



Public Art Practice in Berlin

by Christina Lanzl

Berlin ranks high among the world's urban centers. What makes this city so special, so worth living in or visiting? Perhaps it is the rewarding experience of feeling a sense of place. Successful cities are attractive because significance of place, particularly unique artistic and cultural attractions, sets them apart. Berlin's success story begins with the fall of the Wall in 1989. Since reunification, it has seen immense public and private reinvestment. Sites in the city center that once stood empty are now filled with high-quality architecture, open space, and public art.

Large-scale development has produced grand public plazas such as the Sony Center's Atrium, as well as more intimately scaled environments in historic neighborhoods like Berlin Mitte, Kreuzberg, and Prenzlauer Berg, all of which

rival the acclaimed Potsdamer Platz area. Ultimately, part of Berlin's attraction lies in the diverse typologies and uses that characterize its public places. Public art features prominently in all of these environments, both in functional forms and as pure works of art. Berlin's successful public places range from sidewalks to courtyards, plazas, landmarks, and parks.

Process determines the outcome of any project, including public art. In Berlin, art in public places is commissioned in two major ways: through the Büro für Kunst im öffentlichen Raum (KioeR), or the Office for Public Art, and through private initiatives. The city's most prominent collection of outdoor sculpture is sited on the grounds of the vast Potsdamer Platz development. The Daimler collection, particularly, demonstrates an international outlook and serves as a draw

for international cultural tourists. Daimler's outdoor sculpture collection consists of works by internationally renowned American artists, including Keith Haring, Jeff Koons, Robert Rauschenberg, and Mark di Suvero. To the connoisseur, this is an outdoor gallery par excellence. Originality and site-specificity, however, are less obvious. But the sculptures do enliven public areas around the Daimler development, which tend to be immense and devoid of pedestrians. The scale of Renzo Piano's design simply fails to create spaces that attract people. The intimate, human-scale environment experienced in the rest of Berlin's public realm is entirely absent here.

Private initiatives are complemented by commissions from KioeR. Established in 1979 by Berlin's Bund Bildender Künstler (BBK), or Visual Artists Association, KioeR is entrusted with the task of implementing the city's percent-for-art mandate, which was adopted that same year. The nonprofit BBK, which has over 3,000 artist members,

Stefan Krüskemper and Karlheinz Essl, *Air Borne*, 2006. View of sound installation at Berlin-Adlershof, Aerodynamic Park, Science Campus of Humboldt University.

is dedicated to a transparent process of open competition for public artworks, and its guidelines were implemented to counterbalance and correct a plethora of internal, ad hoc artist choices by architectural firms and developers. Other unfair practices included turning allocated percent-for-art funds into a line item on the architect's budget. KioeR ensures a fair artist selection process by drawing on its registry of 550 artists. The majority of competitions are by invitation, though KioeR does occasionally issue open calls. Juries are composed of two bodies representing the client's project team and a peer group of BBK professional artist and architect members.

Most projects are completed for educational and public institutions, within public improvement initiatives. While KioeR commissions often have

modest budgets, the resulting works are highly accomplished. Like most percent-for-art policies in the U.S., three types of projects fall under the mandate: architecture, landscape, and public works initiatives. Unlike other percent-for-art programs, however, Berlin's ordinance is not mandatory, and KioeR is not notified of new capital investments. This places KioeR in the role of detective and enforcer; BBK members identify new building projects as they travel around the city and report them back to headquarters. Two public art managers staff the KioeR office, project manager Martin Schoenfeld and director Dr. Elfriede Mueller.

KioeR strives for an integrated design process, which means getting artists involved in the early stages of a project, but this rarely happens. Ninety percent of Berlin's public art for new construction is implemented after planning and design have already been completed. Schoenfeld sees this as a loss: if the art were integrated earlier, it would result in more comprehensive design outcomes. Because of the delayed commissioning, artists also face immense deadline pressure to plan, design, permit, fabricate, and install a work in time for the official dedication. Integrated process is considered best practice standard in the U.S. as well, where it is endorsed by the Public Art Network of Americans for the Arts.

The Humboldt University science campus in Berlin-Adlershof recently sited the sound installation *Air Borne* on its central lawn. A collaboration between Berlin artist Stefan Krüskemper and Viennese composer Karlheinz Essl,

Josefine Günschel, *Innenhaut—aussehenhaut (Inner skin—outer skin)*, 2008. White tree paint on trees along Wisbyer Straße in Berlin-Pankow.

the work consists of 15 ellipsoid sound elements. Passing pedestrians experience individual units, each responding differently with a randomly triggered, rhythmic sequence. Essl wrote the software for what he calls "remembrance images" of the site and its associations—these aural fragments were taken from more than 1,000 audio files found in the German radio archive (Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv). Inspirational inscriptions engraved on the two-foot-high, bright-red speaker elements identify the compositions and offer moments of reflection during silent periods. The historic Modernist buildings surrounding the park provide a framework and counterpoint to the suite of brightly colored spheres. Their random placement on the green gives the cheerful appearance of mushrooms shooting out of the ground, adding an element of humor.

Heads, shifting (2008), a technically innovative kinetic sculpture by Josefine Günschel and Margund Smolka, serves as a gateway to the plaza fronting the Adlershof campus lab buildings. Two five-foot-high, androgynous heads rise from 16-foot supports, their features continuously morphing in slow, deliberate motion. The computer-rendered, monochrome heads are assembled from narrow ribbons of reinforced fiberglass with interior motors that twist the banded features ever so slightly. The continuous rotation establishes a constantly changing dialogue



between the two animated heads and with watching viewers.

Günschel's most recent public art commission is an Art on the Tree/Kunst am Baum project along Wisbyer Straße in Berlin's Pankow district. *Innenhaut—aussehenhaut (Inner skin—outer skin)* uses protective tree paint as a medium for stencil designs on tree trunks. Inspired by popular tapestry patterns from various eras, the designs allude to the area's status as an upscale residential community—before a sharp increase in traffic led to a decline in its popularity. The tree drawings mark three important pedestrian crossings along Wisbyer Straße. Günschel's project is noteworthy for its innovative use of materials and its ecological merit.

At the Center for Anatomy at Charité, dissecting corpses is the primary activity. A new commission formed part of recent renovations to the building, and Norbert Radermacher won the juried competition with *Vases*. In a poetic interpretation of the cycle of life and death, one black and one white

glass vase (fabricated on the island of Murano in Venice) are mounted on pedestals in the interior stair hall; each vase receives a weekly cutting of fresh flowers. The flowers wilt and decay until they are replaced with new bouquets in an eloquent symbol of ephemeral beauty and vanitas. They also add an element of welcome and elegance to this institutional environment.

As a private, nonprofit organization for professional artists, the BBK is unique. Membership for its more than 3,000 artists is free, and funding is provided by Berlin's municipal government. It administers a wide range of programs in addition to KioeR and owns several professional studio/workshop buildings (these are all documented on its extensive Web site in both German and English at <www.bbk-kulturwerk.de>). Public art circles in Berlin see KioeR's public art projects as synonymous with fair process, thoughtful proposals, and often innovative outcomes.