

## Interculturalism and New Russians in Berlin

Giacomo Bottà  
*University of Helsinki*

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**Abstract:** In his paper, "Interculturalism and New Russians in Berlin" Giacomo Bottá discusses aspects of the community of Russian artists in contemporary (post-1989) Berlin. The Berlin-based *Russendisko* night has been held in Tel Aviv, Milan, or Frankfurt, where enthusiastic people danced to songs of obscure Russian bands. In 2004, a new CD compilation, *Russensoul*, was published and in 2005 *Karaoke*, the ninth novel by Russian-born and Berlin-based author Wladimir Kaminer appeared in book stores. Russian culture is experiencing global success curiously tied to Berlin. How could the German capital have channelled this interest? Is there a particular historical, social, geographical, or cultural factor which has been decisive in this phenomenon? Why are these artists in Berlin? How important has Berlin been in the production of Russian artists? These are the basic questions Bottá explores in his study in an exploration of Berlin as an intercultural city and the locus of an Russian artistic community as intercultural practice. Bottá included in his analysis Wladimir Kaminer, Natalia Hantke, both writers, and Wladimir Skokov, a painter. Their biographies and some of their works, relating to urban subjects, are analysed and embedded in the urban context.

**Giacomo BOTTÁ**

### **Interculturalism and New Russians in Berlin**

Interculturalism is widely used as an educational and communicational approach to face problems connected to the "clash of civilizations" the contemporary world is facing. Rarely has it been used to examine tangible phenomena that could be identified in the urban environment, where multiculturalism, as a theory more than as practice, has been more often referred to (see, e.g., Teraoka). Lately, the idea of multiculturalism has faced criticism (see, e.g., Sartori), owing to the failures of policies that had juxtaposed different cultures within different places, without providing the "soft infrastructures" for the construction of networks and interaction. Multiculturalism explains ethnic districts or "villages," especially in relation to US-American cities and their sometimes turning into ghettos or bases for urban guerrillas. At the same time the "abuse" of the term in very different environments and situations has altered its meaning. The adjective *multikulti* in many European languages has become a way to express fascination for everything that looks, sounds or smells "exotic," "the other," and different. Interculturalism is based on dialogue and communication, facilitating contact between different cultures in a common (inter)space: cultural interaction helps the reconsideration of one's own identity and leads to an understanding of the mechanisms forming it. The city can become a place where problem solving and communication, as shown by the "corporate use" of interculturalism (Jandt), can lead to real interaction and collaboration. The modern city has always been the place where cultures, as ways of life, meet, and coexist. In the city "the other" is encountered and the subject is continuously torn between homologisation and distinctiveness (see Simmel

<[http://condor.depaul.edu/~dweinste/intro/simmel\\_M&ML.htm](http://condor.depaul.edu/~dweinste/intro/simmel_M&ML.htm)>). Every year the magnetic power of the city attracts new people looking for better living conditions, a new beginning or the freedom to pursue their own happiness. Different understandings of space, time, and life gather and coexist in the same city, often in conflict or in total ignorance of one another. Nevertheless, sometimes a particular urban context happens to be vital to the birth of an intercultural practice, of a border that cannot be ascribed to one culture but that becomes a cognitive link between identities, cultures or worlds (see, e.g., Milz <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol2/iss2/4/>>). Geographically, Berlin lies in the middle of Brandenburg, a sandy region of lakes, fields, and small villages, far from the core of Western Europe; the Polish border is only 120 kms away. Even culturally, the German capital has been defined as a city on the border between "East and West," a definition that seems catching, at first sight.

The main feature of Berlin's locus on the border between East and West, apart from its tragic political reality as the dividing point of the Iron Curtain in the Cold War era, lies in its evanescence: you might find yourself searching for it in vain, just like tourists looking for the Berlin Wall. Berlin is neither a city of the East, of the West, nor a city between East and West. It is a city that can only be defined interculturally, in the sense that East and West, as vague cultural connotations, had the chance to interact and define a homogeneous urban context, where actors are to be found both in the ruling powers and in grassroots subcultural activities of various origins. The German capital is not on a border; it is a border itself; a place where cultures meet and interact (for a theoretical approach to the notions of Central and East European borders, "peripherality," and exile and diaspora writing, see, e.g., Totosy de Zepetnek

<<http://www.sjschmidt.net/konzepte/texte/totosy1.htm>>). Its identity cannot be determined by any single definition: Berlin has always absorbed and "digested" architectural, social, and cultural influences that should be perceived as contents within the city-container, but that cannot be used to explain it as "on the border": the project of an intercultural city remains, especially in the case of Berlin, self-significant. The intercultural connotation of Berlin is also endorsed by its multilingualism: apart from German, the languages spoken in the four allied sectors after World War II (English, French, and Russian) left their influence and toponyms. After 1989 Russian, as we will see, has regained prominence, along Turkish, which has been widely spoken since the 1960s, especially in "Little Istanbul" (i.e., Kreuzberg, a distinctively ethnic quarter). Nowadays English is

widely used as a language of business and tourism. In everyday use or in literary expression, all considered languages mirror cultural differences, existing in different urban perceptions. The spatial definition of Berlin made, for example, by German, Turkish, or Russian speakers reveals singular cultural determinations of space and original cognitive mappings, which should always be kept in mind, when speaking about the city "in general." Starting with the 1990s, for the first time in Europe, cities had to face new urban phenomena such as gentrification, massive immigration, poverty, and segregation; in particular, new lines of division set by social boundaries appeared in Berlin, outnumbering the former ideological division. At the same time, the aim to compete in the world scenario, with the other "world cities" collapsed partly under the weight of a bottomless financial bankruptcy; on a global level, many big cities have lost their economic and political supremacy, previously connected to their "centrality" in production, communication, and power (see Savage and Warde). Culture has been used as a means to regain this superiority: art, performance, and entertainment, originating in popular subcultural settings, have been moved to serve the marketing interests of the city. Free cultural production, institutionalised through the organisation of city festivals or otherwise subsidized, has turned into "city culture"; part of what Sharon Zukin calls "symbolic economy" (3). This new cultural policy turned the newly reunified Berlin into a film and video location, a gigantic dance-floor (with the Love Parade and the Christopher Street Day), and a tourist stage for the *Erlebnisgesellschaft* (event society). In the 1990s, Berlin baptized a new civil society whose lifestyle was shaped as a mixture of the roaring twenties cultural fascination (*die goldenen Zwanziger Jahre*) and the most contemporary of global corporate concerns. The recent past was quickly obliterated, at least from promotional material. At the same time, the city was chosen again as German capital (in 1991), greeted by the birth of a new political class: the *Berliner Republik*, which was biographically separated from Germany's Nazi past and initiated the normalisation of the country within the European Union.

Having been passive and unheard spectators of all this, many grassroots artists and intellectuals, felt the need to preserve or renew pre-existent local practices in the city, the features of which were traditionally participation, autonomy, and a deep disbelief in any form of hierarchy, capitalistic exploitation, and profit. In fact, Kreuzberg in West and Prenzlauer Berg in East Berlin represented islands of alternative urban lifestyles and cultural experiences that could not just be put away by the reunification and sacrificed in the name of a city-marketing plan that was eager to forget the past and substitute it with an idealized and flat "pop history" (Jameson 25). Artistic and intellectual work, outside official circles, has emphasized the importance of urban liveability and local practices, and has opposed the market-ruled policies of city governance. The big projects that made Berlin *die grösste Baustelle Europas* (the biggest construction site in Europe), such as the Potsdamer Platz or the Friedrichstrasse left out real citizens' needs and the problems that they had to face every day. An interesting metaphor describing the reunified Berlin is that of a medieval palimpsest (see Huyssen). According to Andreas Huyssen, the city was rubbed and rewritten several times during the twentieth century, and just like in an old manuscript, valuable texts in ancient tongues are still partially visible under the freshly written words, pointing at various historical markers, both towards the past and the future of the city. The textual metaphorisation of Berlin has always been fascinating for its semiotic connotations but it seems questionable, when analysing also visual (pictorial, photographic, filmic) representations of the German capital and its socio-spatial image. For example, the Reichstag, one of the most contested symbols of the new Berlin was originally built between 1884 and 1894 as the parliament of the German empire and then of the Weimar republic. It was burnt down in 1933 and destroyed during World War II, becoming a symbol of Nazi defeat, for example through the famous (staged) photo, portraying a Soviet soldier with the red flag on its roof. After Berlin's division among the allied forces, it ended up in the British sector and was partly restored in 1961. After the 1991 *Wiedervereinigung* (reunification), the building was chosen as the place for the parliament (Bundestag) of the German federation of states and a major restoration began, following a project by Norman Foster, who decided to top the roof with a new futuristic dome. The nicknamed "space egg," made of glass and steel, the dome contains two ramps leading the visitors to a 360-degree panorama of the city. The dome has been interpreted as an expression of the transparency of the new unified democracy (see

Köpenick). Inside, in the renovated entrance, some Cyrillic graffiti, left by the red army soldiers, is marked with light. The stratification of radically different political and historical meanings is recalled continuously by visible and invisible signs, by public or personal memories bound to the place, to its history, and to its medial representations.

In 1995, just before the restoration of the Reichstag began, the artist pair Christo and Jeanne-Claude "wrapped" the Reichstag with thickly woven polypropylene fabric with an aluminium surface, lending it an unreal, fairy tale dimension and underlining its spatial importance within Berlin's landscape (Christo and Jeanne-Claude <<http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/wr.html>>). Christo and Jeanne-Claude's wrapping transformed the building into a "shimmering and abstract form" without any clear message, and more than five million people strolled and relaxed around the temporary work of art, enjoying its vacuity (Ladd 88-90). All semiotic meanings related to the building's future and past disappeared: for two weeks it included everyone looking at it. The palimpsest had turned temporarily into blank paper and everyone became able to read it. Nevertheless, and more profoundly, Berlin's image interfered in the artistic and cultural life of the city. Every book about Berlin had the moral task confronting "its ghosts" (Ladd 1). Writing about Berlin became an overwhelming challenge: too big was the confrontation with its history and its myth, and the expectations of the reading public and of the critics had been exaggerated. On the other hand, the socio-cultural scenes and subcultures of the 1990s, left out of the big speeches and of the expectations related to "high culture," acquired new autonomous features through mutual intermingling/exchanging/mixing and interaction. The chance to overwhelm the weight of history was bound to the recognition that Berlin does not belong just to History or to Myth. Berlin is also a place where millions of people live every day and where every day new ways to read the city are created and new meanings are attributed to places. The Russian-speaking minority in post-1989 Berlin has been one of the most active and original in reshaping the everyday city as a cultural environment and constitutes an interesting case study related to the intercultural city thesis. In fact, practices that renewed the urban cultural environment, mirroring social life, have been fuelled extensively by Russian-speaking immigrants and by their work. Berlin has always been the first step into the West for Russian-speaking emigrants, used both as a point of arrival or transit. In the twentieth century, five waves of migrations to the West can be identified, the first and the fifth of which interest the German capital in particular. The first wave, which had a peak of about 350.000 people in the 1920s, was a consequence of the Bolshevik Revolution. It is the most celebrated, owing to the extensive presence of intellectuals and to its taking place in an era when Berlin acquired the qualities of a world city in size, infrastructure, and cultural life. It is often forgotten that Berlin in the *goldenen Jahren*, was extremely diverse not only in sexual orientation but also culturally in diverse contexts: Nabokov, Majakowski, Gorki, and Kandinsky were among the many Russian artists without those contribution German art movements, for example, Expressionism or Dada, would never have begun. Nevertheless, although influences spread among fellow poets, painters, and revolutionaries, the social independence of nationalities remained. Cafes such as the Prager Diele or institutions such as the *Haus der Kunst (Dom Iskusstv)* and the writers' club (*Klub Pisatelej*) were Russian-speaking outposts. The quarter of Charlottenburg (in the Western part of the city) became a centre for the Russian-speaking community and was familiarly called Petersburg by the immigrants -- or Charlottengrad by the Berliners (see Shrivastava 35). This wave of immigration can be characterized by the preservation of the national cultural identity, which was evident, for example, in the refusal to learn and use German and in the consolidation of a Russian-speaking infrastructure in communications and media. Striking is the fact that more than seventy publishers and printing houses, putting out approximately 200 newspapers and magazines were active in the German capital until 1941 (Kasack; Andreesen <<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla64/096-116e.htm>>) and the fascination of this era is tangible in several of Nabokov's novels.

The second wave of immigration was a result of World War II; many war prisoners remained in West Germany after 1945, fearing repercussions if they return to the Soviet Union. At the same time, a sector of Berlin was controlled directly by the Soviet Union, involving the moving in of troops, functionaries, and various officials. The third wave was an outcome of repression in the

USSR with a high tide in the 1970s: dissident writers and intellectuals escaped or were sent abroad under international pressure. The fourth wave of immigration to Germany involved people of Jewish background who were allowed to leave USSR in the 1980s: some of the Russian-speaking emigres with a Jewish background, while most settled in Israel, also settled in West Germany or used Berlin -- owing to its proximity to St. Petersburg (Leningrad) and Moscow as a transit point to Israel or the US/Canada. The fifth wave, the one that is central to this paper, is related to the fall of the Berlin Wall and to the end of the Cold War and of the Socialist Block. In this last wave, three interrelated typologies of Russian-speaking immigrants to Berlin can be identified. The *Deutsch-Russen*, Russian-speaking citizens with German ancestors, misplaced during or soon after World War II constitute the first group; then there were people of Jewish religion (*Kontingentflüchtlinge*) who were often also of German origin; finally there were people who, independent of any ethnic or religious identity, moved for economical reasons and saw Berlin as the nearest place to find better living conditions. It is interesting to note how the first two categories relate to historical events that took place fifty years before, as if the Cold War had frozen time. From the legislative point of view, they were a direct consequence of the new immigrant legislation (*Asylrecht*) approved by the German parliament in 1993. Germany's Basic Law guarantees people of German ancestry the right to enter the country and to obtain citizenship (i.e., the *ius sanguinis*) if they suffered persecution after World War II because of their heritage, even if they do not speak the language and have no direct ties to the country. In 1990, almost 400,000 ethnic Germans arrived. Since 1993, a maximum 220,000 persons per year can be granted recognition as ethnic Germans, although not all of them will move immediately to Germany. Statistics aside, in Berlin the official number of Russian-speaking immigrants should take into account the existence of illegal immigrants. Their presence could mean something between 50.000 to 200.000 people facing, at the same time, the problem of who to identify as "Russian" (all Russian speakers? Only the people from the Russian Federation?). Relevant for my study is the fact that, whether or not of German origin, some intellectuals and writers started working extensively in German and felt immediately at home in the new, precarious, and exciting reunified Berlin, changing radically the whole image of Russian-speaking immigration in the city. As far as writing is concerned, German intercultural literature is not a new phenomenon: already in the 1960s, guest workers from Italy and Turkey started adopting the guest language to document, in poetry and prose about identity and ethnicity issues, but with a strong political and realist attitude, sometimes filled with hostility (see Chiellino 60-61; see also Nell). In fact, Carmin Chiellino identifies the fifth-wave of Russian-speaking immigrants as the *Neunte Stimme*, (ninth voice; Chiellino 56) of German-language intercultural literature.

Contemporary Russian-speaking authors use German naturally, not as a weapon to fight back discrimination, but as a positive means to assert their own identity among the German and non-German speaking population of Berlin. The membership of the wider subcultural Berlin scene (Prenzlauer Berg) is of course a decisive factor in this attitude. In fact, the scene attracts outsiders and minorities from various cultural and national environments. Their attitude liberated the German language from its negative historical connotations very much present in Russia. There is an assembly of factors which could only be found in the German capital at the beginning of the 1990s central to the redevelopment of Berlin as an original cultural space and that explain the extensive use of the German language. Firstly, the housing situation in the district Prenzlauer Berg must be considered. This working-class district is located in the central East side of the city; its buildings, called *Mietskaserne* in German, were built no later than the 1920s and needed renovation, especially after World War II. Instead of carrying out renovations, the East German government, since the 1960s, preferred to build new block of apartments (*Neubauten*), embodying the socialist ideal with all kinds of facilities, in quarters further east such as Marzahn and Hellersdorf. The offer of brand new apartments somewhere else led Prenzlauer Berg to decay for a long time. At the end of the 1970s, a small group of outsiders, punks, and dissidents started repopulating the area, owing to the abundance of empty buildings with apartments (see Felsmann and Gröschner). Despite this, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, one-sixth of the district's dwellings were vacant, 43% of the apartments lacked a private bathroom, 22% had an outdoor toilet and 83 % were inadequate-

ly heated (see Levine 95). These factors, plus the Bohemian reputation, prompted many "pioneers" to move to Prenzlauer Berg, both from West Germany and from East Europe. The run-down quarter was an ideal place for gentrification, i.e., the social and physical process of inner city regeneration (Friedrichs). Many original residents had decided to leave their apartments and move to West Germany; West German members of the "creative class" occupied these apartments and started rearranging the public and private space they now claimed their own at their will. Soon the transformation of the working-class quarter into a gentrified one began to be apparent. Nowadays, in areas such as Kollwitz Platz and in some parts of the Schönhauser Allee, the gentrification process seems to have been accomplished. Also from the infrastructural point of view the quarter represented, together with some parts of the more central *Mitte*, an ideal setting for social and cultural experimentation because of the presence of modern buildings, warehouses, available basements, and other service- or industry-related buildings that were turned, more or less illegally, into clubs, bars, galleries, or restaurants. Thus, the parallel of gentrification and the birth of a sub-cultural scene is obvious.

The urban environment described above was decisive for Wladimir Kaminer's popularity, which relies on the unique interaction between his Russian origin and identity and their embeddedness in practices typical of Berlin. Kaminer, a trained sound-engineer and theatre student, was born in Moscow in 1967. He came to East Berlin in 1990, as the avant-garde of the fifth wave of immigration obtaining a visa as a Russian of Jewish origin. After a series of various jobs and short-term occupations, he decided to become a writer and performer. Today, he can be considered one of the most influential writers of post-1989 Berlin. His multifaceted career was started by meeting Bert Pappenfuß, an East German dissident poet, active in the pre-1989 Prenzlauer Berg scene. In the bar Kaffee Burger, whose furniture remains untouched by history, Kaminer founded NPK: Neue Proletarische Kunst (New Proletarian Art) and later joined the *Reformbühne Heim und Welt*. Both are groups of spoken word artists. In Kaffee Burger and in other small bars and clubs of Prenzlauer Berg, he started reading his short stories, surreal and humorous texts, full of autobiographical anecdotes related to his identity, the difficulties of living in Berlin and the city's Russian underworld. The spoken word scene was a phenomenon limited to the East and to Prenzlauer Berg in particular, where veterans from the former East Germany (GDR) oppositional movements got in contact with Western artists and writers and with foreigners. Kaminer's short stories aroused interest: they were published, among others, by *TAZ (Die Tageszeitung)*, a left-wing newspaper. The Russian author was also working for *Multi-Kulti*, a radio station broadcasting in various languages. At the same time, he organized a regular party in Tacheles (a run-down department store from the 1920s in the eastern quarter *Mitte* of the city, which squatters occupied in the early 1990s and turned into a culture centre) where, as a DJ, he played only obscure Russian rock and pop music from the 1960s and 1970s. This selection suited the Western audience that attended the parties, read the *TAZ*, and listened to *Multi-Kulti*, always in search of something distinctive. Kaminer became a sort of catalyst for the "invisible" minority of East European immigrants in Berlin and at the same time revived the myth of the first wave immigration, when the Russian intellectuals set trends. His popularity grew in 2000 with the Goldmann publishing house publication of *Russendisko*, which contained most of his short stories. The book, with an explicit red star on the cover, was greeted with great success in Germany and, thanks to various translations, abroad. Along with the book, also his work as spoken word performer, journalist, DJ, talent scout, and event promoter acquired more and more national and international visibility. Every book published by Kaminer was followed by a reading tour associated to a DJ night, transforming the promotional job into a multimedia event (see Schulze). Kaminer's entrepreneurial ability is striking: *Russendisko* became a "trademark," in the form of a CD, a weekly DJ night, a book, a website <<http://www.russendisko.de>>, and an "event," maintaining a subcultural and Bohemian credibility that many other artists would have then lost. His attitude, as a performer, is in fact strikingly low-profile and relaxed, celebrating humorously his own amateurism and marking continuously his condition as immigrant and outsider -- a well-established way of self-irony practiced by many Central and East European writers and artists. "Don't take it too seriously" is a sort of motto of the whole Prenzlauer Berg scene, where the intermingling of subcultural elements, marketing strategies, and anti-professionalism are the

norm, Kaminer used this attitude and brought it to success. Kaminer's sensation brought Russian culture, music, and aesthetics into fashion, the ethnic minority, which was previously linked, especially in the yellow press, only to mafia or criminality, was suddenly surrounded by a previously unknown hype: Russian artists were invited or moved to Berlin, Russian bars opened and Russian music events began populating the programs of various clubs. A brief internet look-up suggests the existence of websites and articles, both in Russian and German, promoting the Berlin "Russian scene" and all its activities (concerts, exhibitions, readings, disco nights, etc.), e.g., <<http://www.007-berlin.de>>, <<http://dierussenkommen.de>>. A visit to Kaffe Burger (the established location for the party after its beginning in Tacheles) on a Saturday could easily testify the enormous popularity of the "Russendisko night" for non-Russians. This fascination has been explained by *Ostalgie* (a fusion of the worlds Ost i.e., East and *Nostalgie*, i.e., nostalgia), which idealised the GDR and East Bloc aesthetics and which found expression in the partly melancholic mood of films such as the vastly popular *Good Bye! Lenin* (2003) or in the ironic re-release of East German products and furniture. An insight into Kaminer's work shows its actual distance from this phenomenon, which is bound to a post-reunification desire for *Heimat*, solidarity, and tradition. *Ostalgie* is not sufficient to explain Kaminer's efforts or the "Russian mania" as a whole, as its above-mentioned intercultural dimension is far from the idealisation of a German monocultural past.

*Russendisko's* short stories are not centred on the past; they describe Berlin's reality and chronicle the author's assimilation into Berlin's contemporary social and urban fabric. Mental maps are the routes in our minds, which organize our moving, orienting and living in spaces and that influence our recollection and meaning (on this, see, e.g., Downs and Stea; Lynch). In *Russendisko*, Kaminer sets the majority of his short stories at the beginning of the 1990s, as the fifth wave of immigration was beginning to hit East Berlin (when Honecker granted GDR citizenship to Russians of Jewish background) or even in during the years when Kaminer was planning in Moscow to emigrate. Analysing time and space references, we can identify a slow shift in perception through the book: in the oldest descriptions, there are no real mental maps and no references to prototypical elements of the German capital: the city is still an imaginary goal, filtered through Russian narratives and images (TV reports, friends, books, etc.). The stories set in the east of the city, at the very beginning of the 1990s belong to a second level of perception. "Centrality" is represented by Marzahn (an eastern district in the outskirts of the city where the refugees' apartments were located) and the Lichtenberg Railway Station (where the trains from Moscow and St. Petersburg arrive). They both represent the first consequential places encountered by a Russian immigrant. Socially, in these first stories there are few references to Germans; the protagonists are Russian compatriots of, real or presumed, Jewish Russians, Roma, Africans, and Vietnamese, which constituted the ethnic minorities already present in the GDR before 1989. A key short story in the book is "Die erste eigene Wohnung" ("My First Apartment"), where Kaminer describes the gentrification of Prenzlauer Berg, according to his own experience as a pioneer. The first phase of this process is depicted vividly. Prenzlauer Berg is identified as a secret hint and starts attracting pioneers from the West: "Punks, Ausländer und Anhänger der Kirche der Heiligen Mutter, schräge Typen und Lebenskünstler aller Art" (28) ("Punks, foreigners, members of the church of the holy mother, strange guys, and life artists of every kind"; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine) who replace the original dwellers. The author and two friends fed up with life in the refugee dormitory, join this Western wave (from the east!) and take up squatting. Only later does the city become able to identify and regulate the housing through ordinary rent contracts. This will eventually lead to a normalisation and to the consequent third and fourth stages of gentrification. Three streets are named in the story: Stargarder, Greifenhagener, and Lychener (the last being the one chosen by the author for his 25-square-metre apartment), which nowadays are very "central" areas of the gentrified Prenzlauer Berg. Moving into a private home is also linked to a change in the social environment: the majority of stories reel around his Russian family and friends, West Europeans, and bizarre characters from the intercultural Prenzlauer Berg community. The ethnic references are limited to Vietnamese and Turks and are mainly connected to their commercial and restaurant activities flourishing in the district. This slow shift in the author's perception of the city

and of its inhabitants continues in the second book, *Schönhauser Allee* (2001). The title refers to the long street (2775 meters) running north to south, one of the main axes of Prenzlauer Berg. It is unusually taken over almost completely by the U2 metro line, which is elevated far over the street level in the middle. Its metro stations are traditional meeting points, especially the ones called Eberswalder Stasse and Schönhauser Allee, where beggars, street vendors, and musicians are present. The street has always had a literary and filmic fascination, which found expression during GDR times in films such as *Berlin. Ecke Schönhauser* (1957), about youth gangs. Many of its bars and shops are often portrayed in photographs, to evoke the "alternative Berlin" or as a symbol for the gentrified East. Today it constitutes a microcosm of Berlin and an urban village with connotations that could be defined interculturally and not only ethnically. Unlike Kreuzberg, where the Turkish majority has set a certain national flair on many streets, the Schönhauser Allee constitutes an inter-relational cultural space. This is also historically visible, for example, in its Jewish cemetery, the second oldest in Berlin, where epitaphs are bilingual German and Hebrew displaying an ongoing assimilation. The street is adorned by an incredible number of bars, cafés, and ethnic restaurants, small shops with curious names, a mall called Arcaden (opened in 1999), a cinema complex, Colosseum (founded in 1924), and a big cultural centre, the Kulturbrauerei. The street is also full of residential apartments. All buildings along the street have their own courtyard, with apartments also located at the wings and back of the buildings; this means that behind every entrance exists a hidden and crowded "square." The street constitutes a huge meeting point, where every day many people walk, travel, eat, work, shop, and mingle. Owing to the gentrification of the area, its population is rather mixed: the gentrifiers live beside the original Prenzlauerberger and the ethnic minorities, which are mainly involved in commerce also share the same locations.

As we know from *Russendisko*, Kaminer's real postal/residential address is on Schönhauser Allee. For him, it represents a home, a starting point to explore the city, and at the same time a mythical place to be abstracted or emphasized. His wandering along the shops, in the Arcaden mall or by the Burger King, during the day or at night, shows a deep confidence in the street, especially through the use, of his supposed, everyday mental maps, his locations of existence. The ease with which he recognizes places, routes, and manners typical of Prenzlauer Berg, could be one explanation of his popularity, as they establish a familiarity with the readers. His ironical questioning of trademarks, chain shops, and fast food outlets, and his keen descriptions of people's manners could also lead one to think of him as a post-modern *flâneur*. Post-modern *flânerie* because of its minimalism and because "it could not care less about possible conflicts between authenticity and simulation" (Goebel 1279). Kaminer operates a sort of "urban archaeology" in the shops and trash bins of the busy street by enumerating products on display in a Vietnamese corner-shop, books found in a dustbin or in cheap bookstores. This shows the speed and craziness, achieved by consumption. His criticism, although politically loaded, is never prevailing, and it is offered in a humorous way, pointing at the comic more than at the dramatic aspects of contemporary capitalism. Nevertheless, also in this collection, the idea of interculturalism remains essential; for example in "Jungeesellen und Familienwirtschaft" ("Singles and Family Economy") the author describes the building, where he lives with his wife and children. Russian, "modern Islamic," Vietnamese families, and German singles live side-by-side, sharing space, sniffing exotic food from behind the neighbouring door, listening to unknown languages and noises and every day observing "the other," the strange, and the uncommon. This is the real multiculturalism in place here where different cultures have their own place to express themselves (the apartment), but at the same time, inevitably, they interact in real life through noises, smells, and words, in sharing the same building and street. Socially, it is interesting to note that, besides foreign families, the German *autochthons* are often single, involved in artistic or cultural work, and perform urbanity through a distinctiveness, which at times turns into caricature or cliché (for example in the "black only" outfit of the *lässige Junggesellin* on the first floor). This shows implicitly the limits of gentrification, here without an intercultural counterpart. Again, following the rapid succession of short stories, the author wanders along his cognitive maps of the city, which remain deeply rooted in the East. West Berlin is for Kaminer, as for many other contemporary authors, an unexplored and most likely uninteresting site. At the same time, there are no references to the "contested places" of Berlin, to

tourist attractions, or to prototypical elements of the city. Stylistically, many of the short stories maintain a common bizarre structure, where an episode of the past, in Moscow, is linked abruptly to something contemporary in Berlin, with sentences such as "auch bei uns in der Schönhauser Allee... (22) ("here too, on our Schönhauser Allee"): the phrase shows complicity with the reader. The Schönhauser Allee acquires in Kaminer's text the features of an urban intercultural village, where social and ethnic diversities coexist and interact. At the same time, the realistic dimension of the street is strengthened by abstractions: the fictional episodes where famous persons are met by the author in the street (for example Bill Clinton, Charles Bukowski, Albert Einstein) assert a mythical and dreamy dimension, which modify the dynamics of its perception and its canonisation. Kaminer refers repeatedly to the importance of the street, as a subject for urban research. As Marshall Berman noted, the street is the place where the subject comes in contact with social forces, the showcase of modernity, the place where social classes interact, where strangers bump into each other and where riots and political rallies are performed. In Paris, the Boulevard was the symbol of modernity and modernisation, just like the Newsy Prospect in St. Petersburg, and in Berlin it is the Schönhauser Allee that exemplifies the intercultural character of the German capital, its being built upon history but also its being deeply entrenched in the everyday encounter of diverse but interacting ways of life.

Next, I introduce another Russian immigrant to Berlin, Natalia Hantke: born 1967 in Kazakhstan, Hantke studied social sciences in St. Petersburg, before moving to Berlin in December 1991. She belongs to the spoken word group *Erfolgsschriftsteller im Schacht*. The group of seven authors, previously known as *Blaue Drache*, established itself as one of the most active within the Prenzlauer Berg literary "off" scene, participating actively in reading nights and poetry slams and hosting a literary night every Monday at the Bergwerk, in the district *Mitte*. The spoken word movement in Germany originated from social beat and from slam poetry activities, which flourished in East Berlin after 1989 (on this, see, e.g., Neumeister and Hartges). These literary practices were first conceived in the USA in the 1960s: they adopt performance and entertainment to bring literature back to nightclubs and bars and to a wider and more mixed audience than the written book. Gathering in groups mocks the "rock-band" attitude and at the same time helps the performers to gain confidence. Besides learning German, in a way that could allow her to "play" with language, Hantke had a double task: to establish herself as the "Russian girl" within a scene almost completely German and male. In fact Hantke's texts, never collected in a book, are connected to the questioning of her own identity, of her home country's and family's history, and constitute a fascinating counterpart to her "Western" colleagues. For example, "Deutschland sucht seine Gagarin-Büsten" ("Germany Searches for Its Gagarin Statues") is a humorous reportage which mixes a variety of time/space associations: the inauguration of "Flug zum Himmel" ("Flight to the Sky"), an exhibition by the painter Andrej Rudjev at the Prenzlauer Berg planetarium, a childhood cosmonauts stamp collection, a letter from a Siberian Russo-German woman to the newspaper *Eurasia Direkt* concerning the Soviet cosmonaut Jurij Gagarin, with the editor's answer. "Space" is the connecting element of the text, which jumps from Prenzlauer Berg to Siberia, from Berlin to the sky and back, through unexpected and sudden associations. The link to the work of Kaminer is clear, as she points out in an interview: "ich glaube, ohne Kaminer konnte ich nicht tun, was ich tue" (Hantke qtd. in Ahne 20) ("I believe without Kaminer I couldn't do what I'm doing"). In fact, in the above-mentioned text, she adopts Kaminer's strategy of linking the past to Russia and the Soviet Union and to the present, the "new life" in Germany. Her texts also appeared in the newspaper *TAZ*; among them a reportage about the Nazi scene in the outskirts of Berlin <<http://www.taz.de/pt/2004/07/24/a0288.1/text.ges,1>> and some humorous stories about intercultural communication. Her studies in social pedagogy, in St. Petersburg and then at Berlin's Freie Universität have surely been extremely relevant to her literary work. At the same time, following Kaminer's example again, she started her own DJ night called *Disconova*.

My next example, the painter Vladimir Skokov <<http://www.kleinsassen.de/gal-2000/schatten03.php>>, was born in 1966 in Priekule, Latvia. He could be considered the visual equivalent to the work of Kaminer and Hantke. Skokov moved to Berlin in 1997 and apparently left the city a few years ago to move to Moscow, where he was prac-

tically unknown. The intercultural dimension of Skokov's work consists of the mix of historically loaded elements of the Russian tradition with pop art and with themes which are clearly bound to the specifics of living in Berlin. Briefly put, he uses techniques of the Orthodox icon painters to portray the contemporary urban environment. Skokov started painting icons in 1991 after working as a graphic and shop window designer (in 1988 his shop window design of the Melodia music shop earned him a prize from the Leningrad City Council); he paints mainly on simple wooden surfaces such as wardrobe boards and doors and in small formats (see, for example <<http://www.berlinhaus.ru/de/berlin-moscow/culture.html>>). For my purposes here, I discuss briefly two of his paintings, *Der Warteraum II* (1999) and *Game Boy Spieler* (1998), as these represent the Berlin series of the artist. *Der Warteraum II* (acrylic on wood, gold leaf, 77x85 cm) depicts the queue in the employment office, as if it were a Biblical apocalypse. The plastic features of an icon are maintained, both in the human figures and in the setting. Following the traditional rules, even if the scene is happening in an interior, the people are placed outside; the entrance and exit of the office are seen in the background. All faces are staring to the top, where, substituting the eye of God and surrounded by logos of the *Arbeitsamt* (employment office), is the display with the number of the next person in the queue. The humorous attempt of the painter is clear: high culture, established by historical and religious values and surrounded by a sacral aura is deconstructed by the use of contemporary urban "icons," logos, and everyday situations. Nonetheless, the subject dealt with in the icon is typical of the German capital: the employment office is filled to capacity; since reunification Berlin is straddled with an enormous unemployment rate (as is all of the former East Germany). At the same time, there is also an ironic meaning, specific to Russian immigrants: many of them have the chance to work only through special programs of the employment office (Kaminer himself at the beginning of the 1990s had to visit the office several times, to obtain jobs as an immigrant from the former Soviet Union). *Game Boy Spieler* (acrylic on wood, gold leaf, 21.5x29.5 cm) is a more conventional icon, representing a full frontal figure, in the way Jesus and saints are normally portrayed. In the hands of the boy is a videogame console, in his shirt pocket a large container of fast-food beverage, both symbols of contemporary, globalized urban lifestyle. The background shows the electronic circuits of the videogame. Again the intermingling of high and low culture is clear, similar to the one between Russian heritage and elements belonging to the Western urban world, recognizable also in Berlin. Other Skokov icons present prominent German or Russian politicians or even reprisals of famous pop art masterpieces (Andy Warhol's Campbell soup can), always keen on stylistic faithfulness to religious art on one hand and on the humorous, nearly comical effect on the other, in portraying contemporary urbanity.

The *Verheimatung* (established as in a home) of Russian artists in Berlin has led to the creation of an original intercultural production and at the same time has contributed enormously to the canonisation of the "image" of the city and of some of its areas around the world. Kaminer and Hantke are recognized today as initiators of the Prenzlauer Berg intellectual scene and their visibility in national newspapers and other media has contributed to the normalisation of much of the eastern immigration and to the spread of an intercultural understanding of Berlin. The results of the present study suggest at least three levels of intercultural practice in Berlin: 1) a socio-spatial practice of interculturality: the Prenzlauer Berg district, and more generally the whole of Berlin, gave the discussed artists the chance to find their "own apartment" to pursue a career and to create places and infrastructures to perform and to "invent" intercultural work. The inherited richness of the cultural cityscape offered itself up for exploration, interaction and comparison to the home country. The particular social and spatial dimensions of Berlin are the *sine qua non* conditions for the artists' production. On the other hand, these artists gave a personal commitment to Prenzlauer Berg, both as gentrifiers and as promoters of the district's social life, which, in turn, became basic to its survival. Kaminer in particular brought the district to national and international attention; 2) there is a biographical level of interculturality in place: the artists discussed immigrated to Berlin for different reasons, but with an open mind and the capacity to interact with the place and its people. Migration to Berlin increased and guided their professional expectations and their artistic careers; and 3) the content of intercultural production, namely the texts and paintings show an

intense and determined use of interculturalism: the Russian components, supported by stylistic and thematic references, are always mixed with Berlin's urbanity. German as a language or, in the case of Skokov, German icons and logos are used as a means of artistic expression, but at the same time also as instruments to affirm his existence as a minority member of German society. Thematically, the references to visas, employment offices, and citizenship applications relate to real and personal situations. Of importance is also that the portrayal of de facto Russian and/or foreign artists in the texts of Kaminer and Hantke promote other intercultural work. Christo and Jeanne-Claude's wrapping temporarily "liberated" the Reichstag of the burden of history and made it a piece of art, belonging to everyone, to its haters and admirers, thus to a wide audience. In the same way the work of many intercultural or bicultural artists of today's Berlin, when confronted with an urban framework, tend to create new and positive ways to "read" the city as a social and spatial entity.

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Author's profile: Giacomo Bottà is working as a postdoctoral fellow with the Urban Studies Network at the Department of Social Policy, University of Helsinki. His dissertation is entitled *"Ich steh" auf Berlin! City, Individual, and Text in Berlin Prose of the 1990s* and his doctorate was awarded from the Libera Università di Lingue e Comunicazione in 2003. Bottà is particularly interested in the representations of popular culture in European cities in general, and Helsinki, Berlin, and Manchester in particular. His recent publications include the article "All the Way from Berlin to Helsinki: Three Modes of Urban Representation in Literature" in *RTN: UrbEurope Working Paper Series 2* (2006). E-mail: <[giacomo.botta@helsinki.fi](mailto:giacomo.botta@helsinki.fi)>.