



February 4, 2000

Leisure & Arts

Post-Wall Club Scene Hits New Barriers

By ED WARD

Berlin

A couple of Fridays ago, Gordon Monahan noticed a police car parked in front of the club he helps run in an old garage at Schlegelstrasse 26/27, part of an industrial complex that once housed Thomas Edison's only non-American light-bulb factory. Inside the club, the DJ was spinning easy-listening music, and the usual gaggle of patrons milled around, admiring the astonishing interior or lining up for a drink. After some time, the two policemen entered the club and served the managers with a noise complaint. "They'd been parked outside for 20 minutes," Mr. Monahan said the other day, "trying to figure out where to go. Then they saw someone enter and they followed him."

The bad news was that it was Bauhutte Gemutlichkeit's third warning. The fourth would result in the seizure of all of its sound equipment and a hefty fine. It's a problem that has become a fact of life for Berlin's club scene, as the formerly deserted spaces in up-and-coming neighborhoods fill in with new development and the recent arrivals who have followed the government up from Bonn discover that the contemporary arts in Berlin don't



necessarily sit quietly in museums.

Bauhütte Gemutlichkeit is no ordinary club, even by Berlin standards. It is run by Mr. Monahan and his wife, Laura Kikauka, Canadian artists who have been here since 1992, and is largely a showcase for Ms. Kikauka's utterly mind-boggling work, in which she transforms rooms into clutters of kitsch. It's the couple's third club, and is known to all as Schmalzwald, after their previous one. Ms. Kikauka is there most nights, flamboyantly dressed, gluegun in hand, making art while Mr. Monahan plays a cheesy organ with rhythm machine on stage, accompanying singers and the occasional theremin player. On some occasions they are joined by "performance chef" Gordon W., another Canadian, who whips up Indian or Thai food.

The noise complaints started this summer, when particularly fine weather inspired the creation of an outdoor beer garden in front of the club. Gordon W. cooked, Tiki decorations appeared, hula records were played, and people had a good time. Too good, it seemed, for one of their neighbors, a 34-year-old lawyer who called the cops. The problem is, he's still calling, even though the garden's closed and other tenants in the building weren't even aware of the club's existence.

But this isn't a story about one irascible young man vs. a bunch of crazy artists. Ever since the federal government decided to move back to this city, real-estate speculation has gone nuts. The previous owner of the Edison factory complex had a vision for it that would include culture (a now-closed gallery and the Berlin Baroque Orchestra's rehearsal space), media (a television-production company), restaurants, offices and residences. He managed to renovate one of the buildings before he noticed something about the "new Berlin": Things simply weren't moving very fast. So late last year he sold the property to two brothers from Schleswig-Holstein, who, it appears, may have a different, more lucrative vision for it, with stepped-up gentrification of the property as a key factor. They've made no secret of wanting to install a high-end restaurant in the club's space, although it will cost nearly half a million dollars just to make it habitable for such a business, which will then have to attract enough customers to stay afloat.

The Edison factory, you see, isn't centrally located. It's north of the hopping gallery scene on Auguststrasse and the bar-and-restaurant scene on Oranienburger Strasse; it's on a side street; and it's in a courtyard off of that street. The only thing that attracts people to Schlegelstrasse these days is the chance to sip cocktails amid the riot of Laura Kikauka's art. A self-confessed "collectaholic," Ms. Kikauka soon after she moved here discovered dumpsters filled with the castoffs of the East German past and, with another artist obsessed with obsolete technology, opened the Glowing Pickle, her first art-bar project. This led to Spatverkauf, named for the after-hours shops once legal in East Berlin, where they actually sold some of the items she'd collected, and thence to the first Schmalzwald.

"It's such a paradox," says John "J.J." Jones, an American vocalist who performs weekly at the club. "People want to live around culture. Culture is one of the things that attracts people to this area of Berlin, and yet they also want to live their quiet, orderly lives, and sometimes the culture makes that difficult."

This makes Bauhütte Gemutlichkeit a potential member of a long list of spaces and clubs that made post-Wall Berlin a magnet for edgy culture yet have also been shut down, including E-Werk, the legendary dance club that became a techno temple in the early '90s, and the WMF club. And these are just the legal places: There are still numerous clubs and art spaces behind locked doors or in obscure locations operating with members-only rules. As a virtually bankrupt city strives to keep both its reputation and its credit line afloat, the culture/commerce nexus will remain a flashpoint.

As of last weekend, the landlords had served the Schmalzwald crew with eviction papers, but had also accepted its January rent, ensuring it at least three more months at the location. The artists' plight has attracted media attention in a number of national outlets, which are using it as a stick to beat Berlin for its provincialism. And the angry tenant has offered to sublet his apartment to anyone who wants it. If you're interested, you can also find a rather unique interior decorator Friday and Saturday nights in the nearby windowless building with the sign on the door that says Schmalzwald.

-- From *The Wall Street Journal Europe* Feb. 4, 2000