

“A SUITCASE FULL OR ART”

Transnational Mobility among Berlin-Based Visual Artists from Finland

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This article examines the intra-European mobility of contemporary artists by scrutinizing the experiences of visual artists from Finland who have been living in Berlin for at least one year. Based on data that were gathered via ethnographic fieldwork including interviews with 15 artists, the paper sheds light on the role that economic and career factors, images and dreams, social networks, and the prospect of working in an inspirational urban context play in influencing the decisions of Finnish artists to move to Berlin. Further, and more significantly, this study illuminates the reasons that encourage Berlin-based Finnish artists to maintain a transnational lifestyle through which they produce a “transnational flow of creativity.”

Keywords: artists, Finland, Berlin, mobility, transnational

“Between you and me”

The video starts with flickering images of a snowy landscape in Finland that passes by as the train speeds through it. Suddenly the spectator is sitting in an aeroplane and witnessing the moment of take-off. Enigmatic music is playing in the background. The scenery we are leaving behind is still Finland’s snowy landscape, this time shot in black and white. The next black image dominates the screen for seconds, and in the darkness we hear a coarse female voice speaking in German and see English subtitles. The woman is reading a letter aloud: an artist is reflecting on the making and purpose of art, and brings to the fore the artist’s international mobility. The journey across national borders, which takes the viewer from Rovaniemi (Finland) via Berlin (Germany) to Venice

(Italy), is also the storyline that structures the video. In the next sequence, we hear the sound of the plane, and as it comes in to land we begin to see Berlin’s houses and streets on the screen. We are told that the person who wrote the letter has been living in Berlin for a year now. Then the reader of the letter says: “By the way, every other person is an artist around here [in Berlin], and I’m not sure that the city needs another one.” (Karila 2011)

The above account of the first three minutes of this video, which the Finnish-born Berlin-based artist Eemil Karila (b. 1978) authored and directed, serves as an adequate substitute for the typical arrival story through which ethnographers guide their readers on an imaginary journey to the field they have studied. The beginning of the video reflects the type of

journey contemporary artists from Finland, and I as a researcher, make in order to get from Finland to Berlin. Trains and planes play a central role in this particular intra-European form of mobility, which in most cases includes crossing the Baltic Sea. My aim in this article is to enhance understanding of the various factors that motivate visual artists from Finland to move to Berlin, and that encourage them to maintain a transnational way of being. Although it would have been interesting to scrutinize and contrast the experiences of international artists living in Berlin at large, I decided to focus only on examining the experience of artists from Finland. This enabled me to provide a thick contextualization of the gathered research material, considering the limited timeframe available for carrying out this research project. Nevertheless, this case study also offers novel insights concerning the intra-European mobility patterns and transnational practices of artists on a more general level. The research is part of a larger study in which I seek to shed light on why artists from Finland move to Berlin, how the experience of living there influences their work and how they and their art take part in the process of shaping the socio-cultural texture of the city and the images that are being attached to it.¹

Artists, Cities and Images

The video described at the beginning of this article refers to the high number of artists who are currently living in Berlin. The writer of the letter wonders whether the city needs yet another one. Indirectly, this comment could be seen as alluding to the image of Berlin as a hotspot that attracts numerous artists from within Germany and also from abroad, and thus shows how artists can become the object of a city's image (see Färber 2008: 284). Cities are linked to certain images, or to what Rob Shields would call place-images that emerge as a result of over-simplification, stereotyping and labelling (1991: 47), and collectively form a place-myth (ibid.: 61). Various players influence the creation of such images and help to circulate them on a global scale. The media and tourist guides, for instance, perform an important role in creating stories that are told "in" as well

as "of" places and thus help to shape the meanings that are attached to them. Artists, too, may play a pivotal role in the process through which place-myths are created (Urry 1995; see also Färber 2008: 284). Musicians, for instance, can help produce a sonic storyline that people attach to a specific place. With regard to Berlin, one only has to think of U2's famous album "Achtung Baby" (1991), or David Bowie's song "Heroes" (1977): both were recorded in Berlin, inspired by the city and the wall, as well as the months following its tearing down.

Images of cities and of entire nations travel by word of mouth when tourists and immigrants, for example, share with relatives and friends in their native lands their impressions and experiences of the places they have visited or in which they currently live. These kinds of orally transmitted place-myths may encourage tourists and other travellers to visit a particular place (Urry 1995: 194ff.; Salazar 2011: 577), or may function as triggers for future migration journeys (Sooudi 2011: 80; Salazar 2011: 586ff.; Benson 2012; Hirvi 2013: 53). Policy makers tend to be well aware of the inherent power in a city's image and may decide to use it for their own ends. With regard to Berlin the tendency in recent decades has been to promote it as a "creative city" (Novy 2013: 231; Lanz 2013). The interest in implementing such policies derives from a desire to make cities more liveable and vital, and thus to enhance their global competitiveness and economic wellbeing.

Such policies are to some extent motivated by studies such as that of Richard Florida (2002), which argue for a strong correlation between a city's attractiveness, creative mobile people, foreign investment and economic growth.² Artists are deemed to play a meaningful role in such a framework. They foster vitality within urban areas in decline through their artistic practices and their very presence (see Bianchini & Landry 1995: 47). Together with students, immigrants and gay people, artists are seen to produce in such neighbourhoods a bohemian, tolerant, liberal and culturally diverse atmosphere. Such kind of an urban milieu is, according to Florida's thesis (2002), attracting

other members of the mobile creative class, such as scientists, engineers, and designers, who are eager to consume and experience such kind of a setting. According to Florida's thesis (2002), foreign investors and high-tech industries eventually follow the creative class, which will lead to urban economic development.

In this line of thinking, creative people, but also creativity as such, are considered to be crucially important for urban growth, and they ought to help cities to stay competitive on a global scale. Creativity could be defined as the human capability to produce something new by moving beyond the things, thoughts and images that already exist (Reckwitz 2010: 3). Creative thoughts and actions do not emerge out of the blue, however, but evolve in a process that involves the generation of new ideas through the application, combination and rearranging of pre-existing knowledge (see Mumford et al. 2013: 250). Considered a prerequisite for progress and economic success, the ability to create something new is thus valued highly in contemporary societies and the economy.

Artists who have moved from Finland to Berlin thus appear to assume a significant role in the city, and seem to be – at least from the perspective of policy makers – people who are welcome. On the one hand, as artists and foreigners they possess the ability to induce change by bringing something new (cf. Hall 2000). On the other hand they may help to attract new visitors, including tourists and other creative mobile people, to visit or move to Berlin. On the concrete level they might set such processes in motion when inviting their artist friends to visit, or telling their colleagues in Finland that Germany's old and new capital is attractive, not least because of its thriving art scene and the cheap cost of living. The latter argument is often cited in newspaper articles (e.g., Reyes 2007; Baer 2012) and tourist guides (e.g., Lonely Planet 2012) as one of the main reasons why Berlin has become such a strong magnet for artists from different corners of the world. Yet, as this article demonstrates, a low cost of living is not the only explanation; other factors play a pivotal role in the process.

Transnationalism, Mobile Artists and the Art World

Ethnologists in Finland have long been interested in studying people who belong to a specific professional group (e.g., Snellman 1996; Koskinen-Koivisto 2013), and since the end of the 1980s they have increasingly been scrutinizing the life world of mobile people (e.g., Tuomi-Nikula 1989, 2013; Snellman 2003; Hirvi 2013; Lappi 2013). Given that my focus in this study is on mobile artists from Finland living in Berlin, I am combining the ethnographic study of a particular professional group with the study of mobile people. Artists have been highly mobile as a group for centuries, as various scholars remind us (Fuhrmeister, Kohle & Thielemans 2009b: 8; Lipphardt 2012: 113), but there has been little empirical research exploring migration among this group (Bennett 2010: 118). Most previous studies considering the international mobility of artists focus on those who travel from one country to another for short periods of time, and tend to examine the phenomenon from a historical perspective (Saarinen 2001; Waenerberg 2006; Fuhrmeister, Kohle & Thielemans 2009a; Glauser 2009; Harris 2012; Lipphardt 2012; Magkou 2012; Bil'ová 2013; Duester 2013; Koscielniak 2013). There are also some studies that focus on the experiences of contemporary artists (Wulff 1992a, 1992b; Dellbrügge & de Moll 2005; Harris 2006; Karttunen 2009; Wiklund 2012, 2013), but apart from a few exceptions (Fujita 2004; Bennett 2010; Sooudi 2011; Borén & Young 2013) there is a general lack of research that would systematically study and analyse the dynamics informing the mobility of artists, who have lived in another country for a prolonged period of time. The aim of this study is to help fill out this research gap, and to contribute empirical informed insights concerning the migration dynamics of creative people.

The artists I interviewed for this study are mobile artists, "mobile" being used and understood as an adjective referring to people who travel geographically from one place to another. They are also immigrants, if "immigrant" is defined as someone who has moved to another country and has settled down there. As the empirical data discussed in this article

shows, most Finnish artists moving to Berlin had no fixed ideas concerning the duration of their stay or their possible departure date. Some of them lived there for a year or two, whereas others stayed on for much longer, some for more than ten years. Decisions concerning whether to stay, to go back or to move on to another place were negotiated in the light of the changing conditions and the opportunities that arose in their lives. What seems to be common in the experiences of both mobile and immigrant artists is the voluntary nature of their movement. Further, the artists that I interviewed seemed to engage in practices and to maintain social relationships that transcended national borders. Thus, “they exhibit a ‘transnational way of being’” (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004: 1011). “Transnationalism” is useful as an analytical concept in that it covers networks as well as cultural, economic, political and religious practices that extend across national borders, resulting in the production of a fluid, transnational space (Glick Schiller, Basch & Blanc-Szanton 1992).

Transnational practices may also play a part in shaping the social field that makes up an art world, as I attempt to highlight in this study. The concept “art world” here refers to a socio-cultural sphere constituted of artists as well as people and institutions that play a role in terms of consuming, assessing, researching, funding, selling, buying or exhibiting art. The art world thus includes, in addition to artists, people such as art critics, curators, collectors, patrons, and gallery owners as well as the audiences that consume artworks and thus help to co-produce their meanings. Researchers and the kind of research presented in this article are also agents who participate in the process of shaping art worlds and the discourse that defines them. Major physical structures of the art world include galleries and museums, as well as fairs and festivals (Harris 2012: 153). An art world can be explored on a local, global or transnational level. Each one is marked by specific discourses, traditions and conventions, as well as power systems that make their mark in defining the worth of what the art world produces and determine who will find a place within it. (See Becker 1976: 703–705; Sperling 2011: 53–93; Harris 2012.)

Research Method and Data

The focus in my research is on visual artists who were born or received their education as artists in Finland, and who have lived in Berlin at one point in their career for a year or longer. The research material was gathered by means of ethnographic fieldwork undertaken between February 2013 and July 2014. To make myself familiar with the life world of artists I carried out participant observation in different sites that played a meaningful role in the lives of Finnish artists. I observed and participated in their everyday life in spaces such as exhibitions, as well as in their homes and studios in Finland and Berlin. Field notes and photographs helped me memorize and reflect on the impressions and insights that arose during the participant observation. I also used newspaper articles as well as online sources to collect additional information and to put the empirical data I had gathered into a larger context.

In addition, I conducted semi-structured interviews with visual artists in Finnish, which I recorded and later on transcribed and translated into English. The intention in the interviews was to gain a better insight into the daily experiences of Finnish artists and the meanings they attached to the city of Berlin. Complementing the data I gathered during my own interviews for this study I also analysed videotaped interviews that Maritta Mellais from the *Finnish National Gallery, Archive Collections* conducted with Finnish artists in Berlin in the summer of 2012. Her purpose was to document a particular moment in Finland’s art history. Mellais (2014), like others in Finland (Baer 2012; Finnish embassy 2010), noted that numerous Finnish artists chose Berlin as their new home at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is impossible to come up with exact numbers concerning how many Finnish artists have lived in Berlin, since *Statistics Finland* is not listing the professional group of Finnish emigrants. Based on my own calculations, there are at least 35 visual artists, including painters, sculptors, photographers, media artists and those working with multiple media, who have lived in Berlin for at least one year in the course of the twenty-first century. If taking the mean value of statistics available for the number of sculptors,

painters and related artists listed in Finland in the years 2000 to 2009, which is 4,374 (Statistics Finland 2014), it can thus be suggested that about 0,8% of this group have lived in Berlin for a prolonged period of time. Important to note is that this number excludes the great number of artists who annually spent a shorter period of time in Berlin in one of the residences available for them. The number also lacks curators, gallery owners, and other creative professionals from Finland living in Berlin, such as actors, dancers, musicians, choreographers, and writers.

This study is based on interviews with 15 artists (8 female, 7 male). The female artists who were interviewed were all born in the 1970s (4) or 1980s (3), with the exception of one who was born in the 1960s. The age span of the male artists was somewhat wider, distributed across generations: 1950s (1), 1960s (1), 1970s (2), 1980s (3). Of the 15 interviewees, 9 had studied at the *Finnish Academy of Fine Arts* in Helsinki. Many of them had also studied abroad for some time, for example in the UK, Sweden, Estonia and Germany. Two of them, both born in Finland, had never studied at a Finnish art school, but undertook all their studies abroad, one in Germany and the other in Sweden.

With the exception of 1 person who had moved to Berlin in 1988, the artists (= 14) interviewed for this study had arrived there in the course of the twenty-first century. At the time of the interviews, 3 of them had returned to Finland, and 1 research participant had moved to another European country. In other words, 11 artists in the sample were actually living on a more or less permanent basis in Berlin: one of them had been there for more than twenty years (male), two others for more than ten years (female) and the rest for about five years or less (3 female, 5 male). The areas in which they lived and worked included the districts of Kreuzberg, Lichtenberg, Moabit, Neukölln, Prenzlauer Berg and Schöneberg.

Diverging from the usual convention in current ethnographic studies to disguise the identity of the research informants by using pseudonyms, I decided to use the real names of the artists, with their permission. I also gave them the opportunity to read and comment on this article once more before

publishing it, and I would have concealed their real identity if they had asked me to do so. My decision to use real names was based on the assumption that as artists they are semi-public figures whose thoughts are of interest to art historians and the general public now and in the future.³

Multiple Motivating Factors

In this section I explore how and why artists from Finland come to live in Berlin for a prolonged period of time and to adopt the city as their urban atelier. Anyone familiar with the research on human migration and mobility are well aware that this seemingly simple question of why people voluntarily move to a particular place attracts various overlapping and intrinsically linked, multi-layered responses. Carr, Inkson and Thorn (2005: 389) point out, in their study of global talent flow, that people deciding whether and where to move take into consideration various factors linked to their economic, political, cultural, family and career circumstances (see also Salazar 2011: 586). However, as Carr and his colleagues (2005: 389–390) plausibly suggest, a dynamic combination of various issues tends to inform people's decisions to move to a particular place. This is also clear in the explanations the Finnish artists I studied gave of how they happened to be living in Berlin.

Economic and Career Factors

Painter Robert Lucander (b. 1962), who among the interviewed artists has been resident in Berlin for the longest time, moved there in 1988 to study at the *Hochschule der Künste* in West Berlin. He had tried a couple of times to get into Finnish art schools, but without success. He therefore decided to apply to art schools abroad, in Stockholm, Copenhagen and Berlin. He was especially interested in Germany and German art schools, which had a very good reputation at that time, as he explained. He also felt that German art was second in innovativeness only to art from America in those times. Hence he came to Berlin with a "suitcase full of his art work," as he said, to build up a portfolio and to receive feedback from local professors. Lucander managed to get into the

Hochschule der Künste, where he now works as a professor. In his case it could be argued that it was primarily the career factor that influenced his decision to leave Finland to gain an education in the profession of his dreams in Berlin, where he had the opportunity to do so. Lucander, like other artists such as the painter Janne Räisänen (b. 1971) who followed him two decades later, also found Germany attractive because of its art history and its standing in the global art world.

The reasons why the other interviewed Finnish artists who came to Berlin in the twenty-first century decided to stay for a shorter or longer period seemed to be somewhat more complex. One of the most commonly cited and also most obvious attractions for contemporary artists from Finland was “because Berlin is cheap” (see also Karttunen 2009: 169–170, 173). This argument applies in general to Berlin-based artists living on a grant from the Nordic countries (see Borén & Young 2013: 203, 206; Dellbrügge & de Moll 2005); shifting their place of residence to Germany’s capital makes their Nordic grant last longer than in their native countries where the cost of living is much higher.

Some of the artists gave me examples of how the fact that “Berlin is cheap” is reflected in their daily lives. The food is much cheaper, and the materials they need for producing their art works are less expensive than in Finland. In addition, Berlin’s relatively low rents enable many of them to rent an additional room or separate studio in which to do their work. In the case of artists, managing to maintain separate spaces for working and for living does not simply imply the luxury of being able to physically separate those two realms of life. What is more important is the effect on the kind of art works they are able to produce (Nippe 2011: 86ff.).

Sculptor Ida Koitila (b. 1983), who prefers to work with old materials rather than buying new ones, explained in the interview that she needed a studio (see the cover illustration) that was big enough to store all the junk (*romu*) that she collected to make her sculptures. She explained that it would be much harder and more expensive to find such a space in Helsinki than in Berlin, where she currently lives

and rents a studio for about 150 euros a month. It could thus be concluded that Berlin provides its resident artists with more space and better conditions for creating art (see also Glauser 2009: 133).

It also appears that moving to Berlin enables these artists to advance their careers by turning into “Berlin artists” (see Dellbrügge & de Moll 2005). The logic behind this claim is that the city as well as its image is linked to the artist’s CV through statements such as: “Finnish-born, Berlin-based artist” and “lives and works in Berlin and Helsinki.” Germany’s capital tends to be seen in the global art world as a location in which newly emerging contemporary art is being produced (Nippe 2011: 313). In the context of Finland, and the Nordic countries more generally, art produced by Nordic artists living in Berlin seems to attract special interest and give added value. Although none of the interviewees mentioned this as an explicit reason for moving to Berlin, some agreed that it was a positive side effect of the fact that they were now living there (see also Karttunen 2009: 78). “Having been there,” in Berlin, seemed to increase their socio-economic standing in the Finnish art world. In this regard, the migration trajectories of Finnish artists moving to Berlin differ from those of creative people from Japan who move to cities in Western Europe, North America or Australia in the knowledge that their decision to migrate may entail substantial financial risk and the downgrading of the socio-economic standing they had in Japan before moving abroad (Fujita 2004: 24; Sooudi 2011: 87; Wiklund 2013).

Images and Dreams

Numerous factors other than economic and career considerations explain why artists from Finland settle in Germany’s capital. For media artist Gun Holmström (b. 1964), for instance, living in Berlin was a life-long dream. As she explains: “[...] after [I finished my MA studies in Sweden] I went to Berlin because I always wanted [to go there]. I have travelled a lot around the world in general, when I had exhibitions and for residencies, but Berlin, that was a dream.” Holmström continues, saying that she wanted to have the experience of living in Berlin be-

fore it was too late: “[...] I wanted to try this, before I was too old, that is how I thought, ‘now I have to [do it]!’”

In a somewhat similar vein, in the interview, sculptor Ida Koitila explains that she had always planned to move to Berlin one day. She liked the sense of “conflict” that was lingering in the city’s atmosphere and that differentiated it from the Swedish context in which she had grown up. Yet, in contrast to Holmström, Koitila felt that she was too young to move to Berlin at the age of 18 when she left school in Sweden. Moreover, she did not speak perfect German, which she said she needed when applying to Berlin’s art school, UdK (*Universität der Künste*). Thus, this daughter of Finnish immigrants instead decided to apply to the Academy of Fine Arts in her parents’ original homeland, Finland, where she was accepted. She moved to Helsinki in 2005, but the plan to move to Berlin “followed” her, as she puts it. While living in Helsinki she visited Germany’s capital at least once a year. Helsinki felt like a “homecoming” to her, whereas Berlin was “another world” that she sought when she wanted “something else” and other “influences”. In addition to her holiday visits, Koitila stayed at the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts’ residence in Berlin twice during her studies, and started to make friends in the city. Berlin thus became another important social and working environment for her. After graduating in 2011 she decided to move there. Her decision to shift the focus of her daily life to Berlin was strengthened by the fact that she had fallen in love with a German man. Other artists also mentioned “love” and “family reasons” as factors influencing their eventual decision to move to Berlin, or to leave the city.

Two other artists who participated in this study linked their decision to move to Berlin with the thought that it was the “right moment in life” to do so. One of them was Anu Pennanen (b. 1975), who was interested in Berlin when she left school in Finland but did “not feel ready to come here” yet. In sum, these statements seem to suggest that the decision to voluntarily move to another place also correlates with the person’s individual life trajectory, and how she or he envisages it evolving in rela-

tion to a particular place and the image she or he has of it. The image that people have of a place can fuel the dream of living in that very place one day in the future. It is the association between the place and the imagined life there that can make people move (O’Reilly & Benson 2009: 7; Benson 2012: 1685). These findings confirm the relevance of examining the act of migration, or human mobility more generally, within the wider context of the whole spectrum of lifestyle choices people make in the course of their lives (see O’Reilly & Benson 2009: 2). The results also indicate that the image and dreams people have of a certain place may have a significant influence on their decision to move there or not (Adams 2004; Benson 2012; see also Wiklund 2013), and on when in their life would be the right moment to do so.

The Significance of Social Networks

Koitila and Pennanen both mentioned in the interviews that after graduating from the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, before moving to Berlin, they had spent some time at the school’s residence in the city. Interestingly, staying in Germany before moving there seems to be a fairly common trait in the biographies of artists who go on to live in Berlin for a year or longer. Apart from Lucander, whose main reason for moving was to study in Berlin, at least half of the remaining 14 artists had studied for some time or had a period of residence in Germany before eventually moving to the capital for a longer period of time. The research participants tended to mention these previous short-term visits in passing. Nevertheless, the fact that they had been able to establish social and sometimes also professional networks during their previous stays seemed to encourage and support the subsequent choice to move to Berlin. This is highlighted in painter Janne Räisänen’s response when I asked him why he chose Berlin instead of London or New York:

There is also this background that I studied in the Frankfurt Städelschule in 1996 for one semester. I have friends from this time who moved from [Frankfurt] to Berlin. So it was very easy to move [to Berlin] because I had local friends, German-

speaking friends. That had a great impact [on my choice to move to Berlin].

Likewise, Saana Inari Lähteenmäki (b. 1983) explained in her interview that when she decided to leave Finland in 2008 – mostly because of problems with mould in the buildings of the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts – she had two alternative cities in mind: Amsterdam and Berlin. She already knew some people she liked in both, and thus thought that “it would be easy to go” to one of them because of that. Eventually, she decided to go to Berlin, “because here it is easier to find apartments, and it’s cheaper, and it’s a bigger city and there are very different happenings. This is, in a way, the art capital, almost, at the moment.” Berlin seems to constitute a meeting point for international artists in the global art world. This comes out clearly in Anu Pennanen’s account. Contemplating where to go next after a short residency in Frankfurt she eventually decided to return to Berlin, where she had already spent some time during another short residency in 2003:

I went to work in many other places [in the world] and finally came back [to Berlin] in 2007 [...]. I thought maybe this is a place where I will meet people with whom I can discuss things. Many of [the people here] were actually part of a network that I had built over the years, because I had been in many different international exhibitions, and many of my friends, I realized, were now living in Berlin. So when I was thinking about where would be a good place to live for some time, [...] it was natural for me to come here. It felt a little bit more like home than other places [...].

Pennanen’s statement seems to confirm Vered Amit’s (2007: 11) observation that the “circuits of travel” tend to be “shaped by structures that channel voyagers into contact with others like themselves.” In other words, there is a strong likelihood that mobile artists will encounter other mobile artists in Berlin. Further, the ethnographic material that was gathered for this study indicates that having friends in a city constitutes a factor in a person’s decision to migrate

there, and pre-existing social networks can enhance the feeling of being at home in a place. In this respect the current findings differ somewhat from those reported by Dawn Bennett (2010: 125): based on his research on artist migration from Western Australia he argues that “artists tend to move away from important social networks in order to further their artistic practice.” Nevertheless, the results are in line with Thomas Borén and Craig Young’s (2013: 203) research findings on mobile artists in Stockholm, Sweden, and with those reported in Sari Karttunen’s (2009: 172) study on the international mobility of Finnish artists.

Inspirational Working Context

In addition to the above-mentioned factors, which also feature prominently in the accounts of other mobile people, the highly inspirational working environment in Berlin also appear to attract artists from Finland. Its historical layers, which all the interviewed artists felt are omnipresent in the city’s public urban space, are considered especially intriguing. They refer in particular to events that linked Berlin to World War II and its aftermath. Media artist Laura Horelli (b. 1976) contrasts her experience of living in Berlin with her experiences of living in Frankfurt and Finland. In Frankfurt, she explains, “history is not as visible as it is here in [Berlin].” On the other hand, she feels that there is a distancing from recent historical events in Finland, and in particular from those related to World War II: “People [in Finland] know of those things, but there is some sort of a protective curtain [*suojaverho*]. People don’t want to talk about them.” Here in Berlin, she continues, history is “in your face, in a very powerful way,” which makes her think differently about those issues, and also inspires her to deal with them in her artistic work.

Berlin’s vibrant art scene also contributes to the fruitful working context. The city is enlivened by the abundance of museums and the numerous art-related events that are going on every day of the week, often in unconventional, surprising settings such as bars, cellars or in people’s own apartments. As painter Olli Piippo (b. 1980) puts it: “[The] art

scene is so wide [here in Berlin], you can spend your whole life walking through it.” Some interviewees also refer to Berlin as a place in which people value art and respected artists, more so than in Finland, for example. This is perceived as a very positive and encouraging experience. In line with other international artists living in Berlin, these Finnish research participants portray Germany’s capital as a city with a liberal and bohemian spirit that gives people the freedom to experiment with art and to engage in alternative lifestyles (see Nippe 2011: 89ff.). In the view of artist Anu Pennanen, the lack of money and grants available to artists in Berlin facilitate such a lifestyle:

[I]f there is no money the city goes down the alternative route and becomes more open to all kinds of experiments and stuff, and less competitive, because we aren’t really competing for grants from here because there aren’t any.

Media artist Laura Horelli describes Berlin as an “open city”. She continues: “if you use the cliché that ‘everything is possible in Berlin,’ which I heard a couple of weeks ago here, it is perhaps not so wrong: a person who wants to do her own thing can come here and just do it, that is very positive of course...” Thus, it seems that, like other artists living in Germany’s capital (see Nippe 2011: 89ff.), Horelli and her fellow Finns perceive Berlin as a city with an atmosphere that offers creative people the space to experiment and play around with their art.

Painter Olli Piippo refers to Berlin as a place of constant bubbling experimentation, which makes it such an exciting city in which to live and work. In the course of the interview he also contrasts Berlin with other cities, namely London, Paris and New York, where the art scene is rather better established than in Berlin, and argues that the things people in New York are currently nostalgic about are the current reality in today’s Berlin, at least for the time being. Compared with Finland and other places in the world, therefore, Berlin appears to offer more space for artistic freedom and a fruitful ground for creativity on account of its liberal and bohemian

character. This impression is also echoed in painter and curator Eemil Karila’s description of his current place of residence:

[Berlin] is very different from all other cities in Germany or wherever. It is a kind of metropolis that doesn’t exist anywhere else in Germany. It’s the only one. I mean, the whole atmosphere here is much more liberal, bohemian, laid back, and I think Germany and Austria otherwise are really conservative, which Berlin is not.

Many of the artists are keen to point out that they have explicitly chosen to live in Berlin, and could not imagine living in any other city in Germany. Berlin seems to constitute an island within Germany, as both Janne Räisänen and Olli Piippo describe it. This image reflects the city’s own history when the western part (West Berlin) constituted an island city within the former German Democratic Republic in the period of the Cold War. In contrast to the past, however, the current borders of the island called Berlin are not of a national character: they are social phenomena constructed through narratives that help to create the image of Berlin as a metropolis with a culture that diverges and stands in contrast to the rest of Germany (see Allon 2013: 293). Nevertheless, as is typical of borders, they function as a tool to distinguish the imagined island of Berlin from the rest of Germany, which encircles it like a mist-covered sea. In the view of the interviewed artists it is a Las Vegas of a sort (cf. Novy 2013: 232), a playground with its own, alternative rules and its own logic, which encourages and offers space for the creation of new forms of art, and of making, selling and exhibiting it. With regards to Finnish artists living in Berlin, it can be concluded that it is the city’s particular atmosphere that plays an important role in attracting them.

The Transnational Flow of Creativity

Once these Finnish artists establish their more or less permanent homes in Berlin they begin to engage in a number of everyday practices that reach across borders, as the empirical data gathered for this re-

search has brought to light. As I argue, such practices result in the creation of a “transnational flow of creativity” in which artists, art students and art works travelling across national borders launch new ideas. It is thus not only creative people and products, but also the very seeds of creativity that travel across national borders. In the following I give some concrete examples of this kind of transnational agency, and highlight the dynamics that drive the transnational flow of creativity as it unfolds on the ground in the everyday life of the artists.

As mentioned earlier, 11 of the 15 artists lived in Berlin on a more or less permanent basis at the time they were interviewed. Many of them still consider it important to visit Finland and “show their face” on a regular basis. Showing their face refers, among other things, to exhibiting their art in Finland and participating in social gatherings such as *vernissages*. One purpose of these transnational practices is to maintain their professional standing and networks in the context of Finland, which they consider necessary to maintain their chances of obtaining grants from Finnish funding organizations. The young Finnish artists Sari Karttunen (2009: 88, 173) interviewed also pointed out the importance of staying connected with the social networks that constitute both local and global art worlds.

Another reason why these Berlin-based Finnish artists follow a transnational lifestyle is that they earn money from teaching or selling their art works in Finland. They consider this necessary given that Berlin is not a fruitful ground in terms of earning a living on account of its well-known lack of money coupled with its abundance of artists. Nina Lehtonen-Braun describes the current situation in Berlin as follows: “[H]ere [in Berlin] there are no jobs, and then if you get a job it’s badly paid [...] there are so many, a thousand applicants for each job, and they can probably do it better than you.” As a result, Berlin-based artists try to earn money abroad. Anu Pennanen’s partner, French-born filmmaker Stéphane Querrec, who also lives in Berlin, depicts the scenario as follows:

[A]rtists try to live here [in Berlin], but the city has no money, so all the cultural actors involved need to have their own financing already set up – a gallery perhaps in Paris or a business going on in London, and go back and forth, so they really have to find a way to make money, but outside of Berlin, perhaps in another German city, if you are lucky, if you speak German. Otherwise, it is outside of Germany, so most of the people we know, art curators, art historians, obviously always talk about the same topic all the time, and this is “how do we find the money to live here?”

Querrec’s statement highlights the factors that motivate many international artists in Berlin to maintain a transnational lifestyle for economic reasons: earning abroad the money they spend on living in Berlin (see also Färber 2011; Nippe 2011: 91). Indeed, in the global art world Berlin is not considered the place in which to sell art, it is rather the place in which to make it (see Glauser 2009: 57; Nippe 2011). According to Robert Lucander, the problem is not only that art is not being sold in Berlin, but also that the city and its museums fail to exhibit the art that is being produced there. As he puts it: “A lot of art work is being produced here in Berlin, but there are not that many institutions that are willing to show it.”

It is perhaps for these reasons that many of the interviewed artists still consider the primary context for selling and exhibiting their art to be the Finnish art world. Sculptor Ida Koitila, who moved to Berlin in 2011 after graduating in Finland, describes in the following the transnational professional activities that typify her everyday life as an artist, and highlights how creative goods and people are caught in the cross-border flow:

[N]ow that I live in Berlin I’m in Helsinki a lot. I have been at the *HIAB* [Helsinki International Artist Programme] residence for two months [in Helsinki], and then I had an exhibition at the *Sinne* Gallery [in Helsinki] in spring, and then I came back here [to Berlin], and now in three weeks I have an exhibition at the *Bergman* Gallery again in Helsinki. So I work here [in

Berlin], and then I send the entire work home to Helsinki.

In other words, Berlin-based Finnish artists maintain a transnational way of life by exhibiting and selling their artworks in Finland. Nina Lehtonen-Braun (b. 1975), who has been living in Berlin for more than ten years, also continues to exhibit her work in Helsinki. She is pleased because this enables her colleagues in Helsinki to see what she has been up to in recent years. Exhibiting her artwork in Finland “sort of connects both worlds,” she explains. She continues: “now that so many Finnish artists are coming to Berlin” either for a holiday or to stay longer, “there is almost no distinction between being here [in Berlin] or there [in Finland].” It appears that the strong presence of Finnish artists in Berlin gives Lehtonen-Braun a sense of being embedded in the Finnish art world, despite the fact that she is living in Germany. At the same time, Berlin spills over into Finland when Berlin-based Finnish artists exhibit their artwork in their home country. This experience seems to invoke in Lehtonen-Braun a sense of simultaneity (see Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004), in which the distinction between “here”, Berlin, and “there”, Finland, or *vice versa*, is dissolved. Thus the idea of a transnational Finnish art world that also includes Finnish artists who are based in Berlin evolves. In this regard the mobility and transnational practices of contemporary artists appear to challenge the idea of an art history as well as art worlds that would be based on the idea of cultural and artistic fields being delineated by geographically defined borders (Harris 2006: 698–679; Fuhrmeister, Kohle & Thielemans 2009b: 8). Instead, the transnational practices of artists push, challenge and question the logic of national borders, especially when it comes to defining the boundaries of the Finnish art world in which Berlin plays a prominent role.

A Moving Suitcase Full of Art

Relatively cheap flights between Berlin and Helsinki, as well as the short distance between the two cities, facilitate an international to-and-fro movement. Some of the interviewed artists travel to Helsinki to

teach at one of the local art schools. Janne Räisänen is one of them, working as a teacher in Finland. In Berlin he is a member of a group of international artists who arrange happenings in unconventional settings, including the former Berlin headquarters of the East German secret police, the Stasi. Sometimes the exhibitions are staged only for one evening. Räisänen describes one such event: “[The exhibition was only on] for one evening, nobody even knew we were there, it was just for the moment.”

Räisänen is eager to bring this kind of happening to Helsinki, as he explains. He therefore invited one of his German artist friends to give a lecture at the Finnish school in which he was teaching. He also curated an exhibition of his students’ work in an “off-space”, a parking area somewhere on the outskirts of Helsinki. As with the happenings he had helped to arrange in Berlin, the exhibition in Helsinki was open for just one day: “for one evening, the same thing, the same idea as in Berlin, we arranged it that way.” Later on Räisänen invited the same group of students to Berlin, where they were asked to produce site-specific art works that were exhibited in the gallery of Räisänen’s colleague, who maintained it in his own apartment. Thus, the ideas and insights of Berlin-based artists giving lectures or teaching at Finnish art schools travel when they pass them on to their students and colleagues in Finland, who can then rearrange and combine them with other ideas to create something new.

To use the metaphor of the suitcase that came up in the interview with Robert Lucander, and which is also popular in exhibitions dealing with the topic of migration (Crooke 2014: 190ff.), it could be argued that there is a “*suitcase* full of art” travelling across national borders. The suitcase is often used in museum exhibitions to symbolize the migrants’ mutual experiences, and to communicate a sense of loss, nostalgia and displacement and of something left behind (Crook 2014: 190ff.). In the context of this study, however, the suitcase metaphor could be used to represent a different kind of experience among mobile subjects. Instead of symbolizing loss or rupture in the lives of those who have moved from one place to live in another, the suitcase indi-

cates continued travelling, thereby creating a transnational flow of creativity. It could thus be said to invoke the idea of connection and continuity in the lives of mobile people who engage in a transnational way of being. Intra-European transnational mobility as it unfolds in the daily lives of the interviewed artists is enabled by their European passports, which give them this kind of freedom. It is worth pointing out that inside the imaginary suitcase that Finnish artists carry back and forth on their journeys are not only concrete works of art but also ideas that may eventually become the seeds from which creativity flourishes and develops the power to induce change and innovation.

Concluding Thoughts

This article has illustrated that what motivates artists from Finland to immigrate to Berlin is not merely the city's advantageous living costs. Instead, it is a rather complex set of factors that influence the particular form of intra-European mobility of Finnish artists as discussed in this study. In the initial phase, the decision to immigrate to Berlin rather than any other place seems to be especially influenced by images and dreams that people have of the city. In addition, pre-existing social networks also support the artist immigrants' eventual choice of where to move. Cultural policy makers should find it interesting that the previous experience of residing in Germany obviously encouraged the interviewees to move to Berlin for longer periods of time. These findings thus imply that studying in a foreign country and residencies abroad enhanced the internationalization of the careers of the artists who were interviewed for this study.

Another reason for why artists from Finland end up staying in Berlin for a longer period of time is that they find the daily life in Berlin to constitute a fruitful source of inspiration. What intrigues the interviewees in particular are the historical layers in the city. In Berlin history is perceived to be "in your face," and thus to be more strongly present than in other places in the world. Berlin is also felt to be an urban site that offers its creative inhabitants sufficient mental and physical space in which

to create art and experiment with the making of it. Compared with other places, it is said to have a more open-minded and laid-back atmosphere, which makes the experience of living there so valuable to these artists. In their view, no Finnish cities display similar characteristics, which is what makes Berlin so special. In this regard, the findings of this study seem to confirm Vered Amit's (2007: 8) ideas about voluntary migrants, namely that "[t]hose who travel head to destinations because they offer something – landscape, food, exotica, institutions, networks – that other places, their homes most especially, do not have."

It is worth noting in this context that it is in Berlin in particular, and not Germany as a whole, that the interviewed artists want to live. Emphasizing this point, a few of them refer to Berlin as an island within Germany. Such an analogy could be said to constitute one way in which Finnish artists participate in the process of image making in relation to the city in which they live, in that they give the idea of Berlin as an island a new meaning. As Alexa Färber (2008: 284) points out, artists and migrants are actors who are involved in the process of forming a particular city image. Artists are thus not only objects of a city's image, nor are they simply attracted to or repelled by it; they also participate in the process of crafting and communicating the image of a particular city.

Both the artists and I, in my role as the interviewer, often described Berlin in our conversations by contrasting it to other places in the world. According to John Urry (2007: 259), this is the "language of mobility" via which people moving around the globe are "subjecting it to abstract characterizations." At the same time, such comparisons constitute a hierarchical framework for places. From the perspective of the interviewed Finnish artists, Berlin is the place in which they make and play with art, whereas they perceive cities such as London and New York as established art centres that offer more opportunities for selling art but less space for experimenting with the doing and exhibiting of it. In this "hierarchy of places," Finland appears as a home base that is important with regard to providing artists with a network of meaningful peers, offering them a context

in which they can gain recognition for their work as artists, and providing them with various means of generating income via sales, grants or teaching.

For the last-mentioned reason, among others, Finland continues to play a meaningful role in the lives of Berlin-based Finnish artists. Indeed, it can be argued that the money that Finnish artists can earn in their native land or receive in the form of grants is one of the main forces that fuels their intra-European mobility: On the one hand, it enables and even encourages them to leave Finland by giving value and funding to artists who are eager to gain an international work experience. On the other hand the possibility to earn an income or receive funding from a Finnish institution are crucial reasons for why many of the artists are eager to return on a regular basis to their homeland. In this way, the artists in question engage in a transnational lifestyle that seems to challenge the idea of needing to distinguish between a “here” and a “there”, and instead follow the idea of “simultaneity” in their lived experience.

Through their continuous back-and-forth crossing of the Baltic Sea they help establish a transnational flow of creativity, in which not only people and art but also ideas that constitute the seeds of creativity travel across borders. The suitcase, which is a popular image with which to portray the experience of immigrants, never reaches its final destination in this metaphor, but keeps on moving. Simultaneously, the transnational practices of creative people question the logic of national borders, especially in defining the boundaries of the Finnish art world in which Finnish artists based in Berlin and the art works they produce there play a prominent role.

Finally, the question arises as to whether the kind of research presented in this article belongs to the body of studies that, according to Matthias Bernt and colleagues (Bernt, Grell & Holm 2013: 12ff.), are in danger of reinforcing “an unreflective hype around Berlin (a.k.a. ‘Berlin: the city of unlimited possibilities’).” In the gathered ethnographic material it was hard to ignore and impossible to downplay the interviewed artists’ fascination for Berlin. Yet, as became clear, they were also critical with regard to the opportunities the city provided for exhibiting

and selling art. I suggest that this research could help to draw a more nuanced picture of the kind of place Berlin might be for (international) artists.

In terms of gaining a better insight into the urban realities as they unfold in the streets of Berlin, I think that future studies on international artists living in Berlin would do well to explore the impact of mobile as well as migrant artists on the process of shaping the socio-cultural texture of the city. In addition, I suggest that in order to fully understand the interplay between artists and cities, and the difference that a place makes in mediating the process of producing art (see While 2003: 251), it would be necessary to carry out more research on how the experience of living in a particular urban site translates into the artistic work of the international artists in question. The research findings presented in this article could provide a useful starting point from which to tackle such issues.

Notes

- 1 I am grateful for the kind support of the Kone Foundation, which funded this project. I would also like to thank the research participants for their willingness to take part in the study, as well as the anonymous reviewers of this article for their comments.
- 2 Various scholars have challenged Florida’s thesis and criticized it for its blurry causal logic about how the creative class relates to urban and economic growth, for a lack of empirical research that would explain the migration dynamics of the creative class or their values, and for bunching together a vast group of people under the notion of the “creative class” with occupations that have little demonstrable relationship to creativity (see, e.g., Glaeser 2004; Markusen 2006; Pratt 2008; Borén & Young 2013).
- 3 For these reasons, too, the interviews in question will be stored at the archive of the Finnish National Gallery under the artists’ real names, with their permission.

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