Berghain: Space, affect, and sexual disorientation

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Abstract
In this article, I think of Berlin’s techno club Berghain as a form of relational aesthetics where encounters mediated by tactile sounds, labyrinthine architecture, and libido-enhancing drugs create an unusually porous sexual subjectivity. By sketching out some changes in the composition of the club’s crowd and drug culture – a shift towards aphrodisiac substances such as G and mephedrone – I argue that Berghain has become a specific pharmacolibidinal constellation. Especially the recreational drug G can be thought of as an unruly liquid that concretises queer theory’s preoccupation with sexual fluidity. Instead of nausea-inducing drugs in combination with same-sex erotica – a popular technique in so-called ‘aversion therapy’ – this is a ‘gay conversion therapy’ in reverse whereby erotic horizons expand and multiply through the combination of chemicals and a multi-sensory overload of pleasurable stimuli. Rather than thinking of sexual orientation as located inside the body, I suggest, we might think of it as located inside the building.

Keywords
Queer, Berlin, sexuality, clubs, art, drugs

Introduction
Renowned for its austere techno, industrial architecture, and clean sound system, Berlin’s techno club Berghain has often been treated with the same reverence as fine art. After a successful court case with Berlin-Brandenburg in 2016, it was recategorised as an arts venue and taxed at the same rate as an opera house or museum, while during the Covid-19 pandemic, the club turned into a gallery for the Boros Foundation’s Studio Berlin exhibition. In normal times, events take place regularly in different parts of the sprawling building every week: concerts in Halle and Kantine, fetish-themed nights in Lab, the male-only adjacent wing of the ground floor, experimental music in Säule, house and disco in Panoramabar, but the big weekly event is Klubnacht when the three main floors are open. Klubnacht, which
starts at midnight on Saturday and builds up towards its crescendo – the final ‘closing’ set that normally ends around noon on Monday – can be approached as an immersive site-specific artwork. More specifically, it can be thought of as an example of relational aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2002), the type of open-ended interactive art that prioritises encounters over detached spectatorship, which evolved in the same period as Berlin’s post-wall club scene in the 1990s and early 2000s. Some of the artists most closely associated with this paradigm – Rirkrit Tiravanija, for example, whose banner ‘MORGEN IST DIE FRAG’ adorned Berghain’s front façade during the pandemic – featured in the Studio Berlin exhibition underlining its affinity with the club.

While relational aesthetics was quickly dismissed by some as ‘arty party’ (Foster, 2003: 22), the notion that parties – at least of a certain kind – can be considered an art form has gained traction. Art critic Jörg Heiser (2018: 177) thinks of ‘the club as a place in which certain marginalised forms of artistic and social expression – queer culture, for example – can be lived out, displayed, and experienced’ but also as ‘a kind of art form in itself – be it a pointed minimalism or a baroque Gesamtkunstwerk.’ In a text specifically on the biannual male-only fetish party Snax that takes place in Berghain, Luis-Manuel Garcia (2019: 75, 89) also makes the comparison with the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk. Perhaps it was Roland Barthes (2010: 145) who first, after a visit to the Parisian disco Le Palace in 1978, saw ‘the appearance of a new art…that is achieved among the public and not in front of it, and a total art (the old Greek and Wagnerian dream), where scintillation, music, and desire unite’. Le Palace, Barthes argued (2010: 128), should not be viewed simply as a ‘business, but a work and…those who conceived it can rightfully consider themselves artists.’ While the owners of Berghain (Norbert Thormann and Michael Teufele) have never agreed to be interviewed, the only quote attributed to them – from a review of the opening of Panoramabar in 2004 by DJ Daniel Wang – ‘stated that they wanted to create a club as a work of art’. If we take them at their words and think of Berghain not only as an exhibition or performance space, but as a relational artwork, then the encounters it fosters must be evaluated as part of the overall aesthetic experience.

At the height of the debates about relational aesthetics and in the same year as Berghain opened, Claire Bishop (2004: 52, 66) argued for relational art that foregrounds friction and unease through encounters between fractured and incomplete subjects: ‘the presence of what is not me’, she wrote, ‘renders my identity precarious and vulnerable, and the threat that the other represents transforms my own sense of self into something questionable’. It is this unstable subjectivity, changeable through the affective presence of others, that is most interesting in relation to the unpredictable encounters that take place in Berghain. Initially, a predominantly gay club with roots in the male fetish party Snax, the crowd has become more mixed over the years and in the words of music journalist Alexis Waltz (2010: 131) constitutes a ‘special social constellation in which all party-goers come together under the hegemony of Berlin’s gay community’. According to Waltz (2013), the overt sexuality in Berghain’s predecessor Ostgut (1999–2003) was ‘more or less to the irritation’ of straight visitors, but by the time Berghain opened, distinctions between straight and gay sexual behavior had already become less obvious: a review from early 2005 noted the unusual social mix of the ‘fetish club style darkrooms where hetero couples are to be found (or groped) alongside their homo counterparts’ (Burns, 2005). In this sense, Berghain was a realisation of Michel Foucault’s (1994: 165–66) ideal of an avant-gardist gay culture ‘that invents ways of relating…that are, at certain points, transferable to heterosexuals’. But beyond transferring relational models from one group to another, mixed sex-positive clubs are also ideal spaces for encounters not predetermined by previous erotic trajectories and identifications. The proximity to other bodies in confined spaces
overflowing with surplus libido, tactile sounds, and empathy-enhancing drugs can create an environment in which sexual categorisation is temporarily transcended.

In her recurring critiques of the limitations of identity politics, Elizabeth Grosz (1995: 227) has argued for a move away from what the body is – an analytical and political emphasis she believes encourages repetition over experimentation – in favour of what the body can do, defining sexuality as ‘fundamentally provisional, tenuous, mobile, igniting in unpredictable contexts with often unsettling effects’. Or as she puts it elsewhere: ‘One’s sexuality is contained in the next sexual encounter, rather than in the synthesis of all one’s past sexual activities (Grosz, 2005: 213).’ In clubs, specifically, Gilbert Caluya (2008: 288–290) has argued, desire (‘the impersonal, material, affective flow that connects bodies’) can overcome sexuality (‘the representation of these desires, the overcoding of these flows’) when we ‘allow ourselves to be swept up by desire to see where it leads us’. While Caluya’s argument is about the overcoding of racial sexual hierarchies, a short think piece by Alexander Lambevski (2004: 304–307) uses ethnographic vignettes to make similar points about how sexual orientation can become fluid in club settings. He refers to such encounters as ‘unpredictable microsocial sexual rearrangements’ that pose ‘serious epistemological challenges’ to how we think of ‘sexuality as a subject position’, suggesting instead a ‘coming together of many elements (music, lights, probable chemicals, the intersubjective play of affects among people)’. In the following discussion of this unpredictable sexuality in Berghain, I want to add spatial dimensions such as architecture and landscape to the affective mix, while also drawing attention to the role played by specific substances such as G and mephedrone.

Unlike Caluya and Lambevski’s explicit deployment of autoethnography, my account is centred on an eclectic range of already circulating materials about Berghain including journalism, literature, scholarship, photographs, art exhibited inside the club, drawings of the crowd, memes, social media, and paraphernalia. These representations have contributed to the myth of the club, which, in turn, likely influences behaviour since the recurring tropes about hedonistic excess create a set of expectations that visitors try to fulfil. Implicitly, my account is also informed by personal observations: I have been to Berghain many times over a 17-year period between 2005 and 2022 although rarely thought of these visits as research. Therefore, no archive of field notes as such exists, but hopefully a cumulative and longitudinal sense of how the club and its subculture has evolved. Indeed, a key argument I want to make is that the increasingly mixed crowd in Klubnacht in combination with changes in the drug culture – pharmacological advancements such as Viagra and PrEP, but also a shift towards aphrodisiac substances such as G and mephedrone – have created a specific pharmacolibidinal constellation that returned gay male culture to the abandon of the pre-AIDS era, while also inviting people who normally identify with different orientations to participate. Apart from highlighting a pattern or grouping of interconnected things (people, chemicals, sounds, etc.), the term constellation, as it is deployed here, suggests an interdisciplinary way of reading that draws on disparate sources and concepts to study cultural formations (Chisholm, 2005).

By focusing primarily on the sexual aspect, I might give the impression that Berghain is a sex club, which would be misleading: it is a dance club with a sex-positive ethos where some people have sex and others don’t while the long opening hours mean people’s priorities fluctuate throughout the day and night. Moreover, the emphasis on sexual fluidity will perhaps imply that the identity affiliations of the outside world simply evaporate inside Berghain, which would be an overstatement: anecdotally, among friends and acquaintances I have talked to, some have said that they never end up in sexual situations with anyone outside their normal gender preference whereas others say that they do. While these
differing experiences perhaps suggest a spectrum (like the Kinsey scale, for example), I am
less interested in measuring past sexual experience than in what Jason Lim (2007: 64) has
called ‘an autonomous sexuality that embraces the potentials offered by events to come’. For
those who allow themselves to be ‘swept up’, Klubnacht can be a ‘conversion therapy’ in
reverse: instead of nausea-inducing drugs in combination with same-sex erotica – a popular
technique in so-called ‘gay aversion therapy’ – erotic horizons expand and multiply through
the combination of chemicals and a multi-sensory overload of pleasurable stimuli. Since this
sexuality is specific to the event, we might think of sexual orientation as located inside the
building instead of inside individual bodies.

The experience, however, already begins in the romantic ‘terrain vague’ that surrounds
the club. In the words of novelist Peter Schneider (2014: 132), ‘Berghain sits there like a dark
castle on an island. To reach it, you have to swim across a black ocean.’

The exterior and the landscape

Seen from a distance, Berghain’s heavy rectangular three-floored façade has, for many,
become a Berlin landmark as easily recognisable as the Reichstag or Brandenburg Gate.
Reproduced on unofficial paraphernalia (memes, tote bags, postcards, posters, a mock Lego
set, the ‘Bergnein’ card game, or ‘Birdhain’ birdhouse, for example), the neoclassical sim-
plicity of its alternating pilasters and windows has an obvious appeal to graphic designers
and illustrators. Moreover, because the building is freestanding in an ostensibly ‘empty’
location, its rectangular shape can be fitted nicely into the frame of selfies and group photos
to communicate subcultural belonging on social media, but also to depict the building itself
as an object of desire. Indeed, in some respects, the devotion to the building resembles
Jennifer Terry’s (2010: 53) notion of ‘monument sexuality’: an orientation where the nor-
mative ‘libidinal reverence’ of ‘standing in awe’ in front of architectural monuments – like
on school trips and holidays – goes further and becomes a romantic investment. During the
pandemic, informal parties organised on Telegram took place immediately outside
Berghain’s entrance suggesting a strong attachment to the building even when the club
was shut.

Built in accordance with the East Germany’s Sixteen Principles of Urbanism approved by
the Soviet Union, the ‘Fernheizwerk für die Stalinallee’ compound was constructed between
1953 and 1954 to supply heat and electricity for Stalinallee, the first stage of East Berlin’s
neoclassical flagship development (van der Gaag, 2014). Photos from the late 1950s show a
coal-powered power station with chimneys and a cooling tower, which have since been
removed. Abandoned in the 1980s, the ruined thermal station was converted into
Berghain in the early 2000s after its predecessor Ostgut, across the railway tracks, had
been forced to shut. Both Ostgut and Berghain were in wasteland locations – or the so-
called Stadtbrachen (Gandy and Jaspers, 2020) – characterised by spontaneous ruderal
vegetation. When the architects first visited the site in February 2003, a 1.5 metre birch
tree was growing inside the building and the surfaces were covered in moss and fern
(Cadenbach, 2019). Among the few circulated images of the club’s interiors is a short art
film of animals in the club called After Hours (Köhn and Kaminik, 2012), reinforcing the
notion of Berghain as urban nature (Figure 1).

In his nature memoir about bisexuality, Out of the Woods, Luke Turner (2019: 208)
suggests the club has a unique ability to accommodate his ‘fluid sexuality’ (‘Just like forests,
Berghain knows no morality or rules’). This evocation of nature or wilderness as outside of
sexual binaries also informs Jack Halberstam’s (2020: 3) book Wild Things: The Disorder of
Desire where he writes of ‘a romantic wild, a space of potential’ that signals ‘simultaneously
a chaotic force of nature, the outside of categorisation, unrestrained forms of embodiment, the refusal to submit to social regulation, loss of control, the unpredictable.’ In an idealised sense, this ‘wild’ speaks both to how the club is perceived by many of its followers – ‘a wild work of immersive art’ according to Liam Cagney (2020) – but also to the ‘unmonitored’ qualities of Berlin’s overgrown wasteland sites as ‘free space for all alternative lifestyles and idiosyncrasies’ (Hausdorf, 2015: 17, 5). In memes and illustrations, Berghain has been inserted into Caspar David Friedrich’s painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), highlighting the romantic connotations of the surrounding pseudo-wilderness (Figure 2).

If landscape is understood as ‘a process by which social and subjective identities are formed’ (Mitchell, 1994: 1–2), then Berlin’s informal *Stadtbrachen* have become spaces of self-discovery and experimentation: a kind of ‘postindustrial neoromanticism’ in the context of its techno scene (Garcia, 2016). Until it was dismantled and sold in smaller pieces in 2017, Piotr Nathan’s monumental mural of volcanic coastal countryside ‘Rituals of Disappearance’ in Berghain’s entrance hall underlined the club’s relationship with landscape painting and provided a transition between the overgrown exterior vegetation and the cavernous interior space.

In 2020, the introduction of manicured lawns, park benches, and foot paths altered the landscape to the west of Berghain, but for the first 15 years of the club’s existence, it retained some of these ‘wild’ romantic qualities with ruderal vegetation, disused railway tracks, and graffiti-covered concrete structures. Yet even before the recent interventions, the landscape was less spontaneous than it seemed: in 2006, the two-hectare site from the club to Warschauer Straße had been given the name Wriezener Freiraum Labor (Wriezener Open Space Laboratory) and received federal government funding as an experiment in participatory planning (Tempel, 2013: 30). The naming of the park as a ‘laboratory’ suggests an affinity with the fetish club on the ground floor of Berghain called ‘Lab.Oratory’ as well as early discussions of relational aesthetics informed by ‘metaphors like “laboratory,” “construction site”, and “art factory”’ (Bishop, 2004: 52). Instead of detached spectatorship in institutional settings, these metaphors suggested an unfinished aesthetic encouraging informal encounters.

The ‘construction site’/‘art factory’ paradigm’s embrace of postindustrial ruins also conforms to what architect and writer Martti Kalliala (2016) has referred to as club culture’s

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**Figure 1.** Still from *After Hours* (Köhn and Kamentiak, 2012).
‘general aesthetic disposition bordering on a fetish toward ready-made, found space: a kind of nomadic *architettura povera*. Berghain was strictly speaking not *architettura povera*: the large-scale conversion required significant capital investment and by conforming to health and safety regulations from the beginning represented a professionalisation of Berlin’s techno culture. Yet the conversion aimed to preserve the raw industrial character of the building at a time when Berlin’s clubs were moving in a sleek direction of shiny surfaces and outward-looking panoramic windows: Watergate, which opened in 2002, had floor-to-ceiling windows facing the river Spree, while Weekend in Haus des Reisens, the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) travel bureau, which opened in 2005, had panoramic dancefloors on the 12th and 15th floors as well as a rooftop bar overlooking Alexanderplatz. There was something of the ‘sky bar’ about these venues: a bling Manhattanised aesthetic removed from the ruinous grit for which Berlin had become renown in the 1990s. Berghain and its predecessor Ostgut, breaking with the dominant global homonormative interior design themes of the time (Andersson, 2019: 3003–3004), instead returned to a dark introspective ideal of club space, which achieved an added mysterious lure because it was difficult to access and forbidden to photograph.

In the era of mass digital reproduction, Berghain has protected its ‘aura’ by a strictly enforced photo ban inside the building. Apart from some brightly lit photographs of the empty interiors on the architects’ webpage and the art film of animals inside the club, very little photographic documentation is publicly available. While scale models such as Philip Topolovac’s *I’ve Never Been to Berghain* (2016) have been exhibited in art galleries and attempts have been made to emulate its interior in TV dramas such as Amazon’s crime series *Beat* (2018), visual depictions during club events exist mainly as drawings. Above all, representations of Berghain’s interior often exist only in written form. According to an overview of early 21st century German literature, ‘Berghain even initiated a distinctive literary genre’ with several novels set in and around the club while journalistic coverage, popular and academic scholarship, as well as various blog entries devoted to its mystique proliferated (Krass and Wold, 2017: 201). This mystique or ‘aura’ was aided and preserved by the club’s notoriously selective door policy and long queue.

![Figure 2. Telekom Electronic Beats (https://www.electronicbeats.net/the-feed/7-reasons-everyone-go-techno-club-alone-least/).](image)
On the weekends, the queue becomes a human extension of Berghain’s concrete architecture. In line with the idea of the club as an interactive artwork, its celebrity doorman Sven Marquardt has rejected the bouncer title in favour of ‘curator’ arguing that his job is to create the right selection of personalities (Kulish, 2011). While selectivity on the door is nothing new – early New York discos were membership clubs for licencing purposes, but also to control the door, while raves in hidden locations were ‘word by mouth’, and clubs before the internet often used targeted flyering – Berghain’s rejection ratio is unusually high, and the choreography of the queue is especially brutal. Rejection – typically communicated through a dismissive hand gesture without verbal interaction – is followed by a ‘walk of shame’ in full view of the main line and the shorter guest list/re-entry queue. Apologists for Berlin’s door policies, however, have referred to them as ‘almost egalitarian’ (Hausdorf, 2015: 30) and ‘radically democratic’ (Rapp, 2010: 144) because subcultural capital trump both monetary and social capital (anecdotes about celebrities turned away from Berghain abound). In an egalitarian sense, the conformist dominance of black clothes in the queue involves a ‘putting on of impersonality’ (Harvey, 1995: 257) although certain types of eccentricity and flamboyance are also rewarded: subcultural capital largely overlaps with ‘queer capital’ since it is assumed that looking like a sexual minority improves one’s chances to get in. The advice to not look too straight, however, has typically not led men to ‘camp it up’, but more often to adopt a hyper-masculine look epitomised by the harness and gym-sculptured pecs, while women frequently wear latex, rubber, and see-through fishnets to communicate ‘kink’. The door policy, in this regard, tests familiarity with sexual subcultures and gauges openness to sexual exploration.

Most who are refused entry to Berghain accept rejection, but there can be outbursts of socially awkward shouting and crying while the absence of any clear explanation for rejection tends to trigger debates about inclusion and exclusion (Moore, 2018: 125). In this respect, the queue almost resembles an ‘antagonistic’ relational artwork aimed at causing uncomfortable friction (Bishop, 2004: 34): the spectacle of rejection becomes a collective ‘acting out’ of rave culture’s broader ‘tension between esoteric snobbery on the one hand, and attempts to transcend social hierarchy on the other’ (Saldanha, 2007: 65). The two principal purposes of the club’s door policy, however, are to preserve its identity as a subcultural space in an era of mass tourism and to create a sense of exclusivity. Both aims are fraught with charges of discrimination since any system of separating ‘insiders’ from ‘outsiders’ based entirely on visual criteria is prone to prejudice. Yet, for those who get in, the post-adrenaline relief can translate into an ‘anything goes’ form of collective abandon while the subcultural belonging created by the selective door promotes an affiliation with gay male culture regardless of sexual identity.

The crowd and the space

Descriptions of the crowd in Berghain fall into three sometimes overlapping categories: (1) accounts of the club as a predominantly masculine space in which other groups are welcome but remain numerically and culturally in a minority; (2) classifications of the crowd into distinct cultural and sexual ‘types’; and (3) a more idealistic tendency in which the various subtypes morph into a queer whole where the sexual difference and identity markers of the outside world are temporarily erased.

In the first category, even celebratory accounts of Berghain can be ambivalent about the expressions of masculinity seen to dominate. Waltz’s (2010: 131) description of a ‘special social constellation in which all party-goers come together under the hegemony of Berlin’s gay community’ hints at a hegemonic masculinity others have been critical of explicitly. The
short film *Hyper Masculinity on The Dancefloor* (Davasse and Busse, 2015) specifically associates certain sections of the crowd with a politically uninformed *masc-for-masc* aesthetic while Liam Cagney (2019) covering its 15th birthday for *Frieze* magazine regretted ‘the macho dominance that occasionally appears in Berghain on a Sunday night’. Moreover, Cagney highlighted the predominantly white male bookings of DJs while it has also been suggested that the sound system on the main floor and acoustics of the concrete building detach techno from its black roots by privileging music below 140 BPM (Gomez, 2020). In the entrance hall, Norbert Bisky’s ‘Vertigo’ (2017), a constellation of around 30 colourful paintings of naked or sparsely dressed male teenagers in urban, lakeside, or camping settings reinforces the notion of Berghain as a predominantly white masculine space. Socialist realism has been mentioned as an influence, yet it is difficult to know if Bisky’s urban pastoral scenes, which have also been accused of a ‘Leni-Riefenstahl-aesthetic’, should be understood as idealisations of adolescent white masculinity or, more critically, as meta-comments on such idealisations (Koerner von Gustorf, 2007). Overall, the exhibited art in the club has tended to be by white male artists creating a jarring disjunction with the demographic composition of the crowd.

The second tendency is to subdivide the crowd into distinct sociological or sexual types. Wang’s review of the opening of Panoramabar in 2004 includes a rough head count of racialised minorities, a gender ratio, and descriptions of the fashion worn as well as references to different gay tribes. A combination of society reporting, ‘thick’ ethnographic description, and the sexologist’s fascination with the coexistence of different subgroups, these descriptions have multiplied over the years with the writer-observer often taking on the role of a scientist who proceeds to classify and subdivide the crowd. British writer Amy Liptrot (2015), for example, compares Berghain’s dancefloor to Ernst Haeckel’s illustrative studies of different aquatic species while Finnish artist Sampo Hänninen lends his drawings of Berghain and Panoramabar a sociological aura by calling them ‘empiric studies’ (Figure 3). Hänninen’s humorous illustrations of self-segregation with different groups occupying different sections of the dancefloor still resonate but the boundaries have become more porous since the drawings were made in 2011.

Finally, the third trope, often overlapping with the other two, idealistically suggests a more open-ended sexuality. Frequently referenced in journalistic accounts of the club, Wolfgang Tillmans’s photographs in Panoramabar, replaced every five years, have served a didactic purpose in this respect by encouraging a sexually open mindset. In the early years, when Berghain was predominantly gay, Tillmans chose a large photograph of the lower abdomen of a naked woman next to two of his abstract *Freischwimmer* pieces, while five years later, when the crowd had become more mixed, the vagina was replaced with a close-up of a male anus (five years later this was replaced with a gender-neutral throat and again on the club’s 15th birthday in December 2019 with a gender-ambiguous photo of a hand inside red underwear). In the book *Berghain: Kunst im Klub*, Tillmans is explicit about his intentions (‘I wanted to broaden the perspective on sexuality’), but ultimately dismissive of the ‘decorative’ function of visual art in clubs. Instead, the ‘atmosphere in a club is like art is supposed to be’, while the architecture and lighting ‘creates a specific landscape’. Echoing arguments about relational aesthetics, Tillmans suggests that encounters and interactions in clubs put us in ‘a position to think about other possible ways of organizing the way we live’ (Schneider, 2015: 30–36).

In some accounts it is even suggested that Berghain turns the crowd queer. In *Lost and Sound: Berlin, Techno and the Easyjet Set*, Tobias Rapp (2010: 155) notes how: ‘Somehow, when you look around on a Sunday afternoon in Panoramabar, everyone’s a little queer’. At the time of Rapp’s observation, Berghain’s closing happened in Panoramabar on Sundays.
(whereas for many years now, both main dancefloors have stayed open until Monday) implying perhaps that queer acclimatisation occurs gradually over time culminating shortly before closing. However, since Rapp also argues that ‘it’s no longer clear what’s gay and what isn’t, except for the actual sexual preference’ (as if ‘the actual sexual preference’ wasn’t central to a definition of gay), his idea of the queer dancefloor does not seem to alter the sexual orientation of the participants. Similarly, scholarly work on the erotic dynamics of the dancefloor such as Tim Lawrence’s (2011: 231–234) analysis of the ‘queer potential’ of the early New York disco the Loft’s ability to exceed ‘normative conceptions of straight and gay sexuality’, ultimately sidelines sex by asserting that ‘intercourse...at the end of the night was only exceptionally more than a secondary concern’. Yet in a sex-positive space like Berghain, ‘intercourse’ is not a consideration for ‘the end of the night’, but takes place

Figure 3. Sampo Hänninen ‘Empiric studies’ (2011).
continuously throughout the night and day, sometimes in unexpected constellations. Queer, in this context, therefore, is not merely an umbrella term for sexual diversity and coexistence but reclaims its parallel meaning as something ‘polymorphous, nonreproductive, pleasure-seeking, compulsive, and unruly’ (de Lauretis, 2011: 248–249).

Seen from the top of the stairs to Panoramabar, the tightly packed crowd of nearly 500 barely dressed bodies on the main floor, can resemble an erupting lava field when the red lights turn on intermittently. Journalistic accounts have sometimes described this sublime unbounded mass as an erasure of clear distinctions between self and other or as a blurring of gender lines. For Cagney (2019), Berghain is a ‘morphogenetic experience of overflowing your bounds, becoming-animal, becoming-other’ while Matthew Collins (2018: 50), in his travelogue *Rave On*, underlines how silhouettes in the darkness become gender-ambiguous: ‘male or female or maybe something else, and anyway who really cares in here?’ These notions of Berghain as unbounded are clearly at odds with the parallel descriptions of hegemonic masculinity, but they are not mutually exclusive: fluidity coexists with what Arun Saldanha (2007: 5) refers to as ‘viscosity’, a stickier tendency of some bodies to group together. Yet, what appears solid one moment, can easily through small shifts in group constellations, music, and intoxicated affects, become permeable.

The reductive preoccupation with having a sexual ‘type’, which in crowded environments easily becomes a screening process whereby desirability is disaggregated into a set of easily identifiable attributes, is both reinforced and disrupted in Berghain. On the one hand, basic gendered visual signs like female curves or sculpted male gym bodies are perhaps privileged in an environment characterised by dimmed lights and loud volume (Amico, 2001: 364), yet at the same time, in a club with a significant trans and non-binary following, these signs are not fixed. Moreover, the semiotic disassociation of sexual signs and dress codes from their dominant meanings – as, for example, when supposedly straight men wear leather harnesses – can be bewildering. This straight appropriation of gay fetish wear, which in the first place was understood as gay appropriations of straight macho signifiers, disrupts basic presumptions about who is potentially sexually available for whom. At its worst, this can lead to a cliquish less friendly dancefloor with self-segregation of the type depicted in Hänninen’s ‘empiric studies’ drawings or where boundary maintenance in the form of small demonstrative gestures or microaggressions becomes an obstacle to the desired togetherness (Figure 3). However, there are also moments when a range of factors fall into place – sound, heat, light, intoxication, physical proximity – and these boundaries dissolve in ways that are genuinely porous.

The dancefloor is often hot contributing to what is already a long tradition at gay circuit parties to dance topless, sometimes taken further in Berghain and other Berlin clubs where nudity is accepted. While sweaty naked bodies in nightclubs can reinforce hegemonic masculinity (Misgav and Johnston, 2014), the packed dancefloor can also be a place where porosity is not merely a metaphor for disintegrating boundaries, but literally porous as pores in the skin through which sweat pass between bodies and break down easy distinctions between interiority and exteriority, oneself and others. Often, sexual activity spills over or overflows from designated areas such as the darkrooms into the dancefloor suggesting that both architectural and corporeal boundaries are leaky. Moreover, following Terry’s (2010: 41) ‘monument sexuality’, the libidinal attachment to Berghain’s architecture is not limited to affectionate reproductions of its façade but involves tactile interactions with its surfaces. The sensation of naked skin against the metal doors of the toilet cubicles, for example, often coincides with the immediate erotic rush after taking drugs triggering sexual encounters where the building itself could be said to possess erotic agency. Pressed against a concrete wall dripping with condensation, the exchange of bodily fluids also includes fluids emanating from the architectural materials.
In urban studies, the term porosity is associated with Walter Benjamin’s writings on leaky physical and temporal boundaries in cities, but extends to subjectivity itself: for Benjamin, “[p]orosity” means that the limits of the subject become flexible and contextually conditioned’ (Melberg, 2005: 106). This context-specific subjectivity is perhaps what Martin Zebracki (2016: 116) describes as ‘redefined in-betweenness’ with regards to his own sexuality in auto-ethnographic notes from Berghain. If skin contact is the most obvious site of porosity on the dancefloor, sounds are designed to encourage this tactility. In work on the tactilisation of sound, Garcia (2015: 73) has argued that the sonic granularity of minimal house and techno ‘speaks to the fluid and blurred social relations that arise on its dancefloors – or, at least, to how that fluidity feels to those who participate in it’. Partly based on ethnographic observations in Berghain, Garcia (2013) has also described this feeling of ‘vague togetherness’ as ‘liquid solidarity’. These two metaphors of fluidity and liquidity have slightly different lineages – the former is associated with queer theory and the latter with Zygmunt Bauman’s work on the ever-changing identities, mobilities and relationships under ‘liquid modernity’ – but both suggest an anti-essentialist idea of sexuality, which is neither fixed nor stable. For Bauman (1998: 22) eroticism after ‘the collapse of the “panoptic” model of securing and perpetuating social order’ is flexible.

The panopticon’s antithesis is the labyrinth, which is also the most common spatial typology deployed in relation to Berghain’s interior architecture in close competition with ‘cathedralesque’ (the 18-metre-high ceiling of the former turbine hall and the illuminated coloured windows in the adjacent bar combine to create this cathedral-like effect) (Ku, 2018: 24). Outside the dancefloors, paths, stairways, a mezzanine, an ice-cream bar, darkrooms, bars, seating areas, toilets, and a garden built of containers, create, at least on a first visit, a labyrinthine impression. The interior has been described as an ‘Ermöglichungsarchitektur’, an architecture that ‘enables’ various activities associated with physical pleasure and where ‘form and function’ are in ‘synthesis’ (Rüb and Ngo, 2011: 146). According to one of its architects, Thomas Karsten, Berghain is designed ‘like a labyrinth’ where intoxicated people react only ‘instinctively’ and ‘can discover a lot or get lost’ (Cadenbach, 2019). The photo ban encourages temporary experimentation and the absence of mirrors even in the bathrooms aid in forgetting one’s everyday identity. While Berghain may be an orchestrated version of the labyrinth from which one can eventually find one’s way out, for periods it is also possible to stray off the path, and disappear into corners and cul-de-sacs.

In media reports that are often voyeuristic and titillating such as the well-researched Rolling Stone article ‘Berghain: The secretive, sex-fueled world of techno’s coolest club’, the labyrinthine characteristics of the building (‘so large and maze-like, you can discover new stairways and rooms even after spending a few days in the club’) are directly linked with its ability to facilitate sexual encounters (‘purpose-built not to have any dead ends, even in the bathrooms, so people can cruise each other without running into a wall’) (Roger, 2014). This ability is not unique to Berghain but has also been observed in other mixed sex-positive clubs. In an interview, one of the founders of Gegen, a party in the equally large KitKatClub, suggests an almost literal correlation between space and desire: the ‘enormous’ size of the club in which people ‘get lost’ and experience ‘identity crisis’ produces its own ‘microclimate’ where ‘queer is about being dialogical, not dialectical’ and the participants ‘take their identity off, like their clothes’ (Electronic Beats, 2015). In this account, the KitKatClub across several floors with its numerous corridors, small rooms, and hidden corners, not merely facilitates in a functional sense a range of different sexual encounters, but disrupts and perhaps ultimately transforms, or at least temporarily transcends, the identity of the participants.
The labyrinth also operates metaphorically: it is simultaneously a place where you can ‘get lost’ (‘Get lost in the concrete temple for contemporary electronic dance music’ was for many years the English tag line for Klubnacht in the weekly listings of the LGBTQ magazine Siegessäule), but also a place where you might ‘lose yourself’. While the essentialist notion of ‘finding yourself’ conforms to a sexual liberation paradigm where one’s true essence can be liberated or ‘found’, ‘losing yourself’ hints at something less stable. Early work on clubs and raves described this ‘loss of self’ as a ‘gender-displacing jouissance’ enabling ‘new relationships to the body of both self and other/s’ (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999: 107). Since the gendered ‘direction’ of desire is referred to as a sexual ‘orientation’, the idea of Berghain as a labyrinth also suggests a form of sexual disorientation where the interioristic perspectives that locate desire inside the body are exteriorised onto the surrounding space. ‘Depending on which way one turns,’ as Sara Ahmed (2006: 15) writes in her influential discussion of the sexual ‘orientation’ metaphor, ‘different worlds might even come into view’. In mixed sex-positive spaces like Gegen and Berghain, the way you turn at each corner determines the next encounter: erotic horizons restricted through repetition over time can be expanded to transcend not only the narrowly normative or identitarian, but also the fixation with ‘type’.

To bridge ‘getting lost’ and ‘losing yourself’, Benjamin’s notion of a threshold space is useful since it does not distinguish between the physical and the psychological. According to Susan Sontag (1997: 10–11), the figure of the labyrinth for Benjamin is ‘about the forbidden, and how to gain access to it: through an act of the mind which is the same as a physical act’. Similarly, in a discussion of Berghain’s door policy, Madison Moore (2018: 123) suggests that ‘doors are thresholds, abstract regulation points that carry us from one state of being to another as soon as we cross them’, while George Kafka (2020), writing about the club’s architecture, highlights ‘the interplay between the rigidity of its interior/exterior threshold (the queue, the infamous door policy) and the contrasting fluidity of the spaces inside (the club has no dead ends)’. The alternate ‘state of being’ on the inside is multifaceted, but apart from architecture, its most central components are electronic music and drugs. If the music is a ‘threshold experience’ that ‘serves to dramatize similar threshold experiences between individual dancers and a crowd’ (Garcia, 2015: 73), this experience is typically pharmacologically mediated: empathy- and libido-enhancing drugs operate as equalisers against the distinctions of the outside world although largely of course by creating its own distinctions against that very outside (Thornton, 1995).

The pharmacolibidinal constellation of Klubnacht

Drugs have also been understood as threshold experiences with regards to sexual orientation. During the era of ‘free love’ in the late 1960s, LSD and marijuana were promoted as returning the user to an innocent stage uncorrupted by the conformity and hypocrisies of post-war society. Partly overlapping with these ideas, one tradition of work on sexuality – what Didier Eribon (2001: 55) refers to as ‘the Freudo-Marxist ideology of sexual liberation’ – believed in an innate universal bisexuality that had been repressed by capitalist social relations but could ultimately be unlocked or ‘liberated’. Other strands of scholarship on drugs have highlighted temporary changes in sexual behaviour under the influence. In Der Cocainismus (1924), a study of Weimar Berlin’s drug culture, Ernst Joëll and Fritz Fränkel, suggested that cocaine influenced seemingly heterosexual people to participate in homosexual acts (Beachy, 2014: 215). Today such changes in sexual behaviour are mainly associated with other drugs, but apart from the libidinal qualities of specific substances, intoxication
cannot be separated from the social context since desire is often opportunistic and dependent on who is around.

Waltz’s (2010: 131) description of Berghain as a ‘special social constellation in which all party-goers come together under the hegemony of Berlin’s gay community’ was written at the end of the 2000s, but since then the crowd has become even more mixed and international. When the club opened in 2004, Berlin was still a shrinking city, but especially after the Global Financial Crisis in 2007–2008, the population started to rise partly because of international migration: between 2008 and 2018, rents of newly let apartments increased with 78% and purchasing prices almost trebled (Holm, 2019). In *Queer Constellations*, Dianne Chisholm (2005: 11, 65) deploys Benjamin’s notion of constellations to ‘foreground contradictions’ such as the intimate connection between ‘sex radicalism’ and ‘the homo-eroticization of capital’ in the context of New York’s 1970s bathhouses. A similar relationship exists in Berlin today where the city’s reputation for hedonistic nightlife has gone hand in hand with rapid gentrification, exacerbated by party tourism and lifestyle migration. While the suggestion that Berghain has ‘become a brutalist Ibiza for the jet-setting class’ is exaggerated (Thomas, 2021), the partial gentrification and straightification of the crowd has created a new heterogeneity.

Perhaps to accommodate the diversification of the crowd, some spatial adjustments that could be viewed as de-gaying or desexualising have taken place in Berghain: the replacement of the downstairs darkroom with the more exposed Säule mezzanine, for example, or the installation of new seating outside the toilets where gay men used to have sex on a couch. At the same time, the more diverse crowd in combination with new highly libidinal recreational drugs such as G and mephedrone have created a *pharmacolibidinal* constellation that is more open-ended. In the late 2000s, the quality and global availability of ecstasy (3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, MDMA) dropped after the Cambodian government with the assistance of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), burnt large quantities of oil rich in safrole, which was used as the chemical precursor in the production of ecstasy. Until then, ecstasy – complemented with amphetamine, cocaine, and ketamine – had dominated in Berghain like it did in the techno clubs of the 1990s, where it was typically understood as promoting empathy and platonic tactility among previously segregated groups: ‘Gay or not-gay was totally immaterial. As was Wessi or Ossi. Everyone got cuddly on ecstasy’ as one informant in *Der Klang Der Familie*, the oral history of Berlin’s techno scene, puts it (Denk and von Thülen, 2014: 120).

This somewhat desexualised understandings of MDMA as cuddly also informed early work on raves and clubs, which described ecstasy as ‘non-genital, especially for men’ (Morton, 1995: 38) or as ‘much more likely to promote a desire for cuddling and friendship than for sex’ (McDermott et al., 1992: 12). Produced during the ‘safer sex’ era of the first phase of the AIDS crisis, such accounts arguably conflated mechanics with desire, confusing the temporary erectile dysfunction caused by MDMA with an absence of libido. Since then, the invention of Viagra and antiretroviral HIV medications (including pre-exposure ones like PrEP) has helped to facilitate a carefree exchange of bodily fluids not seen since before the AIDS crisis. Because of the temporary drop in the quality of ecstasy (safrole was eventually replaced with a newly invented synthetic precursor called PMK-Glycidate), other substances such as G, which was initially marketed as ‘liquid ecstasy’, and mephedrone, first popularised in the UK as a cheap ‘legal high’ during the recession (later becoming more expensive after it was classified as a narcotic), established themselves in the meantime.

Both G and mephedrone are strongly libido-enhancing drugs associated with so-called ‘chills’ or ‘chemsex parties’ organised through gay hook-up apps. Apart from getting high and having sex, chemsex typically involves ‘deep emotional talk’ requiring the participants
to articulate their same-sex desire in addition to downloading and using gay-identified apps (Hakim, 2019: 258). In contrast, in clubs like Berghain, the introduction of the same substances takes place in a highly libidinal context that requires no verbal or written sexual identity affiliation. Electronic dance music events such as Berlin’s Love Parade have been understood as ‘a sensual and affective experience that itself purposely refuses to enter into a relation with official language’ (Borneman and Senders, 2000: 297–300), while similarly, nightclubs offer an alternative model of togetherness where dancing, flirting, sex, tactility, gestures, and smiles are often only accompanied by a bare minimum of verbal communication (Buckland, 2002).

This deprivileging of spoken language enables interactions that fall between or outside the discursive labels with which people might identify in their everyday lives. It is not that desire becomes entirely a set of overwhelming affective flows outside the discursive – in fact, the heavily mythologised discourses of Berghain as sexually free-spirited probably influences behaviour – but sexual encounters are not solely determined by physical criteria, but also by proximity and a range of other sonic, sensual, and pharmacological factors. Moreover, unlike chemsex, which is dependent on both drugs and the image-sharing technologies of hook-up apps – two key aspects of our pharmacopornographic times (Preciado, 2013) – Berghain is pharmacological without being pornographic: desire and collectivity are funnelled through drugs while photography is banned.

G has perhaps changed the erotic dynamics of clubs more than any other drug since the popularisation of ecstasy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Easily bought as an industrial paint stripper online, GBL which the body converts into GHB, is taken in very small quantities with a pipette or syringe making the cost of a dose as low as a few cents. Because of the precise measurements and the importance of timing doses correctly, the risk of overdosing is high and poses problems for clubs when people either ‘collapse’ or start to behave in erratic ways. If there is a ‘G dance’ – an unchoreographed equivalent to Anita Berber’s embodied Weimar performances of ‘Cocaine’ and ‘Morphine’ – its dark variant has something of the death throes about it: far from the hip spasmodic movements of some dance styles, its frightening loss of control resembles epileptic seizures. To minimise such episodes, the body search by security on the door in Berghain is rigorous and those found in possession of G automatically get a three-months Hausverbot the first time and are banned for life the second time (in contrast other drugs are typically confiscated without further penalty). The physically intrusive search on the door, has led guests to hide 20 or 30 millilitre bottles of the drug in condoms in their vagina or rectum, later retrieved in the toilets after entering, in a smuggling process that turns sexual organs into embodied storages for a liquid that literally kills: ‘the rectum as a grave’, or perhaps when dosed right, a self-shattering jouissance of ‘losing sight of the self’ inside Berghain’s labyrinthine space (Bersani, 1987: 222).

While it is tempting to link G with antirelational queer theory’s preoccupation with the death drive, it is also a liquid that concretises queer theory’s preoccupation with sexual fluidity. In the autumn of 2021, a poster campaign across Berlin by ‘Clubculture against GHB’ included the slogan ‘Don’t kill the vibe’ while the city’s Clubcommission (2021) issued a statement (‘There is no G in Club Culture’) presenting the drug as a threat to Berlin’s reputation for ‘hedonism and the dissolution of boundaries.’ Yet, put differently, G is ‘the vibe’ in many of Berlin’s clubs precisely because it facilitates the ‘dissolution of boundaries.’ Public health messaging, advocating prohibition over harm reduction, is likely to fail unless it acknowledges these pharmacolibidinal characteristics. Poured as a graffiti remover on Hänninen’s ‘empiric studies’ of the self-segregating tendency on Berghain’s dancefloors, G would dissolve the boundaries between the different subgroups and create one big
blurry mass/mess (Figure 3). Digested in the body, the drug appears to do something similar by blurring distinctions and creating an unbounded eroticism that, at times, overwhelms the participants. This lowering of sexual inhibitions can be described as a ‘lowering of standards’; phrased horizontally, however, it is also as a ‘widening of scope’ and ‘broadening of horizons.’

**Conclusion**

Approaching 20, Berghain has outlived the lifespan of most canonical clubs and continues to attract new generations of devout followers. Yet in many ways, the club remains rooted in the first post-Cold War decade of the 1990s, when its predecessors Snax and Ostgut started experimenting with techno, art, and sex in abandoned buildings. The name Berghain – a combination of the now merged former West and East Berlin boroughs, Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain – suggests a meeting of West and East, while the desegregation of sexual groups the club has fostered, speaks to the broader valorisation of encounters that also informed the relational art of the period. In his manifesto *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicolas Bourriaud (2002: 50–51) suggested that Cuban artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres had foreshadowed a space based in inter-subjectivity where ‘homosexuality did not seal a community assertion: quite to the contrary, it became a life model that could be shared by all, and identified with by everyone’. Klubnacht, which has been described as ‘half art project, half social experiment’ (Paumgarten, 2014), became a realisation of such an inter-subjective space that not only attracted a wide range of people into a predominantly gay club, but encouraged everyone to adopt ways of relating associated with the subculture.

These roots in 1990s gay white male culture, can, at times, make Berghain seem out of sync with Berlin’s younger generation of queer parties. While many of the newer parties have adopted features originally associated with Berghain – sex positivity, bans on photography, selectivity on the door, long opening hours, and publicised connections with the art world – they also differ in important organisational and political ways, highlighting changes in the meaning of ‘queer’ over time. Where Berghain’s management is hierarchical and never makes public statements, the new generation of parties often describe themselves as ‘collectives’ and communicate with their customers on social media. Moreover, unlike Berghain, they publicly embrace political causes, frequently adopting a language of community, solidarity, coalition-building, and intersectionality, which draws explicitly on feminist, trans, and queer of colour critiques.

The new prevalence of ‘awareness teams’ in Berlin’s clubs, for example, tasked with creating ‘safe(r) spaces’ by preventing boundary crossings and micro aggressions is rooted in feminist practices of self-governance (Raiselis, 2021). While it is difficult to imagine yellow-vested awareness teams in Berghain, there have been signs that the club is subtly abandoning its apolitical policy of not making public statements. In 2020, support for Black Lives Matter was published on its website and in 2022 all profits from Klubnacht’s reopening weekend, after the second Covid-19 lockdown, were donated to sexual and racial minority organisations working with refugees from Ukraine. The peace sign placed on the façade at the same time, following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, suggested that not only Berghain, but Europe had entered a different era from the optimistic one in which the club first emerged.

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