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Berlin's art district attracts a growing flood of talent

By Simon Marks and Franziska von Scheven
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BERLIN: Andro Wekua, a Georgian artist, fled his troubled country in 1995 and, after a sojourn of more than a decade in Switzerland, arrived in Berlin nine months ago. For Wekua, the German capital is a place of creative renewal, a melting pot in which artists from all over the world mingle and interact.

"Berlin provides me with the perfect environment to go about my work," Wekua said one day in February, gazing out over the city's irregular skyline. "People here aren't egocentric. All play a part in remodeling Berlin's ever-changing identity."

Today, the acclaimed 31-year-old produces works of rich, melancholy textures that portray the traumatic conditions and lingering presence of the aftermath of the Georgian civil war. Propped up against one of his walls on the second floor of a spacious Berlin studio is an imposing canvass of a tumultuous ocean above which a deep red and orange sun slowly drops below the horizon.

Before Berlin, Wekua lived and worked in Basel and then Zurich, where he exhibited his first major solo show at the Peter Kilchmann Gallery. It was in Zurich that he developed his work and built an international reputation in art circles in London, Paris and New York. So why come to Berlin?

"In Berlin I feel as though I can breathe. The air is plentiful, the city is cheap and it has great working conditions. Here I can close myself off from the rest of the world and still be a part of the city," said Wekua, drawing a contrast with the cramped living and lack of anonymity of Zurich.

Thomas Schulte, a Berlin gallery owner, noted that the German capital had a history of attracting foreign artists dating back to the 1920s. "Its geographical position



Photo by Ketuta Alexi-Meskishvili
Andro Wekua in his Berlin studio, on the set of his short film "By the Window", 2008.

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stimulates various cultural exchanges between the East and the West," he said.

That tradition was brutally interrupted by the rise of Nazism, World War II and the partition of Germany. But since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, a growing community of international artists like Wekua has been pouring into the city. The migration recently has reached such proportions that the Danish government has spoken of an "art drain" from Denmark to Berlin, while every Swiss Canton has opened an arts center to support its emigrant talents.

Susanne Pfeffer, curator at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, said: "In the past, Cologne was the number one city for contemporary art. Now Berlin has taken over the reigns. In the last five years or so artists from all over the world have started coming here. Berlin is a cheap city that is constantly changing, attracting a lot of interest and providing many opportunities for artists, especially since the fall of the wall."

She admits, however, that although the city still offers a large number of free art studios - financed by government bodies - and lodgings for artists on small budgets, prices are rising fast and once publicly owned and accessible buildings are steadily being privatized.

By European standards the city is still poor and suffers from an unemployment rate of more than 17 percent - close to double Germany's national average. But thriving film, media, music and fashion industries - Berlin held its first fashion week in 2006 and Universal Studios opened a Berlin production unit this year - have enriched its drawing power. Berlin's mayor, Klaus Wowereit, too, works tirelessly to promote the city's bohemian culture.

Popularity, however, carries its own risk. "There has been a lot of change since 1989," said Alessia von Mallinckrodt, a German artist now living in New York, who plans to move to Berlin later this year. "It's a good thing to see a lot of building sites and houses being renovated, but I hope the spark is not going to be lost."

For von Mallinckrodt, Berlin's unruliness is part of its charm. "Berlin is a new and old city at the same time. Everything grows and changes all the time. New York is more clean and sleek," she said. "It is simply too beautiful and perfect."

Nearly two decades since the fall of the wall, the former East Berlin and the western enclave are still a study in cultural contrasts. But the center of gravity is shifting to the east, where gentrification is in full flow, constructing a new identity after nearly thirty years of physical and psychological isolation.

At least superficially, said Marina Grzanic, a researcher at the Institute of Philosophy in Ljubljana and teacher at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, eastern Berlin is becoming "painfully evacuated, hygienic and expressively normalized, producing a city with no face." Yet, for now, it still retains at least some of the flavor of its communist past, when it was a "kind of underground, punkish city," she said.