

# ICWA

## LETTERS

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*Jill Winder is a Donors' Fellow of the Institute studying post-reunification Germany through the work and attitudes of its artists.*

## Laura Horelli: Berlin as One Artist's Muse

By Jill Winder

JULY 1, 2006

BERLIN—I presume that when most people think of an artist's studio, they imagine a rather classic image: a disheveled visionary clutching a paintbrush in a light-filled, paint splattered loft in 1920s Paris or New York's Soho circa 1970. And while it's true that Berlin boasts its fair share of paint-splattered lofts, the traditional artist's studio is by no means the primary workspace of many contemporary artists. For a good number of artists who conduct intensive research, use documentary materials and produce video and photographic work, access to a computer with high-speed Internet and editing programs is all they need.

So when I arranged a "studio visit" with Laura Horelli, a young Finnish artist (b. 1976) working in Berlin this spring, I wasn't surprised that she wanted to meet at her apartment—but I was surprised to see that she lives on one of the strangest streets in the city. Then again, it made perfect sense: Much of Horelli's work is about Berlin itself—its history, architecture and the gentrification processes that are evident everywhere, and she takes a good dose of inspiration from her surroundings.



*Finish artist Laura Horelli*

Karl-Marx-Allee looks like it had been transported piece-by-piece from Moscow and plopped down in the center of Berlin. It's located in the Berlin districts of Mitte and Friedrichshain, running from Alexanderplatz to the Frankfurter Tor. Called "Stalinallee" between 1949 and 1961, the wide boulevard is over a mile long and framed with socialist apartment buildings constructed in the pompous style that most architects ironically call "Stalinist neo-classicism." Built by the East German government during the 1950s, enthusiasts coined it "the first Socialist street in Germany." The apartments along Karl-Marx-Allee were considered luxurious by GDR standards because they included amenities like elevators and featured details like parquet floors. It quickly became a prestigious address. After 1989, the entire street gained official "monument" status and the buildings were painstakingly restored at great expense. The façades of the buildings even include decorative elements fashioned from costly Meissen porcelain.

Despite the impressiveness of Karl-Marx-Allee's expansive layout and unusual architecture, it can feel less like a main thoroughfare than a ghost town. People are seldom seen on the streets; in fact the most reliable source of activity is automobile traffic along the boulevard. The apartment buildings all have commercial spaces on the ground floor. Before 1989, these spaces held booming businesses like grocery stores, dry cleaners, shoe repair shops, fruit stands and the like. Today, a good number of the storefronts are empty and plastered with "for rent" signs that look a decade old. The ground floor of Horelli's building is home to a number of vacant shops and one dusty place selling "work clothes," a GDR-fixture that has somehow stayed in business. Despite this rather abandoned-feel-



*(Above) One of the “Stalinist neoclassical” apartment blocks on Karl-Marx-Allee.  
 (Below) The impressive and imposing view down Karl-Marx-Allee looking towards Mitte, with the famous Berlin TV tower visible at the end of the boulevard.*



ing atmosphere, most of the apartments along Karl-Marx-Allee are occupied and many of the residents have lived there for decades. Horelli creates her artworks in this unusual neighborhood. With intelligence and subtlety, she documents the changing city and its relationship to her present and past.

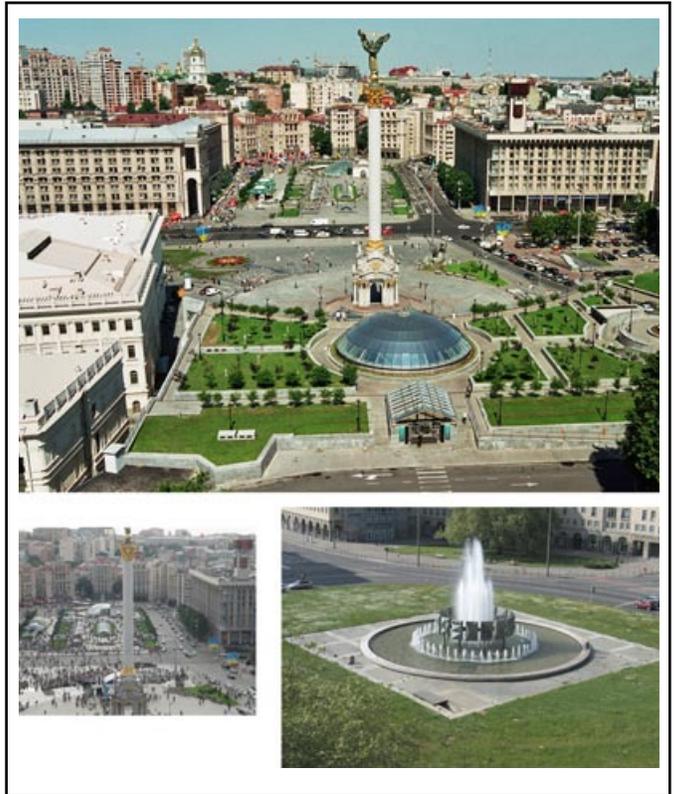
Laura Horelli was born in Helsinki in 1976. She studied art at the famous art academy in Frankfurt, the Städelschule, from 1997-2002, and since then has lived in Berlin. As a conceptual artist, she explores topics such

as globalization, urbanization, gender and history in a diverse range of media including installation work, video, film and photography. One important aspect of Horelli’s artistic practice is that extensive research and documentation (based on materials from the Internet, tabloids, newspapers, magazines, books and other sources) make up the basis of her works. In our studio visit, Laura and I sat down in her living/work room, at a large desk filled with papers, a phone, two computers and other equipment. Before we began, I wandered over to a big window and took in the striking view she has of Strausberger Platz and Karl-Marx-Allee.

Because of the research Horelli conducts during the creative process, her work seems to fit into the trend of using documentary materials in contemporary art (including the use of everything from found footage, archival photographs, interviews, and other research materials), which has increased over the last ten years. This shift is partly a result of the dominance of the mass media and the emergence of the Internet as a tool for research. Though many artists and people working in the cultural field are convinced that contemporary art produces a kind of “knowledge” of its own, the mainstream public remains skeptical, turning instead to more conventional sources such as books, newspapers, websites and the like. The use of documentary sources in art is a kind of middle road; artists make creative work based (ostensibly) on

documented “fact,” revealing their sources and presenting the material in new ways. Horelli’s use of information and evidence in her work subverts this artistic use of documentary somewhat, because her works rely as much on personal history, anecdotes, stories and impressions as on the extensive research she does in preparation for each project. By including these personal, “unscientific” elements, Horelli both takes advantage of and critiques contemporary art’s reliance on documentary methods.

One example of how Horelli mixes these two kinds



Laura Horelli, *Karl-Marx-Allee and Kreshchatik*, 2005, details from an installation work comprised of photographs and a text. Courtesy: the artist

of information is evident in *Karl-Marx-Allee and Kreshchatik* (2005). Here, the artist compares two famous boulevards filled with Stalinist architecture—Karl-Marx-Allee in Berlin where she lives, and Kreshchatik in Kiev. The installation is comprised of photographs Horelli took in each place, and these documents expose the similarities and differences of the two locations in terms of aesthetics, politics, the role of the streets in their respective cities and the historical context. Yet she does not use historical materials or archival photos to compare the boulevards; the only background material in the installation

is a short text written by the artist. Instead of writing an essay about the architecture of the two boulevards, with facts and figures about when they were built, in what style, for what purpose and so on, the text is essentially a stream-of-consciousness travelogue, in which Horelli shares her impressions of Kreshchatik and talks about her apartment on Karl-Marx-Allee in Berlin.

The everyday, the political and historical intertwine in the text. At one point, we read the fragment “Showcase, stage, catwalk, people’s recreation zone;” a few paragraphs later, the artist casually mentions Kreshchatik’s role in Ukraine’s recent political upheaval: “During the ‘orange revolution’ a camp of tents was erected along the street to house protestors from all over the country. Some lived there for two months. Now what’s visible to me from the ‘revolution’ are mainly the T-shirts and scarves sold by street vendors.” Elsewhere in the text, Horelli points to the country’s post-Soviet economic troubles with a short note about a family member: “My uncle acts as a consultant between Finnish investors and Ukrainian or Russian companies. One Ukrainian company he was working with has a beautiful head office on the Kreshchatik, but its factory outside of Kiev only produced five tractors during the last year.”



Laura Horelli, *Karl-Marx-Allee and Kreshchatik*, 2005, installation view. Courtesy: the artist

When writing about her apartment in Berlin, Horelli manages to allude to East

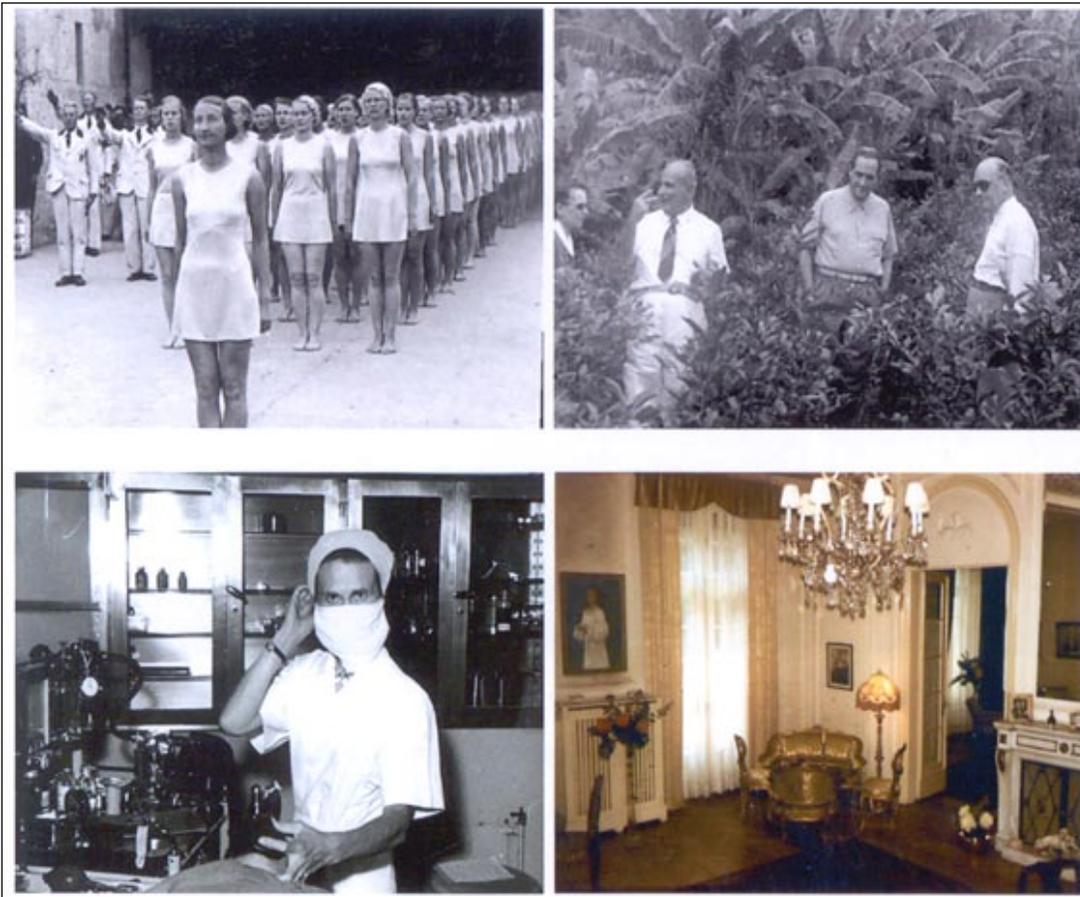
Germany, the way Karl-Marx-Allee was meant to symbolize socialist progress, *and* to the radical economic and political impact of German reunification by writing simply: "When I look out of the kitchen window I often see someone taking a photo, usually of the fountain or the statue of Karl Marx. Many like to be photographed next to the statue. The fountain attracts a wide range of activities: fashion shoots, wedding pictures, music videos, dance performances, art actions," or "...many shop spaces are unused, as they are expensive and there's not enough customer traffic. The property owners however make money from renting apartments; the street is well inhabited and the rents are high. He asks how much rent I pay. I tell him 767 EUR for 80 m<sup>2</sup> and he thinks it is a lot... The street was ignored in the last years of the DDR. There were stories about tiles falling off the buildings." Horelli's use of personal observations to reflect on major political, social and economic changes is both a subtle way of making these points, and a subversion of traditional "documentary" material, in which experts, facts and figures tell the story.

Horelli's most powerful works are inspired by her life in Berlin as well as by her own personal and family history. Yet when I asked if the city provides her with a way of looking into her own past, Horelli was skeptical. "I don't think that every foreign artist living in Berlin must deal with the country's history and their own history. I think everyone is inspired by the context they find

themselves in, and for me that context is Berlin." Nevertheless, in my favorite work by Horelli, *You Go Where You're Sent* (2003), the artist explores the life of her grandmother, an idea that emerged when she learned that her grandmother had been in Nazi Germany in 1936. In speaking about the film, Horelli said, "The video *You Go Where You're Sent* had its starting point in my grandmother taking part in the Berlin Olympics in 1936 as a gymnast. I became interested in her participation in the Olympics while living in Berlin and trying to relate to the place's complicated history. One of my motivations was to look at how Finland, in contrast to the image I was brought up with, was/is not a neutral country, but had ties to both Nazi German and the Soviet Union."

Horelli's grandmother lived a fascinating life. She was born in 1916, and in 1936 she traveled with her Finnish dance troupe to Berlin, where the group had been invited to perform at the Olympics. She trained as a doctor, and practiced in Finland during WW II.

Then she married a diplomat and started a second career as a diplomat's wife, entertaining dignitaries and moving with her husband to a new place every four years. The foreign service took the couple all over the world: to Rio de Janeiro (1946-50), New York and Washington (1950-1954), Cologne (1964-68) and Bucharest (1968-1972). Of her grandmother, Horelli said, "I was interested in the ways that my grandmother represent-



Laura Horelli, *You Go Where You're Sent*, 2003, video stills. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Barbara Weiss



Laura Horelli, *media spree*, 2004-ongoing, details from an installation comprised of photographs, brochures, texts, table and chairs. Courtesy: the artist

graphs that correspond to the time period the two are discussing. Especially striking is the oddly distant and objective tone of the question-and-answer “conversation” between grandmother and granddaughter, totally lacking in warmth or intimacy. Horelli’s grandmother recounts her experiences, the way in which she was both a wife and a public servant, her attempts to continue practicing medicine, and the interesting experiences she had: parties in Rio, dinners in the White House and cocktails with Ceaucescu. Horelli often narrates her films in a bored, monotone voice, poking fun at the supposedly objective and neutral way that journalists and researchers conduct interviews. This is another way in which Horelli critiques the documentary format so popular in contemporary art today.



The speedy pace of gentrification in some parts of Berlin provided the raw material for another of Horelli’s works, called *media spree*. She began the project in 2004 and her work on it is ongoing. *media spree* focuses on the former industrial area on the Spree River in Kreuzberg/Friedrichshain. From 1961 to 1989, the Berlin Wall ran along the Spree River on the Friedrichshain side, dividing West and East Berlin. By 1989, it was basically a no-man’s land, empty save decaying warehouses, docks and other industrial buildings. Over the course of the last five or six years, this area has been developed into a location for media, music and production companies, such as Universal and MTV.<sup>1</sup>

ed the nation; as a Finnish gymnast and dancer in Nazi Germany and later as a diplomat’s spouse serving the governments of postwar Finland. She tried to achieve a balance in her different obligations; her duties as a diplomat’s spouse were a priority, but where she could, she practiced her profession as a physician.”

In *You Go Where You’re Sent*, Horelli talks with her grandmother about her life by looking at photographs from her grandparents’ family album. We do not see the artist and her grandmother in the film, however. Their conversation is “narrated” with still images of photo-

Horelli became interested in the changes in this neighborhood and contacted companies located in the area, requesting to photograph the river view from their corporate offices. Many companies refused the artist access, citing everything from security issues to disinterest in art. Horelli also pretended to be interested in buying an apartment and visited a number of flats for sale in the area in order to gain access to some riverfront properties and find out just how expensive the area’s real estate was becoming. When shown in a gallery, the *media spree* installation is made up of the photographs she managed to take in various locations along the Spree River, as well as documents Horelli col-

<sup>1</sup> This is the same part of town where Los Angeles gallery owner Javier Peres opened the Berlin location of this gallery, Peres Projects, which I wrote about in JW-16.

lected about property values, brochures from real estate firms, and other materials.

Without relying on facts and figures from urban planning experts, Horelli manages to present a picture of how development in this part of Berlin has taken over a formerly unused area, and, through marketing strategies and investment, made it an extremely desirable location. Again, Horelli focuses on her own backyard in order to explore the shifts occurring in Berlin, taking on an active role as a researcher and documenter of a changing city.

In another work, created with anthropologist Kathrin Wildner, Horelli delves into the struggles of eastern Germany's shrinking cities and aging population. Horelli and Wildner focused their research on a neighborhood of *plattenbauten* (socialist housing projects) called Wolfen Nord, located in a former industrial area in eastern Germany. Wolfen Nord, which is slated for demolition, is home to a large population of pensioners. Working-age residents typically travel each week to the west, where they take low-paying temporary jobs to earn a living. The work is made up of two videos, projected simultaneously in the exhibition space.

The first, called "*Ich bleibe hier, hier kenne ich mich aus*" (I'm staying here—I know my way around), concentrates on the elderly residents of Wolfen Nord and shows images of daily life (old ladies hanging laundry out to dry, afternoon coffee and cake sessions, older gentlemen smoking on benches outside or playing cards). The second video is called "*Bevor ich stempeln gehe, fahre ich lieber raus*" (I'd rather commute than go on welfare). This video is filmed from within a commuter's car as he travels on the highway to and from work outside

Wolfen Nord. The soundtrack that accompanies both videos is comprised of interviews that Horelli and Wildner conducted with three pensioners and five commuters. These interviews, however, are interrupted by quotations referring to the changes happening in the region from city employees, city planners, newspapers, social science studies and statistics. In this way, Horelli once again merges personal stories with objective "facts" from experts about the diminishing and aging population of eastern Germany. Even more interesting, as one watches the videos it becomes obvious that some of what is said in the interviews contradicts the information in the quotations, therefore exposing how differently various parties and stakeholders view the economic, social and political challenges facing them.

Laura Horelli's diverse body of work is impressive in her use of various media as well as in the range of subject matter that interests her. She is one of the exceptional young artists working in Berlin today, one who keenly observes the city's history, political transformations and the economic changes that have altered the urban landscape here since reunification. Perhaps because she addresses these topics through her own personal history, experiences and perspective, Horelli manages to take on these complex subjects in a way that feels curious and open, not didactic and opinionated. Her works reflect a refreshing humility and lack of desire to proclaim the "truth" of a topic, or to take sides in whatever controversy is at hand. Instead, Horelli does her homework and then gives a voice to individuals, people who have a particular perspective and point of view. Horelli is a gifted storyteller who makes viewers aware of complicated issues. Seen through her inquisitive eye and heard in a variety of voices, the seismic shifts in modern Germany are explored in a unique and thoughtful way. □



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A lecturer in Philosophy, Asian Religions and Philosophy at Rutgers, Iona College and the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Rick Connerney is spending two years as a Phillips Talbot Fellow studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture and politics in India, once described by former U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith as "a functioning anarchy." Rick has a B.A. and an M.A. in religion from Wheaton College and the University of Hawaii, respectively.

#### **Kay Dilday (October 2005-2007) • FRANCE/MOROCCO**

An editor for the *New York Times'* Op-Ed page for the past five years, Kay holds an M.A. in Comparative International Politics and Theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the *Universiteit van Amsterdam* in the Netherlands and the *Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne*. She has traveled in and written from Haiti and began her journalistic life as city-council reporter for Somerville This Week, in Somerville, MA.

#### **Nicholas Schmidle (October 2005-2007) • PAKISTAN**

Nicholas is a freelance writer interested in the intersection of culture, religion and politics in Asia. He is spending two years in Pakistan writing on issues of ethnic, sectarian, and national identity. Previously, he has reported from Central Asia and Iran, and his work has been published in the *Washington Post*, the *Weekly Standard*, *Foreign Policy*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and others. Nick received an M.A. in International Affairs - Regional Studies from American University in December 2005. He lives with his wife, Rikki.

#### **Andrew J. Tabler (February 2005 - 2007) • SYRIA/LEBANON**

Andrew has lived, studied and worked in the Middle East since a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Fellowship enabled him to begin Arabic-language studies and work toward a Master's degree at the American University in Cairo in 1994. Following the Master's, he held editorships with the *Middle East Times* and *Cairo Times* before moving to Turkey, Lebanon and Syria and working as a Senior Editor with the Oxford Business Group and a correspondent for the *Economist Intelligence Unit*. His two-year ICWA fellowship bases him in Beirut and Damascus, where he will report on Lebanese affairs and Syrian reform.

#### **Jill Winder (July 2004 - 2006) • GERMANY**

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

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