Sustainable Utopias: The Art and Politics of Hope in Germany. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press. 2022. 351 pp. £34.95 (hardback).

Jennifer Allen offers up a relieving slice of hope and optimism. *Sustainable Utopias* charts a broad and disaggregated movement of the 1980s, which responded to seemingly closed parliamentary possibilities, private encroachment into public space, and a limited and hierarchical historical establishment. In their place, artists sought to create large-scale participatory installations, Green Party politicians sought to democratise cultural production, and historians developed *Alltagsgeschichte*. It is clear that Allen is right in drawing these parallels and identifying an important cultural moment of the mid-1980s. A less sophisticated historian might even have used the term *Zeitgeist* in such a context– irrespective of the merits of ‘Sustainable Utopia’ to describe these movements, it means Allen avoids this trap, and offers an impressive discussion of practiced ideology as a result.

Of the three groups Allen explores here, the artists are probably the most convincing. Spatial interventionism was transgressive in breaking art not only out of its galleries and exhibitions, but also out of its traditional audiences and passive modes of appreciation. It had a new relationship with space, too, which Allen describes as ‘functional’. For these artists, ‘the site is not defined as a *pre*condition’, but ‘is *generated* by the work’ (p. 57, emphasis in original). So too is the participation imagined at its most expansive – these were no targeted interventions, but hoped to engage the public in generating the art and its space.

Undoubtedly this new artistic movement brought something new to the streets, parks, squares and buildings of German cities, and Allen’s description situates the movement in intellectual currents ranging from de Certeau to Habermas with impressive acuity. Yet despite this, this section leaves some significant questions well alone. Much is written about power – the artist’s intentions to challenge established power structures, their need to engage with municipal authorities, their conviction that art could be democratised through their interventions. There is little, however, on the power on which the artists own agency to intervene rested. In one section, Gunter Demnig’s *Duftmarken* [scent marks] project to paint a line in the road between Kassel and Paris was repeatedly stopped because he did not get permission and was arrested – though his work was eventually completed and he presumably avoided prosecution (p. 56). The reader is left to imagine how much graffiti, some painted over, some resulting in fines, he passed on the way. Similarly, the insistence on the work defining a space suggests not a tactical Certeauian intervention, but a strategic one that sits uncomfortably with the insistence that this interventionist art did not consider space a *tabula rasa*. If these issues rest on the special privilege of the artist to legitimise spatial intervention as acceptable, others emerge in unpacking the figures of ‘the public’ and ‘ordinary people’ who loom so large in the artists objectives. Who took part in these interventions, and who did they exclude? Perhaps more pointedly, we might ask what role such art played in the gentrification of German inner-cities, defining a space of privilege, and the privileged, at the same time. Who got to live in sustainable utopia? Given the current vogue for participatory research in the UK and beyond, questions raised by Allen’s book have significant contemporary as much as historical salience.

In many ways, these were also the questions that led and enlivened another of Allen’s case studies – the stop-start cultural policy of Germany’s Green Party in the 1980s, and, though to a lesser extent, the familiar *Alltagsgeschichte* scholars of the third. It is the section on the Greens, however, that Allen uses to examine some of the potential pitfalls of sustainable utopia, and especially its limits, as a party increasingly bound to the strictures of institutional and parliamentary politics found new conflict in its democratic, bottom-up ideology. The Green cultural agenda – which Allen convincingly argues certainly existed – rallied for decentralized investment, the provision of space for cultural innovation, and most impressively against new centralising institutions that might sap the life out of local agency. The universalism and emphasis on personal agency in this agenda cannot be gainsaid, and the Greens scored some notable successes, especially in alliance with Berlin’s new ‘Active Museum’. Any impacts on the democratisation of culture, however, are (perhaps sensibly) left to another to explore. In many ways, the same story was repeated by the most radical experiments of the *Geschichtewerkstätten* – a series of attempts to democratise history by bringing it ‘in place’ (‘*vor Ort*’) most obviously realised by Berlin’s ‘mobile museum’ (pp. 157ff). In Allen’s narrative, a series of once-radical initiatives were undone by infighting, administration and the rapid acceptance of new historical methods. Yet it also leaves the reader wondering how committed to democratisation the leaders of the Mobile Museum actually were: the presentation of uncomfortable histories on site certainly reached new audiences, but leading historians seem to have been reluctant to cede their authority over the past.

Undeniably, this is a fascinating and important book which offers a sustained engagement not just with a core ideological thread of Germany’s 1980s, but with questions of continued relevance to today’s efforts to democratise both art and history.

Dr Ben Anderson

*Keele University*.