

Freedom Rocks: The Everyday Life of the Berlin Wall

Artists: Blake Fitzpatrick & Vid Ingelevics

Freedom Rocks: The Everyday Life of the Berlin Wall is a project that investigates post-Cold War history, the souvenir economy of Cold War relics, and the commemoration of an event as a moment in which historical legacies crystallize into highly symbolic forms of public display, shared feeling, and remembrance. This project posits the idea of the Berlin Wall as a mobile ruin. It involves the research and documentation of the movement of large sections and small fragments of the Wall from Berlin to North America post-1989 as well as the consideration of Wall sections currently in storage or still standing in Berlin itself. Charting the Wall as a mobile ruin reveals an object with shifting symbolic value and power. No longer activated by Cold War associations of fear and dread, the examination of the everyday life of the Berlin Wall in a contemporary post-Cold War context refutes the idea that the Wall's history ended in 1989. In this research and creation project, the afterlife of the Berlin Wall will be investigated over three consecutive years. Each year of research will correspond approximately to a distinct form of public commemoration in the remembrance of the Berlin Wall as a signifier of the Cold War. The researchers will respond to these forms of commemoration with the production of new artistic work as discussed in this proposal.

Conceptual framework

Twenty or more years after its fall, with little left to mark its cut through the city, the Berlin Wall remains a powerful and provocative symbol. In the rush of everyday life, Berliners may take no note of where it stood, but this does not mean it has passed quietly into history. In many respects, for Germans, differences between East and West remain accentuated by the long division. Some even look back on their separation with a sense of nostalgia. Often described as “Mauer im Kopf” (“the Wall in the head”), this notion stems from the political, economic, and social difficulties of reunification, as well as the stubbornness of cultural symbols embedded not only in the German consciousness, but indeed, a global consciousness. Our contention is that the globalization of the Berlin Wall as a culturally recognized symbol of freedom or oppression is made material by the far flung dispersal of its fragments, large and small. Time will likely erode such perceptions, but these differences make remembering the Wall through a single narrative problematic. In this light, the Berlin Wall can contest memory and myth, and challenge simple notions about identities, ideology, and human nature.

Commemoration is even more difficult when considering that, despite its relative absence from Berlin streets, the Wall is a major tourist attraction. It simultaneously draws visitors for whom the Wall was generationally emblematic, as well as younger travelers who trace its path with curious disbelief that such a divide ever existed. Thinking about the Wall with the solemnity and complexity it deserves can be trying in the throng of tourists posing for photographs at Checkpoint Charlie, or getting souvenir passports stamped by entrepreneurial hawkers dressed as East German border guards. But remembering and commemorating the Wall's place in history is essential: not just for the sake of posterity, but as a way of questioning the commemorative structures of historical memory itself. Twenty years after its fall, many believe it is time to better commemorate the Berlin Wall as a memorial to those who endured it and as a cautionary tale for future generations. Considering its global resonance as a symbol of division it is imperative to remember that although the one in Berlin came down, many “walls” of the world still remain or have since been erected.

The fall of the Berlin Wall is often historicized in celebratory terms as the end of the Cold War. However, the after-life of its fragments has for the most part escaped public scrutiny. Because of its symbolic weight, the Wall didn't just disappear, but was dismantled, and pieces large and small were scattered, gifted and sold around the world transforming it into a "mobile ruin". Countless small shards of the Wall have been procured by "Cold War" tourists, and are still available today on the Internet and at Berlin gift shops near sites such as the notorious Checkpoint Charlie, usually accompanied by dubious "certificates of authenticity". Accordingly, the first component of our project, *Freedom Rocks*, primarily involves the locating of the now atomized and displaced fragments of the Wall in North America as a tracing of a Cold War trajectory, and the documentation of their present sites and histories through large format still photography and high-definition video. The second part of the project complements the first, and returns us to Berlin, and to a tourist industry with the (largely) absent Wall at its center. Taken together, our project, *The Everyday Life of the Berlin Wall* accumulates evidence of Cold-War relics often severed from the history to which they refer. Neglected and/or celebrated, the everyday life of the Berlin Wall is played out in highly visible commemorative sites, less visible day-to-day settings, as well as in many hidden and unmarked locations. These variations may be found in North America as well as in a reunified Berlin. Ultimately, our project attempts to metaphorically "rebuild the Wall" through photographic and video media as a post-Cold War nomadic and atomized monument severed from its base. The project asks where the Berlin Wall is now, and how its restless mobility, even within the city of its origin, has changed its meaning. How does the Wall both accommodate and yet have the potential to resist the process of commemoration?

Relation to previous work by the artists

Freedom Rocks is a long-term, collaborative project between Canadian artists Blake Fitzpatrick and Vid Ingelevics, that began in 2003. *Freedom Rocks* is a substantial component of the overarching project, *The Everyday Life of the Berlin Wall*, which focuses specifically on the displacement of the Wall to North American locations. The title is taken from the branding found on a bag of Berlin Wall souvenir pieces sold in Toronto in the early 1990s. The *Freedom Rocks* component of the overall project involves documenting the post-1989 displacement of the Berlin Wall (both large segments and small fragments) to North America in photography and video.

In North America, the most visible forms of the Wall are the "trophy" slabs - full top-to-bottom sections of the Wall often bearing original graffiti. It is our premise that these large slabs, typically exhibited in hyper-mediated locations such as presidential libraries, universities and museums are presented as icons of a kind of "petrified history". While often referred to as "memorials", their function is not to preserve or stimulate memory in a personal sense, but to fix in place a larger, usually triumphalist, historical narrative that remains remarkably consistent from site to site. Obscured at these memorial sites are the processes and motivations by which these Wall sections have come to be placed in these locations. The small, pocket-sized souvenir pieces, however, engage far more richly with the contingency of individual memory, almost always eliciting fascinating, quite personal stories related to the circumstances of their acquisition. In the testimonial video interviews that comprise part of *Freedom Rocks*, close-ups of the owner's hands are shown cradling a fragment of the Wall as one hears interviewees speaking about their pieces and the intertwining of their lives with Cold War history. The history of the Berlin Wall has thus, post-1989, become the *histories* of the Wall. It is in this context that the Wall becomes a most provocative presence, not only as a fragment of Cold War history but, more tellingly, as a figment of the post-Cold War imagination.

The project *Freedom Rocks* includes, to date, photographic and video documentation of large-scale segments of the Berlin Wall (trophy slabs) in Washington, DC, Los Angeles, CA (including

photographic and video works that have responded to the Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan Presidential Libraries in southern California), New York, NY, Montreal, Quebec, Truro, Nova Scotia, and Berlin, Germany. Regarding the smaller pieces, we have, through announcements on the German consulate website in Toronto and through word-of-mouth, located, interviewed and documented the individual pieces of over forty individuals in Toronto as well as the sites in which the full segments have been located. We have a growing list of people still waiting to be interviewed at this time.

Future activities

Our timeframe for completion of the project incorporates the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 2014. We are proposing to participate in the commemorative activities of the 25th anniversary as a way to generate first hand research/creation material for a symposium on the event structures of historical commemoration to take place in 2016.

Sites of interest to us for further exploration include displaced Berlin Wall sections located in Texas (including the George Bush Sr. Presidential Library), Redmond, Washington (there is a full section at Microsoft headquarters gifted by Daimler-Benz), Washington, DC (the recently-opened new location of the Newseum which has eight full sections of the Wall), Las Vegas (site of a large section of Wall located in the men's washroom of the Main Street Casino), New York (sections are to be reinstalled in the United Nations Headquarters-Sculpture Garden, and there are sections on Madison Avenue and in Battery City Park, near the site of Ground-Zero), and Los Angeles (the Wende Museum, a recently-opened museum of Cold War history). Of these sites, we have a particular interest in the George Bush Presidential Library and Museum in College Station, Texas, and the Wende Museum, Los Angeles where we would like to carry out a more extended program of archival research and photographic and video documentation.

As ours is a project that investigates the significance of Berlin Wall souvenirs to the many individuals who own them, it has become important for us to trace these memory objects back to their source and to identify the material and economic channels through which the material strata of Cold War memory has been quite literally 'manufactured'. An aspect of the commemorative focus of this project is to chart the Wall's movement throughout Berlin in both symbolic and commodity forms, and to participate in the commemorative activities that will be associated with the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Wall in November 2014. To this end, we have made excellent contacts with curators and souvenir retailers in Berlin who are interested in exhibiting aspects of this project during the anniversary celebrations.

Further information

For further information on the project see the website: www.freedomrocks.ca
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