

## My Story: The East Side Gallery

### Establishment of the East Side Gallery

In the early summer of 1990, I received a phone call from Christine Maclean, the woman responsible for organising a group of artists to paint on the previously inaccessible East side of the Berlin Wall. Between Mühlens Strasse and the River Spree, it divided the areas of Friedrichshain in East Berlin and Kreuzberg in the West. I thought that it was a privilege to be invited to take part in something that involved such a profound symbol, and to have the opportunity to express my feelings about unification through my painting.

This site became known as the East Side Gallery, a 1.3km stretch of the Berlin Wall covered with just over a hundred paintings by 118 artists from 21 different countries. It is said to be the world's largest open-air gallery.

The project involved international artists from East and West European countries: some professionals, hobby artists and Berliners. Some of these artists were already well known graffiti artists who had made their marks on the West side of the Wall. Like the artists themselves, the paintings reflected a very wide variety of personal, social and political responses.



How the well-known painting of the Trabi (Trabant) car came about is especially interesting. During the first day as I was preparing the surface of my painting, a young East German girl, Birgit Kinder, jauntily drove her little Trabi car up onto the pavement in front of me, asserting that she would make a painting too. I told her she needed permission and sent her along to the organisers.

However, there were no segments left, so I offered her some of the segments allocated to me. Copying the image directly from her car log-book, Birgit quickly depicted the Trabi bursting through the Wall from West to East then added the slogan *Test the Best!* A play on buzz words at the time *Test the West*. For East Germans, it evokes nostalgia going back to the time when people had to wait approximately eleven years after passing their driving test to own a beloved little 'car of the people'. Along with the *Brezhnev Honecker Kiss* by the Russian artist Dmitri Vladimirovich Vrubel, *Test the Best* became one of the most iconic images of the East Side Gallery.



As we painted, the Wall was being dismantled around us. Some segments were sold or gifted to various countries around the world, while the visiting public pecked out a little bit of history to take home.

After finishing my painting, *Joint Venture*, I still had one small part of my allocated wall space free. I suggested to a Scottish artist friend who was painting nearby that we could perhaps have a 'joint venture' (the title of my main painting) and make a painting on this additional part together. I chose the subject of hands stretching upwards as for me this suggests striving towards a goal and reminds me of the peaceful demonstrations in the late nineties in East Berlin and Leipzig that led to the Fall of the Wall. I had used a part of the motif in my painting 09.11.89 which I'd made on the night the Wall fell.

In 1990 Berlin was inundated with international visitors keen to be there during that momentous euphoric time and our action at the East Side Gallery attracted huge crowds. While we painted, the world's press interviewed us while tourists snapped photos from their kerb crawling busses.

### **Development of the East Side Gallery**

Few of the artists expected our paintings to last more than a several months, but there was such interest that in 1991 it was designated a listed memorial by the city of Berlin. The

East Side Gallery gained a particular dynamic that waxed and waned in response to circumstances. Various plans for the area resulted in controversy about the existence of this longest remaining stretch of the Wall: it appeared regularly in the press and became a political bone of contention.

Before the 10th anniversary of the Fall of the Wall I was approached by Potsdam University with a request and we gave permission for a group of conservation students supervised by their professor to conserve the painting entitled *Hands*.

In commemoration of the anniversary, the Honorary Consul in Glasgow presented an exhibition of my work in Scotland. However, in Berlin I was amazed at how little interest there was in the 10th anniversary. It seems at that time that memories were still too raw and tangible as the two parts of the city continued to struggle to reintegrate.



*Before renovation – with graffiti and effects of pollution*

While sections of the East Side Gallery were renovated through private sponsorship, tellingly over the years the remainder became run down. Left to the elements it became corroded from the effects of pollution and 'Wall Peckers'.

Further and personally, there has been an on-going dialogue over the years between me and the anonymous, usually young, people who have written their 'I was here' messages on my Wall painting. In one sense, this shows that the Wall retains links to contemporary

history and culture. Nevertheless, I overpainted the graffiti several times. As time passed other groups and often another generation added their part to this continuing dialogue.

## Renovation of the East Side Gallery

In 2009 for the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Wall, the Berlin Senate funded the structural renovation of the East Side Gallery at a cost of almost €3 million. The project was undertaken by STERN a society renowned in the state of Berlin for cautious urban renewal of protected memorials. Most of the artists were brought back from all over the world to renovate their paintings. It was an amazing reunion after twenty years.



*During renovation*



*After renovation*

Although some artists disagreed with the renovation and opted not to participate, I was pleased to be part of the project and to rejuvenate *Joint Venture*. This time the artists were fenced off from possible public intrusion, although we were constantly photographed through the barriers.

Assistants supported the work, we were provided with scaffolding instead of ladders and the professional set up was in direct contrast to the make-do-and-mend situation in 1990 when we painted the East Side Gallery the first time.

Due to the extent of erosion, some of the segments of the Wall needed structural repair while the majority of the paintings required whole or part resurfacing. However, Herr



Helmut Schermeyer the architect in charge of the project suggested that because the painting *Hands* had previously been singled out for renovation by a group of supervised conservation students, it could once again be treated and conserved. A professional company of conservators was brought in to do the job. The team spent three weeks, initially examining, then painstakingly renovating the surface, centimetre by centimetre, while the whole process was documented. It was a revelation once again to see the original colours. This unique treatment during the East Side Gallery restorations means that *Hands* is in effect the only original painting. The result gives a depth to the surface of the painting that witnesses the authenticity of time passing, sandwiched as it was between the other smoothly repainted murals.

Particularly interesting for me during the 2009 renovation was the reaction of most former East Germans who it seemed really 'didn't want to know' during the 10th anniversary in 1999. The attitude towards the East Side Gallery at that time, its ambiguous presence tainted by its history, was in direct contrast to the interest during the 20th anniversary.

At the time, I had a notable conversation with Franzisca Bruehns, one of the conservationists of the mural *Hands*. She said that as a young girl in East Berlin she could see the Wall, a dominating part of her life, from her bedroom window. She told me that now her mother was very proud of the fact that she, Franzisca, was involved in the restoration of the longest remaining part of the Wall. Perhaps the brightly repainted murals symbolically functioned like a plaster over a wound, in some ways mitigating the residual power and memory of the Wall's original function.

Once again, the world's press focussed on the Wall. While the artists were working, regular film teams conducted interviews and leading politicians with entourage in tow used the occasion to trail along the stretch of paintings, pausing for a few words and photos with the artists.



*Me discussing my painting with German President Herr Frank-Walter Steinmeier*

The restored stretch of the Wall was one of Berlin's major events for the celebrations 20 years after the fall of the Wall. The Mayor of Berlin, Klaus Wowereit, conducted the unveiling of the renovated East Side Gallery and the official opening was a grand affair.

## **The symbolism of the East Side Gallery**

Although the practical function of the Wall now belongs to the past, the East Side Gallery stands as witness to a particular historical time in Germany. It is said that the Wall remained for years in the minds of the majority of the former GDR citizens. I find this generally true of people of my generation but, naturally, it applies less to young people. It may be tempting, but I do not believe it is possible or healthy for a nation simply to scratch out parts of the past that do not fit any more. The Wall at the East Side Gallery may sometimes be an uncomfortable reminder but it cannot be ignored. The Wall does not just belong to the history of Germany. It should be kept and sustained not only for those who died or were imprisoned in trying to cross the divide into the West, but also for its symbolic importance, as the catalyst for the subsequent dramatic political changes in world order that have taken place since 1989.

The East Side Gallery has accompanied my life now for over 30 years – and has manifested itself in the creation of a large-scale gallery version entitled 'Re-Statement'.



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*Postscript: In the writing above, I have described how the East Side Gallery was established and developed. Elsewhere on this website, I write about the origins of the Berlin Wall and my painting 'Joint Venture' on the East Side Gallery and the gallery version 'Re-Statement'.*