

Interview: Reclaim Your City

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interviewed by Eva-Maria Ciesla and Hannah Strothmann

Eva-Maria Ciesla, Hannah Strothmann | *How would you describe your collective work and intervention in urban space? Where do you see the interaction between art, architecture, and urban society in your practices?*

Reclaim Your City | Reclaim Your City is a network and archive at the intersection of left-wing urban politics and art in public space, founded in 2003. It grew out of two online platforms on graffiti and urban art in Berlin (*reclaimyourcity.net* and *ueberdose.de*) and the Reclaim Your City exhibition series, which has brought artists and activists from these fields together since 2009. Reclaim Your City is not a fixed group, but a loose association of collectives and individuals who accompany urban political debates in constantly changing constellations using the means of art and culture. In Berlin alone, the Reclaim Your City exhibition series has resulted in numerous collective façade paintings, including for the former squat Brunnenstrasse 183 (»Wir bleiben alle« [We will all remain]) in support of the trans-feminist housing project Liebigstrasse 34, against the eviction of Köpi-Wagenplatz (»Hands Off Our Homes«). But also large-format wall slogans at central locations in the city (»Zwangsräumung verhindern« [Prevent evictions], »Kiez statt Kies« [Neighborhood Instead of Gravel (an untranslatable German pun)]) and many more, and countless spontaneous to well-planned smaller works.

Where do you see the potential of working as a collective to intervene in urban environments and in political and economic forces that shape contemporary cities? To what extent does working as a collective shape and influence your practice in particular?

Almost all of our interventions have no or open collective authorship. On the one hand, this allows for collaboration with other potential allies, such as residents, neighborhood initiatives, or political groups. On the other hand, the works should speak for themselves, inscribe themselves in the city and its history, and be taken up by others. We want to counteract isolation in a neoliberal society with a collective vision. For us, artistic work, networking, research archiving, and intervention are inseparable. The aim is to make debates about the right to the city visible for everyone in public space. We do this, for example, through images, maps, or temporary installations in places but also through the process of painting or mapping. Talking to others, thinking together, supporting each other, learning from each other. And connecting with each other.

Can you tell us about some of the results of your interventions?

The murals and slogans are clearly inscribed in the cityscape. They illustrate the debate about privatization and displacement and are symbols of the counterculture anchored here, appearing incidentally but regularly in the news, in newspaper and television reports, but also in documentaries about Berlin, feature films, and music video clips. The mural »Zwangsräumungen verhindern« [Prevent evictions] near Gesundbrunnen, for example, has become a symbolic image frequently used in newspaper articles on this topic. We are always pleased to see that urban political initiatives use our images for their own political work, such as for advertising demonstrations on posters. Sometimes artworks helped draw attention to places. Kreuzberg's Cuvrybrache was first marked by a mural reading »Reclaim Your City« and later by a huge mural by the artist Blu. The construction of a wooden event space and open-air bar, and an »anti-eviction festival« in the summer of 2012 marked the beginning of a self-managed hut village on the same site. Up to two hundred people lived there at times until the eviction. Today, however, despite vehement protests against gentrification, the site is home to the high-priced Cuvry Campus, which also houses the online delivery service *Liefertando*.



1.

Töte den Investor in dir [Kill the investor in you], Oranienstraße/
Manteuffelstraße. Collaboration between Pappsatt and Plakatief groups, May
2015. © Reclaim Your City.

The publication of the online map »Berlin Besetzt« [Squatted Berlin] caused a huge media response because it reminded people that hundreds of non-commercial cultural spaces and collective housing projects were won through the squatting movements of the 1980s and after the fall of the Berlin Wall, many of which still exist today and are run by cooperatives and thus permanently removed from the rental market. The squats have left a lasting mark on Berlin and made social utopias tangible. Making this history accessible contributed to bringing action in the form of expropriations and occupations into the political present.

Unfortunately, we have often found that while we have made places known and upgraded them through murals and self-organized public events, our work has ultimately been used for commercial purposes. At the Reclaim Your City Congress 2015 at Mensch Meier in Berlin, we discussed, with several hundred participants, our role in gentrification processes and involvement with artistic and urban policy initiatives, and how we can find ways to avoid being appropriated.

What role do architectural knowledge, mapping techniques, and design play in your practice and interventions?

It is important for us to combine art, culture, urban space and architecture and to question social power relations. Art shows us possibilities and gives us scope for action. We want to visualize them, make them tangible and negotiable. For example, we want to create, at least temporarily, spaces by occupation actions where people can meet on an equal footing, exchange ideas, and live culture beyond the logic of the market.

Maps are another important tool for us to show alternative perspectives on urban space, but also to gather knowledge in collective processes, such as about »Aufwertung, Verdrängung und Widerstand in Kreuzberg 36« (2014), about community gardens and urban agriculture (2013). Online projects such as »Berlin besetzt – Illustrierte Karte zu Hausbesetzungen in Berlin« (2017) were preceded by years of research work in trusting cooperation with scene archives such as the Papertiger-Archiv and the Umbruch-Bildarchiv.



2.

Mural for the Köpi-Wagenplatz in spring 2021 – a space for mobile homes in Berlin which at the time was threatened with eviction. © Reclaim Your City.



3.

Painting intervention at building near the subway station Boddinstraße in Berlin-Neukölln, Spring 2014. © 1UP/Reclaim Your City.

As cities are increasingly built up, spatial gaps are filled, places are commodified, and formerly »abandoned« spaces have become a rarity – do you see potential for building alternative cities today?

It was interesting to observe that since the first lockdown during the coronavirus pandemic, much more has happened in Berlin. For example, never before in Berlin's history were so many painted S-Bahn and U-Bahn trains running through the city as during the first lockdown. People were able to use their time off work during the lockdown to go painting in deserted streets, but also to explore new places. We know of some newly discovered areas even in the supposedly largely developed city center. Since the end of the pandemic, illegal parties have been taking place in empty industrial halls but now, far outside the city center, in highway underpasses or abandoned industrial buildings in districts such as Charlottenburg, Dahlem, or Marzahn, which previously were hardly the focus of subcultural groups. Some of the artists in our circle have now moved to the surrounding areas because they have more opportunities to work on their art projects and live their lives there because rents are cheaper and because some of them can now earn money online, and stay in touch with others. Meanwhile, more Right to the City activists can be found at hacker conventions like the annual Chaos Communication Congress. The themes overlap in the fight for free communication and non-commercial public spaces, and in the playful use of technology and found architecture, whether digital or analog.

While graffiti was an art, a practice, and a tool to politically engage with Berlin in the early 2000s, where do you see the tactics and techniques of urban protest today? Is graffiti still a form of protest for you? What has changed? What is new?

The role of graffiti is ambivalent. On the one hand, there is an ever-growing illegal scene, but on the other, it has become part of pop culture and, at least in Berlin, causes comparatively little fuss. Real-estate companies, once the natural enemy of graffiti artists, are now trying to get in touch with the scene, because they have understood that a colorfully painted building can be a good marketing tool. For example, there was »The Haus« an urban art exhibition in a vacant building near Kurfürstendamm, with the declared goal of drawing attention to the property in order to multiply its value. The Pandion company repeated this concept in Kreuzberg (»The



4.

The Cuvry-Brache, a vast wasteland and anarchic space in Berlin-Kreuzberg in July 2012, evicted in 2014. It became known for its mural by blu.

© Reclaim Your City.



5.

Overnight painted mural that is expressing strong emotions at the Cuvry wasteland, protesting against eviction plans, June 2015. © Berlin Kidz.

Shelf») and elsewhere, but this time met with protest from the »Kunstblock and beyond« initiative.

Two weeks before the referendum, »Deutsche Wohnen & Co. enteignen« [Expropriate Deutsche Wohnen & Co.] in September 2021, the real-estate company Deutsche Wohnen organized a mural festival. Artists, outraged by this obvious socialwashing, covered all the murals with paint the night before the opening. Sure, graffiti is part of the cityscape and we enjoy it. But if it wants to keep its subversive character, we should think about what visual language is used where. We must not give in to the advertising industry or city marketing, and we must find new ways to articulate protest. About ten years ago, fire extinguishers filled with paint were discovered by the graffiti scene as a new tool for painting, and these wild and oversized letterings have now been integrated into the cityscape. Since around 2022, the technique has been used by climate activists who spray paint large sections of government buildings, monuments such as the Brandenburg Gate, luxury hotels, and even airplanes in the middle of the day to ensure that the climate catastrophe remains in the public consciousness. In the broader graffiti culture, we observe a refreshing tendency to break with old, supposed design rules. To paint more situationally, freely, and abstractly, instead of fighting for attention and recognition with one's own pictures, especially for one's own graffiti name. We want art in public spaces, but most of all art FOR public spaces, where everyone can meet and participate on an equal footing. We want to draw, build, occupy, and mark these spaces. On all levels, with all means, the city for all.

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