Between Strange and Familiar: Urban Change in Berlin

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Abstract

The post-Cold War adage, that the German capital is “poor, but sexy”, has beckoned in a new age of consumerism. In the same breath, and in light of multifarious crises across the Global South, a sizeable population of émigrés continue arriving to Berlin, the site of their ‘estrangement’. Simultaneously, and as Berlin is rapidly transforming into the ‘silicon valley of Europe’, urban change is making the city less habitable. At this crossroads, one is starkly reminded that Berlin’s urban fabric is increasingly contingent on these crises *elsewhere*. Within this context, how can we readdress urban change in the city? In this semi-personal essay, I argue that, when the city is treated as a ‘heterotopia’, there remains no monopoly on the claim to its past and future. As the city’s future is mapped out, we are able to engage with the different political meanings and experiences attached to the city.

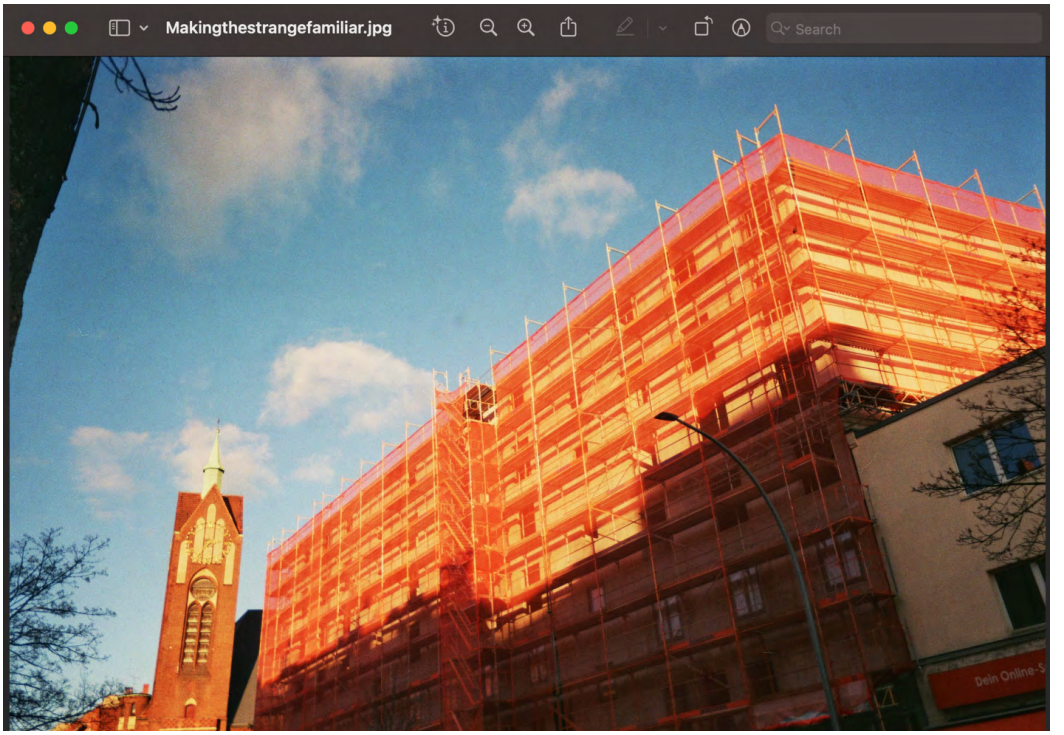

Figure 1: *Makingthestrangefamiliar.jpg, 2021, Moabit, Berlin* (photograph by the author).

Introduction

Berlin is a city of multitude. Historically, it has been refuge for Germans and foreigners alike, instilling the belief that claim to this city can be easily made. For the city's Gastarbeiter ("Guest" Workers), exiles and political émigrés, becoming a "Berliner" was conditioned by the realpolitik of the post-War era.[1] Since the end of the Cold War, the adage, that the German capital is "poor, but sexy", has beckoned in an age of state-sanctioned, neoliberal consumerism. In the same breath, and in light of multifarious urban crises across the Global South, a sizeable population of émigrés continue arriving to Berlin, fleeing political repression, urban warfare, socio-economic collapse and climate change. Throughout the past tumultuous decade, one is starkly reminded that Berlin's urban fabric is increasingly contingent on these crises *elsewhere*.

Back home in downtown Cairo, not glamorous and not shabby, there is a bar called *Lotus Bar*. On the rooftop floor of a mediocre hotel, the bar became a place of solace amidst the changing socio-political landscape of the city. After leaving Cairo, and searching for similar solace in Berlin, it became clear that this city, largely decimated during WWII, had few elevated terraces. In Kreuzberg, however, there is one cafe-bar, elevated on a thin terrace, overlooking the Kottbusser Tor metro station, called *Cafe Kotti*. This particular place, one of the only elevated spaces afforded to me here, accentuates in the most ambivalent way possible, a longing for the

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familiar back home, and a lack in Berlin. As I enter my fifth year here, I often wander to *Cafe Kotti*, desperate for a release from the city down below, as it shape-shifts in front of my very eyes.

For the émigrés trying to make home anew, Berlin is a space of both the strange and the familiar: a site of estrangement. Simultaneously, as Berlin is rapidly transforming into the 'silicon valley of Europe', urban change is making the city more hostile, and less habitable for its residents — Germans and émigrés alike. Within this context, how can seeing 'Berlin as a heterotopia' assist in readdressing urban change in the city? In this semi-personal essay, I argue that, when the city is treated as a "heterotopia", there remains no monopoly on the claim to a city's past and future. As the city's future is mapped out, we are able to engage with and incorporate the different political meanings and experiences attached to the city.

The City as Heterotopia

Michel Foucault's concept of the "heterotopia" is borrowed from medicine, wherein it describes tissue that appears in the body where *it should not* and adapts to the body's ecosystem as it grows. Giving the concept a spatial trait, Foucault explains that a heterotopic space, "is like a ship *par excellence";* in constant motion, elements are gained and lost, redefining the space's essence. (Foucault, 1970). Despite the ship's constant motion, traces of its contents, passengers and travel trajectory remain part and parcel of the heterotopic space. In urban terms, a city's history remains embedded in its fabric, even as the city changes.

For decades, the Berlin Wall prickled through the city's urban fabric as a vehicle of heterotopia, creating two contiguous cities. During this time, the city adapted to the presence of the concrete and barbed wire on both sides of the wall. After its fall, there was a calculated attempt to reunite the divided capital by forging a collective national identity. One scandalous manifestation of this was the destruction of the former Palace of the Republic (whose "Volkskammer" carried sentimental memories for east Berliners) and its reconstruction as the *Humboldt Forum*.[2] In what some Berliners see as a political erasure of the east, a tension appeared in the urban narrative of the newly unified capital. Despite spatial reconfiguration and urban development, the lingering past of the city contests its contemporary narrative. Although ephemeral at times, and in the absence of the Berlin Wall, the city retains this tension, rooted in its political history.

Decades after its toppling, one can still trace the Berlin Wall simply by looking at a transport map. It remains visible *physically* as "real space" dedicated to this past, and, simultaneously, present *mentally* as "ideal space"

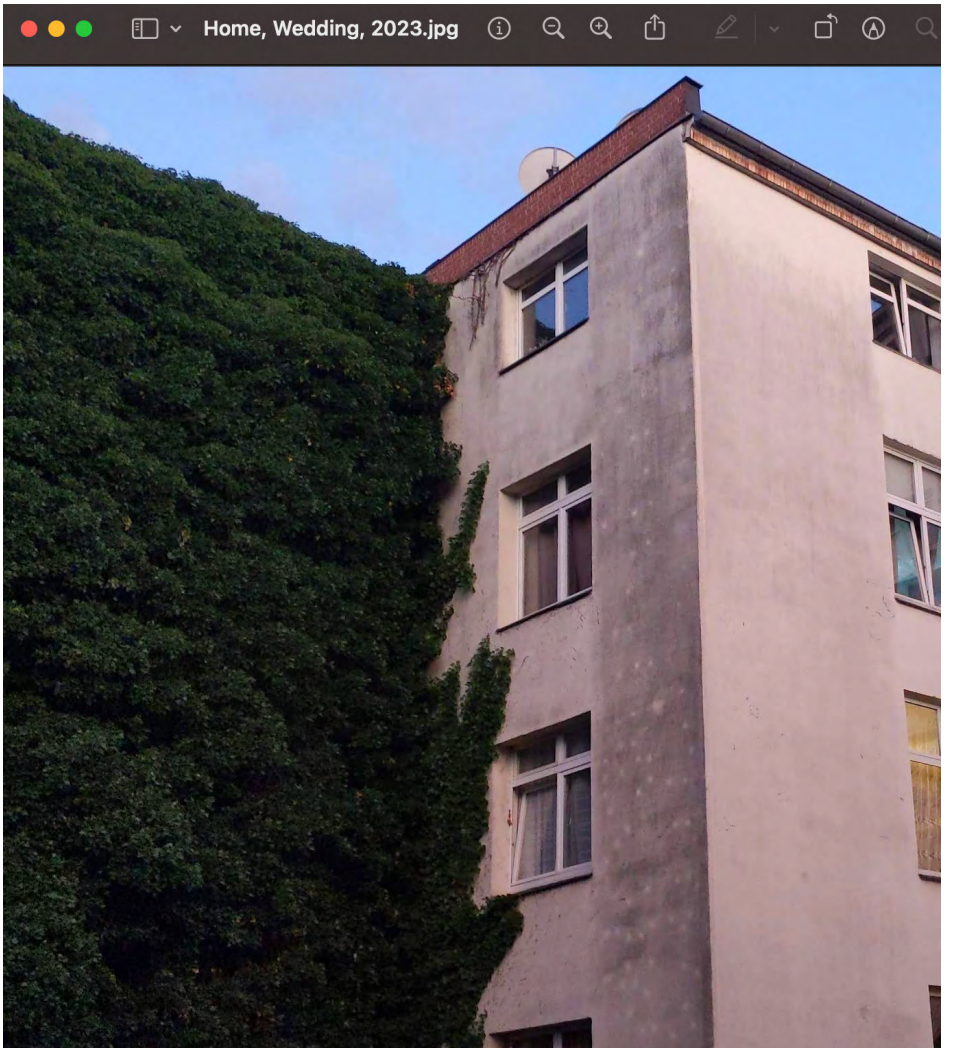

Figure 2: *Home, nirgendwo, 2023, Wedding, Berlin* (photograph by the author).

made void of the same past. (Lefebvre, 1992). This is demonstrated respectively at the former checkpoint at Bösebrücke on Bornholmer Straße, and at Mauerpark, where graffiti artists actively turn remnants of the wall, which bisected the "Wall Park", into a celebrated tourist attraction.[3] Although one can effortlessly criss-cross the former borders of the city today, Berlin remains ridden with reminders of this past. In cities that have witnessed conflict, political history has a tangible afterlife — both physically and in memory. If we establish that the past is not contained within the past itself, how does this implicate a city's relationship with urban change?

A 'Sense of Place'

Through Berlin's long winters, more often than not, I remain home, surrounded by old memories brought in checked luggage and trinkets recently accumulated. Between strangeness and familiarity, my habitual

space contains the city I left behind, and that which I currently inhabit. In an attempt to make Berlin home, I unwillingly find myself in an odd state: neither fully here, nor there any longer; neither in-transit nor arrived. Even if one can return home, it has become clear that the city I left behind exists only in memory. In this way, my relationship with Berlin becomes a constant negotiation: To be present, and leave the past to memory, or to remain in this in-between. As James Baldwin reminds us in *Giovanni's Room*, neither can one ever return home *as it once was*, nor ever recreate it elsewhere. And as Tomasz Jędrowski, in *Swimming in the Dark,* explains, that as one continues to believe their departure is temporary, the familiar becomes alien and "home ceases being home" (Jędrowski, 228). As I remain in this in-between, Berlin has come to embody my estrangement.

Arguably, a city's past and spatial dimensions give it a distinct "sense of place". As Doreen Massey explains, this 'sense' does not describe an amalgamation of urban elements, like a place's climate, geography or aesthetic, but how urban residents *feel* (my emphasis) about this amalgamation (Massey, 145). In many ways, we embody this sense of place in how we perceive, experience and inhabit a city. Massey takes this concept further in the "locality", where the sense of a place does not demarcate the city from the inside, but opens it up to geographies elsewhere, through movement and circulation. There are, therefore, endless configurations of a place's 'sense', meaning a place cannot simply be seen as "neutral" (Massey, 146).

When one witnesses turmoil in the city — a revolutionary uprising, freak-like natural disaster or socio-economic crisis — these histories are carried elsewhere as memories. Like ghosts, one becomes haunted by these memories that often guide their experience of a new "locality". Through a memory-transfusion of sorts, cities of the strange, become infused with what cannot be forgotten, from cities which were once familiar. And as pleasant memories are mixed with those that are less so, this new place becomes a landmine, a roulette of sorts, of both nostalgic and traumatic experiences. With this, demarcation becomes impossible. Berlin becomes a locality that carries a multifarious "sense[s] of place": a byproduct of an interaction, and an opening up to moments in time that are long gone, and places that are elsewhere (Massey, 148). Through these openings, I am transported to Cairo, a place that carries memories of my youth, and a time when everything was possible, while perched atop a café-bar in Berlin.

Space-Time Warp

A 'score' in musicology is a series of lines that form an orchestra. Similarly, in the city, the body also moves to a well-kept score, conducted by muscle

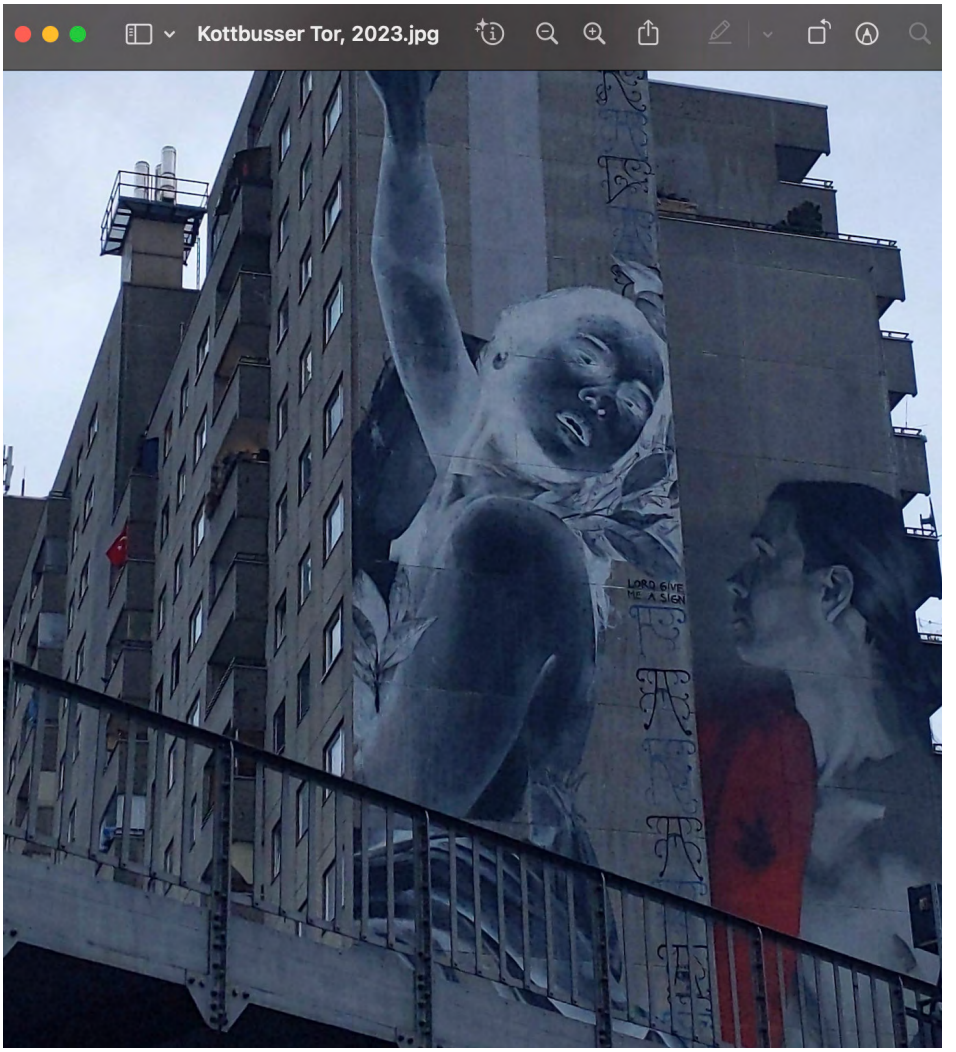

Figure 3: *Skalitzer Straße, 2023, Kreuzberg, Berlin* (photograph by the author).

memory. When I moved to Berlin, I slowly developed a new sense of direction, memorizing metro stations and learning backroads. However, this was not etched onto a *tabula rasa* of sorts; rather, intermixed with older scores. To both noticeable and minor degrees, the ways we inhabit a city are learned with the ways we once lived elsewhere. While this superimposition of old and new may seem coincidental, it is rather circumstantial, based on how the built urban environment can 'activate' the body's score. These memories are involuntary — oftentimes frightening or unwanted — reminders of a place that we no longer know, in a city we are not able to become fully acquainted with. However, as I continue to inhabit — and not *exist* — in these seemingly parallel space-times, how do I navigate change taking place in Berlin?

In her 2017 conversation with David Hornsby and Jane Clark, the late poet Etel Adnan spoke about how crisis can 'split' time. "[W]hen it comes to

Figure 4: *Lockdown, 2021, Wedding-Mitte, Berlin* (photograph by the author).

a crisis somewhere back home, or near home, then you realize that you lead a double life," she says. "You can carry on with your everyday routines, but something is hurting you that is totally without interest for other people." (Beshara Magazine, 2017). When experiencing time as 'split', there seems to be both an acceleration and deceleration of time, wherein one fails to understand 'how much time has passed' and material change that has occurred both 'here' and 'there'.

On this notion of 'split time', philosopher and Arabist Amro Ali sees Berlin as a potential "political laboratory" for its exiled population (Ali, 2019). Given Berlin's history, he believes the city can foster transnational solidarity among a cohesive 'exile body'. Notwithstanding a seeming romanticization of political reality, this is a philosophical inquiry worth questioning. While Berlin's history grants it qualities to become a 'laboratory' as he calls it, this presupposes a shared sense of place. If we all harbor different political realities, here and 'at home', a coherent exile body surely cannot

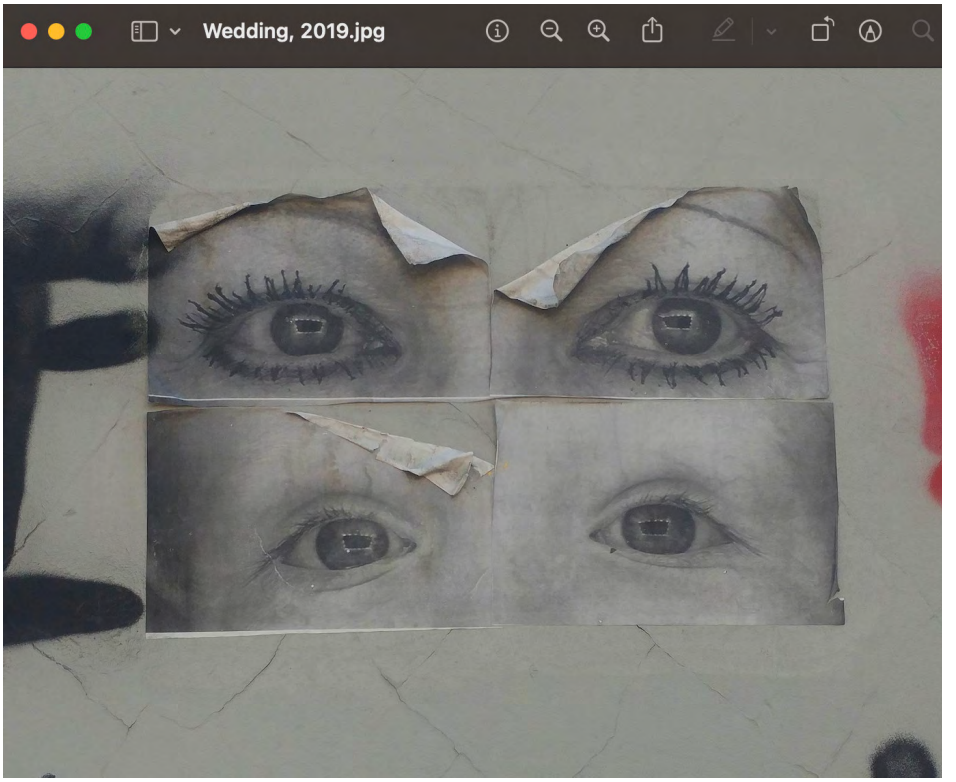

Figure 5: *Untitled, 2019, Wedding, Berlin* (photograph by the author).

experience a city as one and the same. In thinking about what political experiments can come out of Berlin, we must recognize the complexities of class, gender, race and migration that can both help and hinder how we can organize politically in the city.

In many ways, Berlin "as a political laboratory" becomes both symptom and cause of the splitting of space and time, wherein one can simultaneously think about other places while living in Berlin, rooting and uprooting oneself in the process. As Adnan explained, as time passes 'here', there is a distorted experience of time 'there', where one is not. That is to say, time is experienced from a distance. And thus, as the rate of urban change in Berlin picks up speed, this time-splitting is exacerbated, all the while accelerating the rate of evictions, gentrification and restriction of access to public space — both literally and financially.

Through challenging conditions, émigrés old-and-new have established urban economies, networks of community and emulated comfort in the urban landscape as it once was. As Berlin becomes less of a home and more of a securitized playground for consumption of so-called 'culture' and bodies, the city's urban space is becoming increasingly reclusive. While urban change is inevitable, the forms of this change — who it caters to, and excludes — is contingent and not absolute.

Figure 6: *Sweet Home Storefront, 2022, Kreuzberg, Berlin* (photograph by the author).

Conclusion

In February 2023, the Berlin police opened a highly contested station beside *Cafe Kotti*, the same cafe-bar I opened this essay with. Last summer, I attended community theatre pieces on that terrace. This spring, mostly arrestees of Color were seen walking up the steps to the terrace and led into the police station. The inauguration of this police station followed a decades-old narrative of danger rooted in Kottbusser Tor, tainted by discourses of race and class. Here, the opening of the police station is an allegory that describes a Berlin that is becoming more hostile, as the city surrenders to change from the top-down.

Viewing the city as a heterotopia gives us multitude, rather than hegemony. This reading of the city highlights the thin, but stark difference between inclusion and constituency. While the allure of Berlin presupposes the former, the latter is becoming increasingly conditional. Recent calls in Berlin have been made to allow its non-citizen residents to vote in

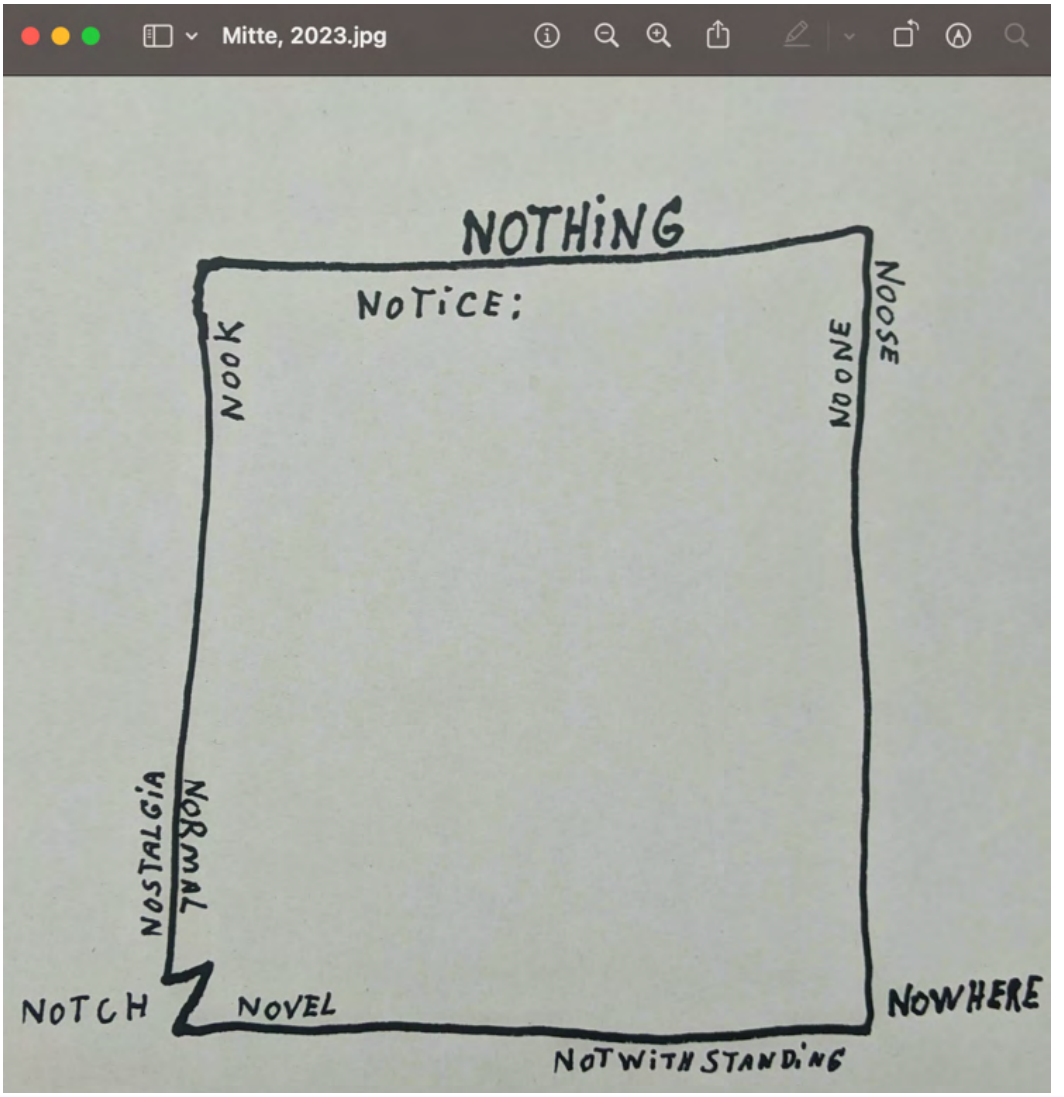

Figure 7: *Photo from Martin Wong's Exhibition "Malicious Mischief" at KW, 2023, Mitte, Berlin* (photograph by the author).

municipal elections based on residence and not citizenship. Similarly, arts and cultural funding is being funneled into projects focusing on living in "exile" in Berlin. Both instances challenge the complexity of what it means to be a 'citizen' and a 'resident' of the city. In this light, a tacit notion makes itself present: every Berliner has a *right to the city* (Lefebvre, 1992). In a Lefebvreian sense, the city is for all its residents.

Berlin is not an exceptional case in heterotopic cities; in fact, nothing makes Berlin a heterotopia *par excellence*. However, the potential afforded to Berlin by its own political history allows us to *read* the city, as a palimpsest, through which we can understand how its residents experience and associate with the built urban environment. In readdressing urban change, taking on the heterotopic lens and treating the city as a 'third space' forces a different conversation on memorialization practices, gentrification and

housing in a way that speaks to its residents, all of whom have made, or are still making, this city their home. It is, thus, rather difficult to see the police station on *Cafe Kotti*'s terrace as anything less than urban securitization, and an intentional reconfiguration of urban space, where the state is all-seeing, and we are forced to forfeit the little comfort found in the Berlin of yesterday. Indeed, the absolute truth of any city is that urban change is inevitable. But as the past lingers around us, not all from today's city must be lost to tomorrow's.

Figure 8: *How is it coming along?, 2022, Kreuzberg, Berlin* (photograph by the author).

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Endnotes

[1] The term *émigrés* is used here to refer exclusively to individuals who have left their cities in the Global South due to social, political and economic crisis. It is commonly used in works on the condition of 'exile', political connotations of which are carried over in its usage herein. In previous works, I have used "migrants" and "immigrants", which are both charged terms within a contemporary European discourse on migration. Considering the politics of movement versus migration, here, "émigrés" does not refer to so-called "expatriates", from mostly Western and European countries, who 'move' freely for personal or professional reasons: that is, as a result of the legal framework of the Schengen Zone within the European Union.

[2] The controversy surrounding the Humboldt Forum museum, which was inaugurated in July 2021, is multifaceted. Calls made to boycott the museum involve a proposal to hoist a cross above the building, reminiscent of the structure's history as the Berlin Palace, built as a palace of the Hohenzollern Family of Prussia. During the Cold War, the structure housed the German Democratic Republic's (GDR) parliament, which included the recreational centre, the "Volkskammer". After reunification, the building was written off as contaminated with asbestos and hastily demolished in 2005. Today, the museum houses the Ethnological Museum of Berlin and the Museum of Asian Art, which contain a number of objects that were looted by German colonial forces in Africa and Asia, considered the crux of the call to boycott the Humboldt Forum.

[3] The name of the bridge "Bösebrücke" is one of several former checkpoints that marked the border crossings of East- and West-Berlin. It was also the first border crossing that was 'accidentally' opened, thus marking the beginning of the end of the Cold War in 1989. Located today on Bornholmer Straße, the Bösebrücke was named after Friedrich Wilhelm Böse, a German who resisted the Nazi Regime. Interestingly, "Böse", the namesake of the anti-Nazi fighter, and the bridge's namesake, also translates to "Evil".