NEW PERSPECTIVE
Klaus Biesenbach, outside the Neue Nationalgalerie, where he took over as director earlier this year. "For me it's like two movies: I see this world now and I also see how it was 33 years ago, and it's an incredible change," he says of Berlin.

The New Cultural Landscape of Berlin

Curator Klaus Biesenbach, along with a variety of artists, galleries and collectors, is reshaping the city's growing art scene.

BY JAY CHESHES PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBBIE LAWRENCE

WHEN I MOVED here it was still completely rubble and ruins," says Klaus Biesenbach as we enter a leafy courtyard, facing a mustard-colored apartment building in former East Berlin. It's mid-September, at the end of Berlin Art Week, and we are touring the few square blocks where the post–Cold War art scene, and Biesenbach's life in the city, first took root.

In 1989, the star curator, now best known for his boundary-busting museum shows at New York's PS1 and MoMA, was a 23-year-old medical student with a side interest in art. Shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, he moved into a former bicycle storage room here—without heat, hot water or a phone line. "I spent my first winter going to museums with my student card," he says. "I could be there for hours, sipping tea to stay warm."

With new friends, he began organizing exhibitions in abandoned spaces. "It was so flexible and open," he says, "you could just literally take over a storefront for nothing and run a gallery." In 1990 they launched the Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art in a former margarine factory near Biesenbach's apartment. The institution became a magnet for a new creative class flooding into the city and the epicenter of an emerging art scene: a multidisciplinary incubator where performance artist Marina Abramović, writer Susan Sontag and fashion designer Hedi Slimane were once residents. "Everybody wanted to see East Berlin," says Biesenbach. "We were in the right place at the right time."

The KW, as it became known, spawned the Berlin Biennale, which held its first edition in 1998 and propelled Biesenbach's art world ascent and his eventual move from Berlin. In New York, beginning in the late '90s, he cemented his reputation as a showman, helping debut the dance party series Warm Up at PS1 and bringing performance art, pop culture and music to MoMA. His attention-getting exhibitions included plenty of hits (Kraftwerk; Doug Aitken's projections on the MoMA facade) and a few notable misses (his Björk show was slammed by critics).

By 2009, Biesenbach was as well-known in some circles as the artists he championed. A fixture on the art world circuit, often surrounded by A-list artist, collector, actor and musician friends, he seemingly embodied *Herr Zeitgeist*, the moniker *New York* magazine gave him.

This past January, after 18 years living full-time in the U.S., he returned to Berlin, lured away from the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, where he started as director in 2018. Biesenbach, 56, was hired to run Berlin's most important modern art institution, the Neue Nationalgalerie, and its new sibling, designed by Herzog & de Meuron, the $450 million Museum of the 20th Century, under construction in the lot next door.

He moved back to a city wildly transformed in his absence, by not only a pandemic but also two decades of growth, an influx of tech money and a maturing art scene with an expanding collector base. The city is now home to as many as 20,000 working artists, according to a city parliament report, and approximately 400 galleries. "For me it's like two movies: I see this world now and I also see how it was 33 years ago, and it's an incredible change," he says.

Art continues to sprout in unlikely venues across Berlin. This past September, the nonprofit Light Art Space foundation, which focuses on the intersection of art and technology, unveiled an immersive installation from artist Ian Cheng at the former power station housing the Berghain nightclub. The Boros Collection, a private collection of contemporary art housed in a bunker, used as an air raid shelter during World War II, has been open to the public by appointment since 2008. "We thought with this dark history it had, art would be the ideal thing to transform the building into something new and positive," says Karen Boros, who, with her husband, Christian, lives in a penthouse above the bunker's galleries.

In 2024, industrialist Heiner Wemhöner aims to launch the city's latest private art collection, opening a new home for his vast holdings, which include video and Chinese art, among other works. David Chipperfield Architects is upgrading the cavernous space with 45-foot ceilings that over the past century has been a cabaret theater, cinema, nightclub and furniture warehouse. Wemhöner, who lives three hours west of the city, spent four years looking for space in Berlin. "All of the galleries came to Berlin, all the artists came to Berlin; this was finally the time to be in Berlin," he says.

Meanwhile, the post-Biesenbach KW—still the headquarters of the Berlin Biennale—is now a state-funded part of the cultural establishment. And the once destitute buildings around it, in central Mitte, are now among Berlin's most valuable real estate. "Imagine so much of this being empty," says Biesenbach, on a stroll through the area. "I have done an exhibition in, I would say, every second building here."

The building formerly known as Kunsthaus Tacheles, once a ribald artist squat in a former turn-of-the-last-century department store just up the street from the KW, will soon house a new branch of Fotografiska, a privately held photography museum opening to the public. The graffiti left behind in its stairwells will be preserved and cataloged. "We have 20 years of Berlin street-art embedded here," says Yoram Roth, one of the cultural entrepreneurs behind the project. Along with exhibition spaces, there will be restaurants, a nightclub, a roof bar and a

lounge when it opens in 2023. “You can see some art and still go back into the club,” says Roth, of his plans for the site. The museum will be the cultural anchor for a mixed-use development nearing completion around it, master-planned by Herzog & de Meuron, with small starter apartments designed to attract young professionals to what had been one of the last abandoned tracts in central Berlin.

Across the neighborhood, guerilla art spaces have given way to established galleries, from art world power players like Sprüth Magers, which transformed a former social club with a grand ballroom into its new flagship in 2008. “At some point all the artists really wanted to show in Berlin.... It became kind of clear that we should close everything and open here,” says Sprüth Magers co-founder Philomene Magers of the decision to shift operations, shuttering its galleries in Cologne and Munich.

And a circuit of well-heeled bars and restaurants has sprung up, catering to the dealers, collectors and curators who followed the artists to Berlin. This fall some of the team behind Grill Royal, a clubby art world canteen, opened one of the city’s most art-filled hotels, the Château Royal, in a building once used by the Stasi for eavesdropping on the nearby American Embassy. The hotel restaurant is run by Victoria Eliasdóttir, the chef sister of Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson. Each of the 93 guest rooms features an intervention by a different artist, the majority based in Berlin. Curatorial guidance came from Kirsten Landwehr and Krist Gruijthuijsen, who has been director of the KW since 2016. The art includes explicit and sometimes challenging work. “If somebody is uncomfortable with an art piece, they’re not my right client,” says Stephan Landwehr, who ran a framing business servicing the city’s top artists and galleries before co-founding Grill Royal and its extended portfolio of restaurants.

Many Berlin artists have been pushed to the periphery, into less vaunted neighborhoods across the city’s 340-square-mile sprawl. “A shift happened,” says Katharina Grosse, known for her monumental, colorful spray-gun abstractions. “It maybe started 10 years ago, and now space isn’t so easy to find so central.” Grosse’s custom-built concrete studio is in a creative compound—with artists, designers and filmmakers—in Moabit, an evolving working-class neighborhood.

Argentine artist Tomás Saraceno was looking for more room a decade ago when he moved his studio into the former AGFA film factory on the eastern edge of the city. Industrial runoff had left the soil around it contaminated. “For that reason, it was very cheap,” he says. Saraceno, recognized for his work exploring the complex geometry of spiderwebs, and others have left an ecological stamp on the compound, planting produce in elevated pots and installing solar panels and rainwater plumbing. He’s now renovating a second building and hopes to add a greenhouse. “I’m slowly trying to see how the studio can become more self-sustaining,” he says.

The once deserted stretch of the River Spree around Saraceno’s studio is fast becoming a new creative hub, with other artists moving in and a popular nightclub, Sisyphos, open across the street. The historic Funkhaus recording studio, where Sting and Depeche Mode have both recorded, now hosts live music events just up the river. A few doors down, on the site of an abandoned Weimar-era public bathhouse, Design Hotels founder Claus Sendlinger is building an ambitious waterfront campus, the headquarters for his new global hospitality brand, Slow, with guest rooms, a Nordic restaurant, a subterranean performance and event space, offices, galleries and studios. Sendlinger and his business partner bought the property seven years ago before he had an idea of what they’d build there. “There was just one artist after another coming to the area,” Sendlinger says. “The more time we spent out there the more we learned about a side of Berlin we hadn’t seen before.”

Arno Brandlhuber, one of the lead architects on the Slow project, which begins opening in phases next year, is an evangelist for the adaptive reuse of old industrial buildings—still abundant in Berlin. “If you would calculate, today, the impact of new buildings for the environment, if you would have to pay for that impact,” he says, “then you would think twice about demolishing.” To showcase the potential, he recently moved his workshop into a concrete factory tower looming over the city’s wholesale district. Brandlhuber shares the space with four young architects to whom he recently gave equal shares of the practice. Their workspace is a conceptual folly, atop 199 concrete stairs—no elevator has been installed. “We all stopped our gym memberships,” he says, arriving breathless one morning after scaling those stairs.

In the halls of federal power, a new center-left coalition government has also begun leaving its stamp on Berlin. Biesenbach, navigating the evolving political, cultural and economic landscape, was hired as one of the final official acts of Angela Merkel’s outgoing regime. (The city’s main art museums fall under the oversight of the German ministry for culture.)

Biesenbach says he accepted almost on impulse, leaving behind his post at L.A. MOCA, an institution that has struggled for years with operational and budgetary issues. In September 2021 the museum board in L.A. announced Biesenbach would be sharing the leadership role with Johanna Burton, his title officially changed to artistic director.

He’d been approached about the Berlin position before, years earlier when he was riding high in New York, as chief curator-at-large at MoMA. “I had just gotten my green card—and

I basically brushed it off without even sharing it with people,” he says, of the first time the job came up. “For 14 years I considered that my biggest professional mistake.... And then magically, 14 years later—somebody calls me on the phone, ‘Do you want that job you rejected?’... It was getting a second chance.... I had to say yes.”

In late summer 2021 the Neue Nationalgalerie, which was originally designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, emerged from a six-year, $168 million renovation overseen by David Chipperfield Architects. Biesenbach arrived for his first day as director a few months later, just before the war in Ukraine broke out. He quickly mobilized to address the conflict, enlisting high-profile artist friends to raise money and awareness, and announced a weekend-long sleep-in at the museum. Installation and performance artist Anne Imhof set up an open-mic stage in the glass atrium. Olafur Eliasson installed a beacon—a lighthouse of sorts—blinking into the city. A Ukrainian opera singer performed. “We opened the museum day and night, and I stayed in the museum, day and night, asking everybody for donations,” says Biesenbach. “More than 7,000 people came.”

In his first year on the job, he’s been working to bring a paradigm shift—inspired by his years in the U.S.—to Berlin’s tightly regulated museum sector, saddled, he says, with too much bureaucratic baggage. “Everything is incredibly regimented,” Biesenbach says.

And he’s begun laying the groundwork for expanding the breadth of Neue Nationalgalerie artworks, moving beyond the current narrow focus on painting and sculpture. “I think we have to broaden what we collect and broaden what we exhibit,” he says. Biesenbach, who launched the Department of Media and Performance at MoMA, is in the early stages of planning a show on Josephine Baker, who performed cabaret shows in Berlin in the 1920s and ’30s.

To begin attracting new audiences to the museum, this past summer Biesenbach brought live music back to its sculpture garden for the first time since 1986. During Berlin Art Week in September, he hosted a last-minute dance party in the atrium, with DJ Personal Jesus spinning until 2 a.m. “There were so many people there who hadn’t been to the museum before,” he says.

Along with steering the Neue Nationalgalerie, Biesenbach has been rethinking the plans for its new sibling, the Museum of the 20th Century. When it’s completed in 2026, the museum will allow him to show much more of the art under his purview. “Currently we can only show between 10 and 20 percent of the collection,” he says.

The squat minimalist new building, its design widely maligned in the German press, sits between two architectural icons: Mies van der Rohe’s 1968 modern art museum and Hans Scharoun’s 1963 concert hall for the Berlin Philharmonic. The understated new building, with its domestic pitched roof, tries not to compete with “those immaculate beauties,” as architect Jacques Herzog describes them. “It’s not the moment where you would want to do something that has iconic presence,” he says.

Shortly after Herzog & de Meuron won the design competition, a petition began circulating among Berlin architects and academics calling for more public debate about the museum project. Since then, critics have called out its soaring price tag and derided the simple barnlike structure as resembling a discount grocery store.

Even before he reached Berlin, Biesenbach was on calls to Herzog in Basel, Switzerland, pausing on a road trip across the U.S. to push for changes to the museum plans. “People are not very fond of the new building,” he says. “I’m working very diligently with Jacques to address it.”

Together Herzog and Biesenbach are developing a revised plan for the state, hoping to make the building more sustainable and open it up on all sides, to create a sort of indoor-outdoor public plaza around an imposing 150-year-old tree. They’re also pushing to reforest the entire Kulturforum, the vast paved museum complex at the edge of the Tiergarten, Berlin’s Central Park, just as Mies hoped to do in the 1960s. “We felt this place is actually part of the Tiergarten,” says Herzog of the museum complex.

Along with planting new trees, Biesenbach dreams of replacing the asphalt that cuts through the Kulturforum with a sculpture garden, open and free to the public. “You can have an Anish Kapoor, a Louise Bourgeois, you can have a mirror work from Gerhard Richter,” he says, imagining the possibilities.

The new plans will, he hopes, create a much more vibrant cultural district, a new place for the cross-pollination of art and performance, just as the KW was after the fall of the Wall. Along the way he’s looking to broaden the program at the Museum of the 20th Century to include photography, film, architecture, design, prints, drawings, media and performance.

“When the government here asked me if I wanted to help shape this museum, to help start a museum for the modern,” says Biesenbach, “I very clearly said that for me modern is all disciplines.” ●

CITYSCAPE Clockwise from above: The banks of the River Spree, on the eastern edge of Berlin, have become a magnet for artists; the building housing the new Château Royal hotel; the hotel’s restaurant, overseen by chef Victoria Eliasdóttir, sister of Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson. Opposite, from top: The factory tower that houses architect Arno Brandlhuber’s new workshop; the former bunker where the Boros Collection is displayed; the Neue Nationalgalerie, originally designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.