedly, the expiration of the initial tenancy agreement coincided with the global financial crisis, leaving the future of Tacheles in limbo, where it has remained. During the most recent ownership dispute, half of the residents vacated the site, while others remained to organize protests, petitions and hunger strikes in hopes of saving the location from development. The global financial crisis has created what artists and activists across the city see as a window of opportunity to challenge the gentrifying forces of development and the use of public space. As commune evictions across Berlin have recently become violent, as was the case with at the Liebigstrasse and Brunnenstrasse squats in the winter of 2010-2011, the existence of such locations has become part of a larger debate of the city's identity and the narrative of Berlin's urban imaginary.

Central to these disputes are claims to authenticity, and the perceived physical and symbolic threat to public order. Opponents of Tacheles largely serve the logic of global finance capital, and the gentrification of the neighbourhood is part of broader citywide efforts to bring order to the capital's spatial and temporal contradictions.[6] Efforts to "clean up" or manage the waste of Berlin – from the removal of punks from Alexanderplatz, to plans for gentrification and the campaign Action Plan Clean Berlin – aim to clean, order and regulate waste and trash in deference to the financial lifeline of tourism in the city.[7] Yet it is this very "trashy" social

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5 The interiors on Museum Island maintain a largely 'white-cube' aesthetic, which maintain the power and prestige of institutionalized 'high culture.'

6 The popular tourist attraction (now closed) INFOBOX provided visitors with an intense multi-media presentation of plan's for Berlin's future renovation.

7 The theatre group *Ratten 07*, composed of homeless persons, satirized municipal attempts in a public performance in Alexanderplatz. Dressed as cleaning ladies and equipped with brooms and foaming detergent, they gave the public square a vigorous cleaning.

legacy that has drawn artists, visitors and residents to Berlin since Isherwood.[8] Interestingly, there has been little discussion of moving the site or institutionalizing the location where this "deviance," or to use Foucault's term "pathological," could be controlled or normalized. The specificity of the location is a central component of the response to a particular set of circumstances that cannot be replicated elsewhere. As such, there is an inherent polarization between the rarified atmosphere of the musealized culture industries and the trashy aesthetic and political patterns Tacheles reinforces. The perceived threat to social order then lies not in the radicalism of the artists, but in the interplay of the social and the urban as site, location, and imaginary.

It is precisely the surprising contradictions and violent juxtapositions of the social, political and cultural within the city that lend depth and complexity to Berlin's urban imaginary. What is derided at the political and social level is symbolically central to imaginings of Berlin. The trash of Tacheles is therefore the ultimate truth-teller and social leveller.[9] It is here that the city's secrets are revealed, and where the authenticity of Berlin is brazenly put on display.

Baudrillard famously considered the functionality of waste in consumer society: it generates social hierarchy, communicates difference, provides the human need for distinction and induces growth–these stipulations all ring true for Tacheles. The symbolic production of its inhabitants reflect the valorization of the low or marginalized that has in recent years gained influence in theory, practice and politics.[10] There is much room in the area of Waste Studies to explore the implications of the material, the social and the theoretical in relation to trash. In light of increasing interest and creative dialogue with trash in both its material and social forms, such transmedial studies would allow for further insight into modern discard practices. Issues of commodification, hybridity, the gendering of waste, and its disposal all ask for further exploration. But it is our relationship to trash, and our production of it, that reveals the implications of our most authentic individual and collective selves. Because ultimately, there is nothing more authentic than trash.

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8 See in particular Christopher Isherwood's depictions of Berlin's bohemia in *Berlin Stories.*

9 Not unlike the material trash heap, to which an archaeological exploration of layers of remnants and residue may be applied. A random pile of *objets trouvés.*

10 See Mikhail Bakhtin's redemption of carnivalized genres, Derrida's recovery of marginalized texts, Raymond William's emergent discourses and Deleuze and Guattari's recuperation of stigmatized psychic states. May also include consideration of genre of 'outsider art.'

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