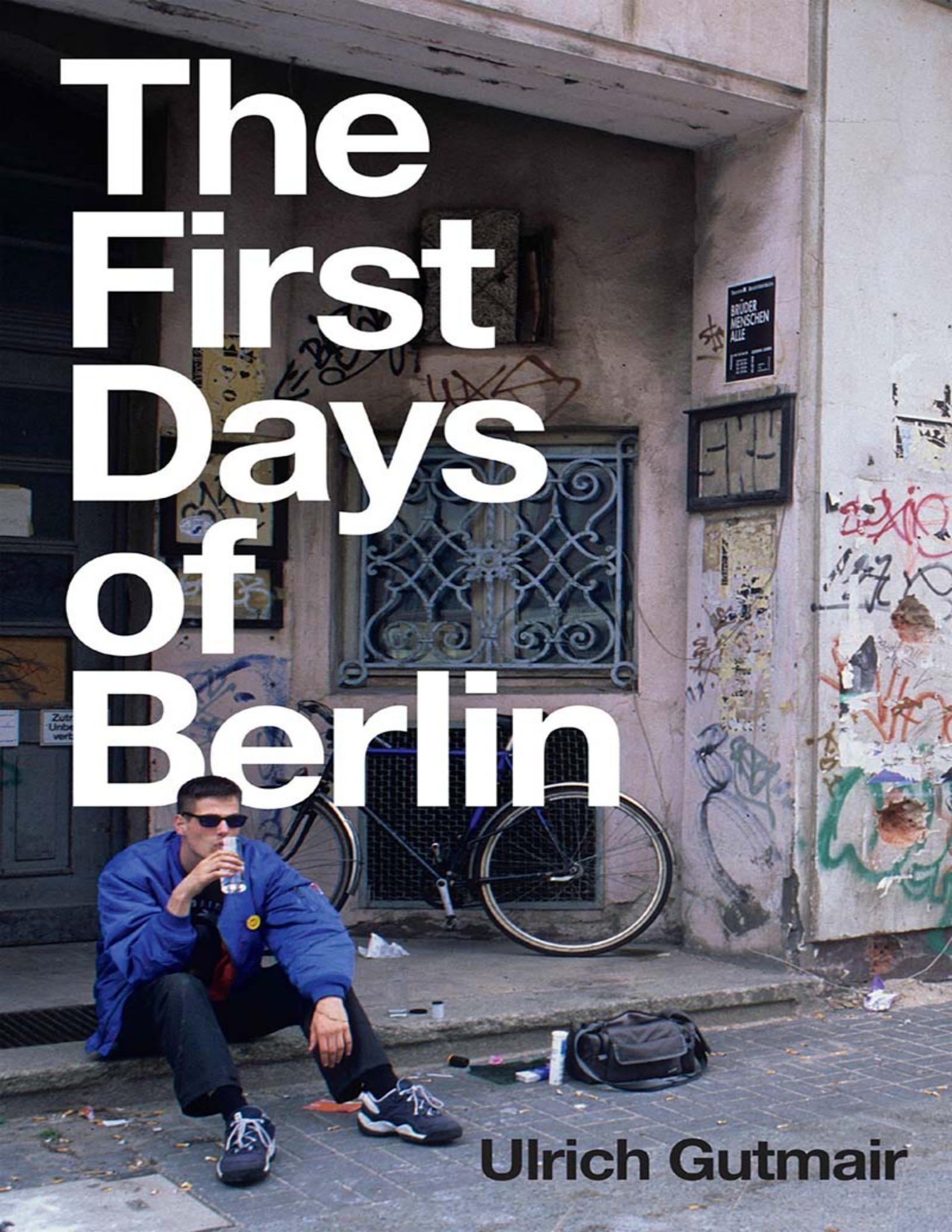
The First Days of Berlin



Ulrich Gutmair

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THE FIRST DAYS OF BERLIN

The Sound of Change

Ulrich Gutmair
Translated by Simon Pare

polity

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Dedication

For Tal and Amalia

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Preface to the English Edition

Some thirty years ago, Berlin was a sleepy place, detached from the rest of the world. Long gone were the days when the city was the most powerful industrial centre in continental Europe; a metropolis, birthplace of artistic avant-gardes, battleground for political ideas, welcoming place for revolutionaries of all kinds. The Nazis had exiled most of the artists, many of whom were Jewish, who had made Berlin a vibrant, hypermodern city. They had considered jazz to be ‘un-German’, and modern art to be ‘degenerate’.

On 2 May 1945, the Red Army finally conquered Berlin. The tyranny that caused the death of 50 million people in Europe, and was supported by some Germans until the bitter end, was over. The Cold War split the city into two halves. As a whole, Berlin found itself pushed from the centre of German culture to the periphery. What remained was the myth of those Golden Years.

The eastern part of the city came under Soviet administration. The socialist German Democratic Republic was founded and East Berlin became its capital. In 1961, the Wall was built to prevent East Germans from fleeing to the West. In the wake of the 1980s, this socialist state was broke and, ironically, kept alive for some more years through loans from West Germany. But the GDR was not able to reform itself. Its government was finally brought down by a peaceful revolution of its citizens. Similar revolutions took place in most of the countries in Eastern Europe, showing the world that people really have the power – if the ones in charge decide not to use rifles and tanks against them. On 4 June 1989, the Chinese government brutally crushed the democratic movement in

Tiananmen Square. So when hundreds of thousands began to join the anti-government demonstrations in Berlin and Leipzig in the autumn of the same year, the fear that the East German Politburo would opt for the ‘Chinese solution’ was in the air.

After 1945 the Western part of Berlin was controlled by the Western Allies – the USA, the UK and France – and later became a part of the Federal Republic of Germany in the West. During the Cold War, the Western Allies considered West Berlin to be ‘the showcase of the Free World’ within the Eastern Bloc. Surrounded by the Wall, the enclave relied on subsidies from the West German government. Had it not been for the student revolt in 1967, the squatters’ movement, the young Germans who came here to avoid the draft, and artists like Einstürzende Neubauten, Iggy Pop and David Bowie, who loved the morbid charm of this grey and forgotten place, we would not have been able to say that anything significant happened here during the 1970s and 1980s.

When the Wall was opened by East German government officials, on the evening of 9 November 1989, the city slowly woke up again. The first days of reunified Berlin began.

This is a book about memory. When I started writing it, about fifteen years ago, I wanted to deliver a historical account of a short but formative transition period. In the year between the fall of the Wall and the reunification of the two states, a space of possibility had opened up. While many of the elder East Berliners were struggling to adapt to the new system, young people from Berlin and from all over the world had the economic and political freedom to realize their dreams, to create artworks and situations in a communal spirit. Houses were squatted, galleries were opened, basements were turned into clubs.

I had moved to Berlin from Bavaria to study history three weeks before the Wall fell. Now, I could study history in the making. I began to understand how revolutionary events actually disrupt and transcend its course. In those days, even the passage of time felt out of control. It seemed to speed up. Every day a new experience, every night a new sound. Rapid political change was followed by a fast transformation of city space. And paradoxically, it also seemed as though time stood still. Berlin-Mitte was an almost pastoral cityscape, a utopia in the true sense of the word. A non-place, in which the sound of the bass drum would set things in motion.

When we went out for a night of dancing in some makeshift club, sometimes we would reach a state of euphoria that, by definition, is the closest a living being can get to the eternal. Forgetting the past and the future, while getting lost in music, we would enter the magical time-space of absolute presence.

When I started to write this book and tried to fill the gaps in my memory, to reclaim my own history that did not find many references in the rapidly changing surroundings, I studied newspapers and books, and more significantly, I asked a variety of people to tell me their stories. This book is also their book, and I have tried to treat all those stories with respect while keeping the somewhat cruel distance you need to write truthfully.

I expected all the popular clubs, like Tresor or E-Werk, to be remembered, and eminent figures in the art and music scene to get the recognition they deserved. So I saw it as my duty to try and catch the ephemeral, to detect the zeitgeist in the lives of those who might be overlooked even though their presence and work were important in forming the culture of this temporary autonomous zone that shapes the image of Berlin to this day.

While working on this book, I spent considerable time trying to find ways to avoid writing ‘I’, thinking that there is a pompousness in it – if not accredited by necessity, the economy of the text itself. But this ‘I’ contained a higher truth. This is a history of the events and developments in Berlin-Mitte that tries to take into account as many perspectives as possible. But ultimately, it is also my personal story.

This is a book about cities. What Berliners fear most today is that their city might meet the fate of London, Paris and New York, where only the wealthy can afford to live, or even worse, where many buildings are not places to dwell in any more, but mere investments, staying empty for most of the year.

After Berlin had again become the capital of Germany, for some time its population rose by about 50,000 per year. At the same time, city government had to sell many of the publicly owned housing enterprises to fill empty coffers. When, after the global financial crisis in 2008, capital was fleeing into real estate, investors from all over the world discovered that real estate was relatively cheap in Berlin.

Berlin has seen a steep rise in rents in recent years – and Berlin is traditionally a city of renters, not owners. So in 2020, R2G – the coalition of Social Democrats, Socialists and the Green Party governing Berlin – decided to introduce legislation to freeze rents. Even though Germany’s Federal Constitution Court has declared the Berlin rent freeze to be null and void in the meantime, it is hailed by progressives as a powerful tool for the whole of Germany in order to keep cities diverse places, inhabitable for the many, not only the few.

For cities to be places open for everyone, culture has to play an important role. In May 2021, the German parliament decided that nightclubs should legally cease to

be considered as places for entertainment and would now be treated as cultural sites. It means that urban planning regulations and building laws concerning museums and theatres now also apply to clubs. This is good news. An environment in which everyone is entitled and able to enjoy the good life cannot be created by market forces, but only by the body politic. The dance floor is one of the urban spaces where the body politic is constituting itself as a community transcending class, gender and colour.

I want to thank my editor at Polity, Elise Heslinga, for helping to bring about the English translation of this book eight years after it was published in German. I am indebted to my translator, Simon Pare, who enthusiastically embarked on the mission of translating this book, and found the right English words to capture the ironies and transpose the rhythms of those sometimes very long and very German sentences.

Ulrich Gutmair, May 2021


HOTEL
WINO
Parfümerie
Friseur
RADIO
LICHTANLAGEN
15

Fig. 1 Hotel Clou and the Wino store in Mauerstrasse 15. The picture was taken on 17 February 1950. A good 40 years later it hosted Elektro, Berlin's smallest Techno club

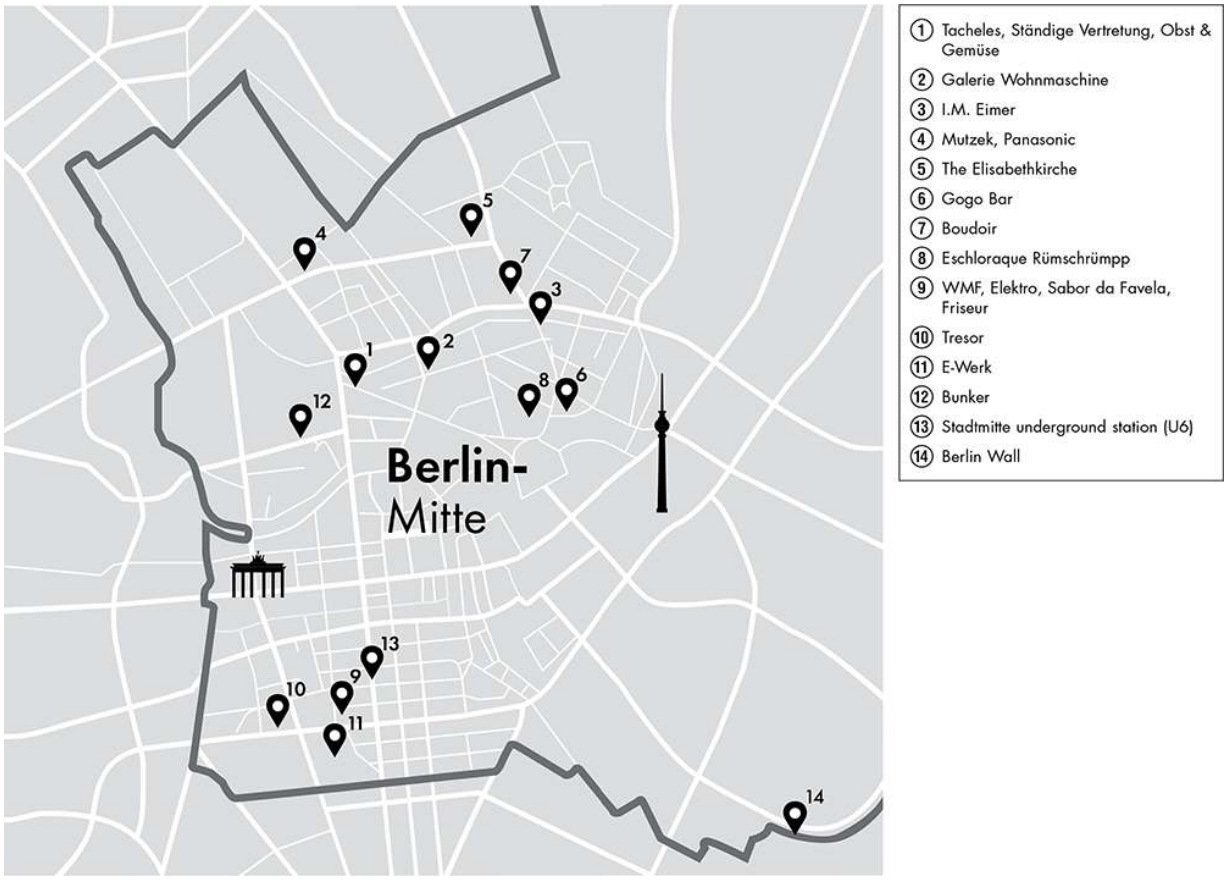

Fig. 2 Map of Berlin showing locations mentioned in the book

1
How Long is Now?

It reeks of Bitterfeld

A Category 1 smog alert is declared if the measuring stations register too much sulphur dioxide and carbon dioxide, if those levels are sustained for three hours, and if there is a wind velocity of below 1.5 metres per second for twelve hours and an area of low pressure over the city. In such cases, residents of West Berlin are requested only to aerate their flats for a short time, not to go out walking for too long and to refrain from outdoor sport. It would probably be healthier for the inhabitants of the capital of the socialist German Democratic Republic, commonly known as East Germany, if the same guidelines were in force there. However, the thresholds are higher than in the West, which is why smog is entirely theoretical in the GDR. When a Category 1 smog alarm is declared on 1 February 1987, police patrols in West Berlin announce over 2,000 infringements of the driving ban before 11 o’clock that morning; the air in the east of the city is officially clean.

There are days when the smell of sulphur hangs in the streets, a reminder that West Berlin is surrounded by the dark continent of the Eastern Bloc, which strikes Westerners as an old, rusting, colourless industrial world populated with smoking chimneys and glum-faced proletarians operating gigantic machines. The GDR is the European country with the greatest sulphur dioxide emissions and the highest levels of particulate matter in the air. East German environmental activists complain that

the chemical combine in Bitterfeld has no pollutant filter. The filters were allegedly removed from the chimneys by Soviet civil engineers after 1945 as reparations, and no new ones were ever installed. Since a pocket of air takes less than three hours on average to travel across the city, the majority of the dirt in Berlin's air is assumed not to have been caused by emissions within the city itself. As long as the power stations and factories are still operating in Czechoslovakia, Bitterfeld and Leipzig, and while people on both sides of the Wall drive cars and coal is burnt in the tiled stoves of old houses, a yellow-brown haze hangs heavily in the wintry Berlin sky whenever a south-easterly wind blows and there is a temperature inversion. The odour is unforgettable.

The deposits of these sulphurous yellow days settle on the house facades and colour them a pale shade of brown. You can see it all over town, though in West Berlin it is concentrated in poorer districts with large migrant-worker communities. In the East, where the late-nineteenth-century buildings haven't seen a lick of paint in fifty years, this brownish hue dominates the city centre. Despite being responsible for a *lack* of colour in the city, it coats your body with excess dirt. This brown suffuses your clothes after a day in the city; it turns your hands and your bathwater black. Spend the whole day outside or dance the night away in a cellar somewhere, and there'll be a black crust to scratch out of the inside of your nose the next morning. Human nostrils and building plaster are the most common magnets for the dirt in Berlin's air. At night it turns the sky orange; in homes it manifests itself as yellow ash, of which large quantities are produced from burning Rekord coal briquettes from Lusatia.

When the Wall was still there, you couldn't see it most of the time from East Berlin. A complex system of barriers, spring guns, patrols and access passes prevented the

ordinary citizens of the East German capital from even approaching the ‘Anti-Fascist Protective Barrier’. At night, the vacant lots and empty houses along the Wall were bathed in bright light on the eastern side. The other side of the Wall was painted in vivid colours, making it the world’s largest work of street art and masking the grim East beyond.

To get a good idea of what it was like in Berlin-Mitte when it was still a little-regarded corner of the East German capital, you should take a look at Hans Martin Sewcz’s photos. The photographer took some thirty black-and-white panorama photos of the streets of Mitte in May 1979. Everything is standing still; only the children are full of life, as children always are.

Two boys in shorts are advancing towards the camera. They are giving the photographer’s lens a look of defiance. One of them is wearing a striped T-shirt, the other has canvas shoes on but no socks. It must have been a warm and sunny spring. Behind them lies Auguststrasse, empty and quiet. The street is clean but has obviously been repaired, creating an asphalt patchwork from different historical periods. A few Wartburgs and Trabants are parked at the side of the road. No rubbish on the pavements, no billboards on the sides of the buildings, only a laundry plying its trade. The rubble of bombed-out houses in Mitte had long since been cleared away. Small parks were established or makeshift sheds erected on those sites. The people in the photo look out of place and yet completely at home, as if they don’t belong here and as if there is no life beyond these streets. Mitte is frozen in time, like the castle in Sleeping Beauty, and it stays that way until 1989, until the Politburo’s sleeping spell can no longer numb the people’s restiveness. When Hans Martin Sewcz photographed the streets of Mitte, East Berlin was still a romantic’s paradise. Now his pictures invite the viewer to

contemplate what used to be, who lived here and what the loss of that isolation means.

Fig. 3 Children in Auguststrasse, May 1979

The Berlin winter sky is also orange one evening as we turn off Oranienburger Strasse into Tacheles' courtyard, where a Trabant is planted nose-first in the sand, a laconic memorial to a lifestyle that no longer exists. In the back wall of the house is an inconspicuous grey steel door, which opens around eleven or twelve at night. I'm not alone – nobody goes dancing on their own. Maybe there are two or three of us. We say hi to the bouncer and wink cagily at the woman on the till. She's sitting off to the right, just inside the door, huddled in a thick jacket. In front of her is a small metal box. She looks like a secretary guarding a franking machine rather than the most exciting place in Berlin. We head downstairs and step into the passageway at the bottom. The ceilings are low, the walls unplastered and damp. It smells of cellar, of decades of silence, of cigarette smoke and the spilt beer of past parties. You're confused the first time you reach this point. Which way? Straight down the tunnel into the pitch black? Or turn right, around the corner? This disorientation turns out to be a trick. There's no dark tunnel ahead of us, just a mirror standing

slanted in a lift shaft. It lures you into believing in a path that doesn’t exist. Then we hear the music. We turn right, around the corner, and we’re inside.

An offbeat is pumping away. The bass drum pounds stoically, imperiously, at 120 beats per minute. The syncopated sound of a cymbal, running ahead, cutting in early, draws our bodies forward. Individual sounds, fat, rich and sexy, carve out spaces for themselves between the beats. Slowly our ears grow accustomed to the music. It’s house, on vinyl imported from Chicago or New York. It’s better, simpler and more seductive than anything we’ve ever heard before. People come in, stand around for a while and say hi to each other. They chat, laugh, drink beer, and then sooner or later they start dancing. They don’t come here to sit around; the only seats are at the cocktail bar. Both the bar and the bar stools are mounted on springs. It’s a challenge to climb up and sit down. Your legs dangle in the air as if you were swaying on the branch of a tree. It isn’t very comfortable and it doesn’t make sense to sit down for very long. The club consists of a damp cellar, dim light, people, music and, most importantly, motion.

You can make out two rooms, separated from one another by a smaller space in the middle. A laser beam cuts across the club from left to right, like a sign from the future encountering the remains of a story that seems to be stuck in 1945 when the Berliners hunkered down in air-raid shelters, waiting for the Red Army to arrive. A heap of rubble is a reminder of how it may once have looked down here. Further back in the dark there’s a small bridge over a water-filled hole in the floor. People are dancing to a new track played by a DJ whose name we don’t know. Initially, there’s no DJ cult, no names you need to remember beyond the names of the places themselves. There are smells and smiles, gestures and conversations in places the music has enticed us to. There are people who move, dress, drink and

smoke in their own style. They meet down here for a night in one another’s company.

The club is called Ständige Vertretung. It’s named after the Federal Republic of Germany’s permanent diplomatic representation in East Germany which was situated just around the corner from Tacheles, in Hannoversche Strasse, from 1974, but is no longer in use. On 2 October 1990 the plaque of the ‘Permanent Representation of the Federal Republic of Germany to the GDR’, to give it its full name, is unscrewed and removed. From that moment on, Ständige Vertretung ceases to be a place representing a state but a place where things happen that you can only experience live. Till Vanish has hauled a few old TVs down from the street into the cellar. He uses them to show the feedback you get when you film a screen with a video camera, then play the recording on a screen and record it all over again: a permanent short circuit that produces not pictures but lighting effects. Till Vanish has a cyberpunk peroxide-blond hairstyle you can spot from a mile away. Some Sundays he cuts people’s hair down here. He came from Weimar to Tacheles and lives next door.

People are dancing in the left-hand room. A French guy is at the decks, playing euphoric, minimalist music that’s hard to resist. From the edge of the dance floor it looks like a private party with rules unintelligible to anyone who’s only watching. Now it’s all about peeling yourself away from the wall, taking that one decisive step towards the dance floor that sets everything in motion. Until your movements have become automatic and you’re immersed in the music. Until you’ve overcome the embarrassment of letting yourself go, and the fear of looking weird. Until your mind is calm and focused, taking the occasional break, a few minutes’ time out at least.

Detlef Kuhlbrodt, who used to go clubbing in Mitte, describes this moment. ‘The first time I ever danced I was twelve. I’d imagined that dancing would kind of make me vanish into the here and now, but sadly that didn’t really happen very often. Instead, you just felt insecure. The effort to get it right just meant the effort contaminated your movements.’

But this music, more than any other, actually makes it easier for the dancer to slip softly into it, as into sleep. House is based on loops, simple repetitive bass lines over a straightforward beat. A few sounds, a few chords played on keyboards, often imitating the sound of a piano. If there’s any singing, it’s generally simple commands related to dancing or to the music itself. The loops spiral forwards in time, creating a feeling, as you dance, of being fully here, an overwhelming, powerful sense of presence and simultaneity. It’s the loop that moves the dancer. This produces the euphoric *je ne sais quoi* described in the ‘Can you feel it?’ of a famous house track, yet still unspoken, as if it were something you weren’t supposed to say aloud. And so at some stage we really do vanish into the now, transported by the beats, the elegance, the lush sounds of the music, beguiled by the motions of other people’s bodies, all this overspilling energy. Laughing faces, fleeting glances, attention, contact.

After we’ve been dancing for an hour, the sweat starts to drip on us and the others from the low ceiling where it has condensed and merged with the grimy deposits. Over the house beat, a woman’s voice shouts, ‘Come on!’ This isn’t just a memory; I can recreate it at any moment, because one of the few pieces of material evidence of my nights at Ständige Vertretung is a Scram record. It’s been standing on my shelf since I bought a copy after the DJ played the Empire Mix of ‘Come On’ one evening. I’d taken an unforgivable peek at the turntable: sometimes sheer

exuberance makes you overstep the line. That can’t have been during Ständige Vertretung’s first winter, though, because ‘Come On’ was only released on the New York-based Strictly Rhythm house label in 1992.

I have precisely three objects that are laden with memories of Ständige Vertretung. That Scram record and two slips with ‘Entrance Card’ printed in bold typewritten letters on thin cardboard – free entrance tickets (you saved five marks) I clearly never used. I think the cashier must have slipped them to me when I left the club in the morning, but it might have been someone else.

I moved to West Berlin in October 1989 to study at the Freie Universität. Good timing, because the Wall came down only three weeks later. In the years that followed, I spent my days at university deep in the western half of the city, while at night I was out in the unlicensed, unregistered bars, the squats and clubs of Mitte.

Memories don’t work like a camera. The pictures our memory produces are hazy. They fuse with smells, sounds and faces, and in turn these are associated with conversations that might well have taken place in a completely different context. Brief moments from scattered nights over a number of years coalesce into a single memory. A riot of rapid sequences, like strobe-shattered shards that belong together but are impossible to compile into a story, however hard you may try. But I can tell when and how at least one of my first nights at Ständige Vertretung ended.

One morning, before sunrise, we staggered up the steep stairs out of the damp cellar and into the wintry orange light of Berlin. It was a Friday, 18 January 1991. The reason I’m so sure of the date is because that morning something about the big wall on the far side of the large stretch of wasteland behind Tacheles was different.

Right at the top of the wall below the roof, written in white lettering at least two metres high, was the word *KRIEG*. War. The previous evening when we went down into the Tacheles cellar – Thursday used to be house night – that graffiti hadn't been there. In the early hours of the previous day, Operation Desert Storm had begun in Iraq. That same day Helmut Kohl was elected the first chancellor of a reunified Germany.

It snowed heavily for a few days in the winter of 1990–1, making Alexanderplatz virtually impassable. The snow appeared to have got the better of East Berlin city council. The old order had collapsed, and the new one wasn't yet fully in place. A year had passed between the Wall falling and reunification. East Berlin was caught up in a turbulent transitional phase marked by constant demonstrations, art happenings and parties. A situation similar to what nineteenth-century utopians christened 'anarchy' had taken hold during the interregnum between systems; an order that appeared to function virtually without leaders. Berlin was no longer the capital of the German Empire, even though every other street corner in Mitte suggested it might have been until very recently. Berlin was no longer the capital of the GDR, and not yet the new capital of a reunified Germany. A deal for Berlin to become the capital was far from done. Quite a few people in West Germany would have much preferred the seat of government to be Bonn rather than decrepit, dirty, poor Berlin in the eastern zone, which to their minds was halfway to Siberia.

Anyone arriving for the first time in reunified Berlin from the old West Germany encountered young East Germans in the process of learning about life in a world that had changed out of all recognition. There were East Berliners coming home from Schöneberg and Kreuzberg after a brief exile. There were people who went off travelling for a long time or moved to West Germany. And then there were those