

Terrified by the Close Other. Is the Postwar History of German Art Ready to Embrace "State Functionaries"?

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Abstract

The article sets out to investigate the fundamental problem for the methodology of postwar German art history, namely, the unavoidable fusion of two markedly different perspectives, i.e., those of East and West Germany, into a coherent narrative. The reconstruction of key exhibitions and controversies sparked by East German art, in 1989 and beyond, suggests that the revision of the canon of art history may be faced with greater challenges whenever adopting the perspective of the close Other (political or ideological), rather than that of a remote Other (ethnic or cultural). The incorporation of the close Other into a uniform narrative on art history can be a moot point, most notably in those cases where the western concept of art calls for a necessary restatement, and one's identity needs to be critically redefined in the process. This is best exemplified by what happened in Germany after 1989.

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Introduction

[1] On the occasion of celebrating German reunification, which took place on 2 October 1990 at the Bundestag, Günter Grass (1927–2015) delivered a rather sorrowful address. His speech seems to be vital for several reasons. Alarmed by the emerging orientation in the reunification process, Grass shared a word of warning against that which seemed inescapable: a mounting economic and social divide, and the ensuing rise of antagonistic attitudes within the German polity.

According to Grass's prophesying account, this accumulation of negative psychic energy would soon be channelled into a stream of hatred targeted against the weak, other, and strange. The main line of argument in his speech addressed the dominant trend in the policy pursued by the West German government, who sought to implement a free-market economy in the former German Democratic Republic (hereinafter: the GDR) as a remedy for differences that had arisen over more than four decades of mutual isolation. This bitter diatribe, which describes the economic and social costs to be paid by former citizens of the GDR in the reunification process, comes to a climax in Grass's biting remarks on the approach to East German culture:

Not a single painting created in the GDR, or in bondage, as it is commonly called, shall be considered art and put on display in museums! Western culture is now all that matters, above all in the world! [...] No more forgiveness. No more privileges. What is "cultural identity"! It is nowhere to be found either in the German State Treaty [Staatsvertrag, 18 September 1990] or German Reunification Treaty [Einigungsvertrag, 31 August 1990]. "It's all useless junk!" we have all heard this diagnosis by now. Forget about your "Kulturbund" and other accomplishments.¹

According to Grass, after 1989, Germany witnessed the mass emergence of brutally uprooted citizens, who were also denied and deprived of their past in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall. He also made a reference to the concept of cultural identity. Disgraced in the Nazi period, and as such discarded by West Germany,² this notion served as one of the ideological foundations of the GDR as an antinomy of the Federal Republic of Germany (hereinafter: the FRG). A variety

¹ Günter Grass, "NRD na wyprzedzący. Mowa wygłoszona w Berlińskim Reichstagu" [GDR for sale. A speech delivered at the Berlin Reichstag], in: *O kondycji Niemiec. Tożsamość niemiecka w debatach intelektualistów po 1945 roku* [On the condition of Germany. The German identity in intellectual debates after 1945], eds. Joanna Jabłkowska and Leszek Żyliński, trans. Joanna Jabłkowska, Poznań 2008, 444-455: 454. Unless otherwise stated, German quotations were translated into Polish by the author. The English version of all Polish quotations was provided by the translator Bartosz Sowiński.

² In the 1950s, the concept of Germany, which was a moot point at that time as an idea charged with national (if not downright nationalistic) overtones, was supplanted with the word *Abendland* (which could be translated as "Christian West"). At the conceptual stage in 1954, the first documenta in Kassel (1955), a "festival of western avant-garde", was called: "documenta. Abendländische Kunst des XX. Jahrhunderts". Walter Grasskamp, "To Be Continued: Periodic Exhibitions (DOCUMENTA, For Example)", in: *Tate Papers* 12 (2009), <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/12/to-be-continued-periodic-exhibitions-documenta-for-example> (last access: 2 September 2019). The concept of German art melted into internationalistic phrases such as *Westkunst* (western art), while *Weltsprache Abstraktion* (the global language of abstraction) was to be its key language of expression. See Gregor Wedekind, "Abstraktion und Abendland: die Erfindung der documenta als Antwort auf unsere deutsche Lage", in: *Kunstgeschichte nach 1945: Kontinuität und Neubeginn in Deutschland*, ed. Nicola Doll, Cologne 2006, 165-181: 168.

of cultural institutions, including the *Kulturbund*, were established to continue this idea.³

[2] Art played an instrumental role in the process of building the East German identity. In the early years of the GDR, art was used by the Communist party to strengthen and legitimise the new regime; however, over time, most notably in the 1970s and beyond, it also began to serve as an alternative public space. Artists developed a system of symbolic and metaphorical allusions which helped them to communicate with an increasingly disaffected and disillusioned society.⁴ At that time, artists such as Wolfgang Mattheuer, Volker Stelzmann, or Bernhard Heisig produced a series of paintings which are called problem paintings in literature [German: *Problembilder*].⁵ The West German art critic and *Die Zeit* columnist Hans-Joachim Müller was truly surprised by the gravity which the citizens of East Germany attached to art: "Over time, East-German gallery goers developed an unprecedented faith in paintings as a socially useful force."⁶

[3] One has to bear in mind, however, that the history of East German art was the history of painting production on a mass scale, not only by professional artists (who operated in the Communist mainstream and in the underground), but also by amateur aficionados. Countless works were also produced on a commission from party organisations and mounted in public buildings: vacation homes for the working class, training centres, canteens, party offices, or workers' clubs.⁷ A large

³ Established in 1945, the *Kulturbund zur demokratischen Erneuerung Deutschlands* was designed as an organisation crossing the boundaries of occupation zones, informed by an anti-fascist ethos, and promoting pluralistic art that disseminated humanistic ideas. When the Socialist Unity Party of Germany came to power in the GDR, the *Kulturbund* became a cultural and political tool in their hands, and it lost its significance in the West.

⁴ Cf. Bernd Lindner, "Wunschbilder? Kunstrezipienten als Förderer und Kritiker von Auftragskunst in der DDR", in: *Enge und Vielfalt. Auftragskunst und Kunstförderung in der DDR. Analysen und Meinungen*, ed. Paul Kaiser, Hamburg 1999, 223-239, especially 228.

⁵ Roland Prügel, "Kritischer Realismus - 'Problembilder' in der DDR in den späten 60er und 70er Jahren", a paper delivered at the conference "Avantgarde und Geschichte im Kalten Krieg", Deutsches Historisches Museum, 04.12.2009-05.12.2009, https://www.academia.edu/11948770/Kritischer_Realismus_Problembilder_in_der_DDR_in_den_sp%C3%A4ten_1960er_und_1970er_Jahren (last access: 13 February 2019).

⁶ As cited in: Bernd Lindner, *Nähe+Distanz. Bildende Kunst in der DDR*, Erfurt 2017, 10.

⁷ The Kunstarchiv Beeskow, a documentation centre for the visual arts in the GDR established in Beeskow (Brandenburg) in 1995 and financed by three federal states is responsible for the storage of artworks formerly owned by Communist party organisations. The archive website provides the following information: "Our understanding of the Kunstarchiv Beeskow's role is that of recording the visual arts of the GDR. The collection now holds 23,000 items, mainly paintings, prints, drawings, and watercolours, but also photographs, sculptures, handicraft products, and medals. Until 1989, they were the property of the party, social organisations, GDR government bodies, the Cultural Fund of the GDR, and the City Office of (East) Berlin"; <https://www.kunstarchiv-beeskow.de/> (last access: 2 February 2019). See Marlene Heidel, *Bilder außer Plan. Kunst aus der DDR und das kollektive Gedächtnis*, Berlin 2015 and

number of workplaces had their own collections of art: the art collection of the Wismut Soviet-German Joint-Stock Company in Chemnitz held more than 4,000 items in 1989.⁸ Those who seek a 'shared' postwar history of German art will be faced with a fundamental methodological challenge: how does one merge two distinct perspectives on art history, namely, those of East and West Germany, into a coherent narrative?

[4] This article sets out to provide a reconstruction of the controversies that emerged while extending the canon of post-1945 German art, the tedious process of which was forced by geopolitical change after 1989; it also tries to demonstrate that attempts at the revision of the canon of art history are faced with unexpected and greater challenges whenever adopting the perspective of a close Other (political or ideological) rather than that of a remote Other (ethnic or cultural). These challenges are not only due to the fact that one's identity should be critically redefined in the process. The incorporation of the close Other into a uniform narrative on art history may be a debatable issue, most notably in those cases where the modern concept of art developed in the West calls for a critical restatement. This is best exemplified by what happened in Germany after 1989.

Two art histories in one polity

[5] In the early years of the reunification process, makeshift yet far-reaching criteria were quickly adopted for the evaluation of artistic production in the GDR. These criteria were not so much aesthetic as moral in nature.⁹ Simplistic and black-and-white depictions of East German art prevailed: dissidents versus *Staatskünstler* (Communist state/ party artists) or the Communist mainstream versus the underground. One likely reason for this was that researchers and critics lacked the necessary tools with which to appreciate the relevance of East German art. The language and value criteria used in western literature on art history offered no requisite vocabulary to describe a number of phenomena. The existing lexicon only encouraged negative judgements.

[6] Another reason for such a situation was also the fact that access to information from the other side was limited not only in the GDR. The same

Jérôme Bazin, *Réalisme et égalité - Une histoire sociale des arts en République Démocratique Allemande (1949-1990)*, Dijon 2015. In his study, Bazin offers a 'bottom-up' social perspective. A similar methodology was furnished by April A. Eisman. See April A. Eisman, "Whose East German Art Is This? The Politics of Reception After 1989", in: *Imaginations. Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies*, May 21, 2017, <http://imagination.glendon.yorku.ca/?p=9487> (last access: 2 February 2019).

⁸ Paul Kaiser, "Ressentiment und Konfliktzug. Die Präsentations- und Sammlungspolitik ostdeutscher Kunst nach dem Ende der DDR als Rahmenhandlung des Bilderstreites", in: *Bilderstreit und Gesellschaftsumbruch. Die Debatten um die Kunst aus der DDR im Prozess der deutschen Wiedervereinigung*, eds. Karl-Siegbert Rehberg and Paul Kaiser, Berlin and Kassel 2013, 72-90: 77.

⁹ Frank Eckhart, *Eigenart und Eigensinn. Alternative Kulturszenen in der DDR (1980-1990)*, Bremen 1993, 65.

separation mechanism was also present in West Germany, where information on East German art was somewhat scant, as opposed to news on music or literature. The two following books, *Die Malerei in der DDR 1949-1979* (Cologne 1980) by the Cologne-based art historian Karin Thomas, and *Malerei und Graphik in der DDR* (Leipzig 1978) by the influential East German art critic and curator Lothar Lang¹⁰, remain the seminal publications on the art of the 'other' Germany. Karin Thomas's book, which was published in 1980, is especially worth noticing. Its author was fully aware of the fact that the East German artistic scene had been undergoing significant change since the mid-1970s. It is also truly astonishing as an attempt at providing a matter-of-fact and impartial account of the development of East German art using 'inner' criteria for analysis, i.e., the ones prevalent in the GDR itself. The book concludes with the observation that the greatest challenge of that time was to develop a new definition of Socialist Realism, one that would be broad enough to encapsulate emerging phenomena in East German art. Thomas quotes Jan Białostocki as a model art historian who managed to deftly combine the tradition of iconology with that of Marxism-Leninism.

[7] A proverbial can of worms was opened in December 1990 by Georg Baselitz (b. 1938) and his provocative statement published in a popular magazine called *art. Das Kunstmagazin*.¹¹ Hailing from Lusatia, Georg Kern *aka* Baselitz, who

¹⁰ The biography of Lothar Lang epitomises the attitudes of East German artistic circles, which elude black-and-white generalisations. A member of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany from 1946, Lang was appointed head of the Kupferstichkabinett (Collection of Prints and Drawings) at the Institut für Lehrerweiterbildung in Berlin-Weißensee, where in 1967 he organised the only exhibition in East Germany of the outsider artist Gerhard Altenbourg (1926-1989). In the 1960s, the Kupferstichkabinett was a prominent destination for the artistic world of the GDR, and it showcased a number of artists who would otherwise be ignored by other institutions. In 1968, the Kupferstichkabinett was closed, and Lang was dismissed for publishing a collection of prints by the dissident artist Wieland Förster (b. 1930). In 1977, he curated a famous display of East German art at documenta 6 in Kassel. In 1976, he organised an exhibition on the occasion of Altenbourg's 50th birthday at Schloss Hinterglauchau. At the opening night, Lang delivered a laudatory speech on the artist, and faced no consequences. Günter Ullmann, the head of the gallery, was in turn dismissed. Lang made no mention of the respect that Altenbourg commanded in West Germany (the artist was showcased at documenta 2 in 1959; he was also awarded a number of distinctions; in 1969/1970, he was celebrated with a retrospective exhibition which travelled to Hannover, Baden-Baden, West Berlin, Hamburg, and Düsseldorf). Many years later, Lang was exposed as a secret agent (in service since 1967) of the Stasi, the East German secret police. See: Lindner, *Nähe + Distanz*, 69-70.

¹¹ The presentation of East German artists at documenta 6 in Kassel in 1977 provoked a controversy which served as a prelude to Baselitz's provocative antics. East German art was mainly showcased by the members of the Leipzig School. This fuelled a scandal: an East German observer demanded that works by Penck be taken off the exhibition. This defiant artist was also in regular contact with his friends from the West; he lived in Dresden at that time and was stripped of his nationality in 1980. Two migrants to the West, Gerhard Richter and Georg Baselitz, retaliated with an ostentatious refusal to take

considered himself to be a transterritorial, relocated from East Berlin to West Berlin in 1957 following his expulsion from the Hochschule Berlin-Weißensee for "social and political immaturity".¹² Baselitz's radical stance contributed to a debate on East German art with a whole array of stereotypical notions, which were to recur throughout the following decade, and perpetuated a series of pejorative depictions of East German artists as provincial botchers in the service of the Communist party and Communist state.¹³ This thoroughly uncompromising statement is worth quoting *in extenso*:

There were no artists in the GDR, all of them had left [...]. This is not a verdict. It's a mere statement of fact! [...] No artists. No painters, either. None of them ever managed to create a painting. They made reproductions and reconstructions. They never invented anything. This is all boring. These are mere interpretations, all of them toeing the line of the Communist dispensation. These artists served ideological propaganda [...]. They weren't even apologists, but mere assholes. Don't forget that Germany was divided at that time, and active painters either lived in West Germany or relocated there.¹⁴

[8] Baselitz refuses to accept that individual choices could be determined by a motivation other than art or ideology. This reveals one more demarcating line, which comes strongly to the fore of this German-German painting controversy and divides the artistic scene of the former GDR into those who stayed and those who either emigrated or defected. Sven Marquardt (b. 1962), another German artist and active member of the alternative artistic scene of East Berlin,¹⁵ recalls his first stay in West Berlin:

part in the exhibition. In 1988, Baselitz expressed his aversion to East German artists once more: he withdrew from West Berlin's Academy of Arts in a stand against the decision to tenure Volker Stelzmann, a defector from the East and long-standing affiliate of the Academy of Graphic Art and Book Art in Leipzig. In the early days of February 1992, Baselitz withdrew from the Academy yet again (with Richter, Gotthard Graubner, and 18 other West German painters and sculptors) in a protest against the reunion of the Akademie der Künste-West with the Akademie der Künste-Ost, which meant that all the members of the latter were, by default, admitted to the former. Cf. Gisela Schirmer, *DDR und documenta: Kunst im deutsch-deutschen Widerspruch*, Berlin 2005, 82-143, Eckhart Gillen, [untitled], in: *Enge und Vielfalt. Auftragskunst und Kunstförderung in der DDR*, eds. Paul Kaiser and Karl-Siegbert Rehberg, Berlin 1999, 589-590: 589.

¹² See Justyna Balisz-Schmelz, *Przeszłość niepokonana. Sztuka niemiecka po 1945 roku jako przestrzeń i medium pamięci* [The past undefeated. German art after 1945 as a space and medium of memory], Cracow 2018, 161-165.

¹³ The following terms recurred in the debate: *Auftragskunst* (artist working on commission), *Schreibtischtäter* (desk murderers), *Klassenkampfillustratoren* (class struggle illustrators), or even *Unkunst* (non-art).

¹⁴ Axel Hecht and Alfred Welti, "Ein Meister, der Talent verschmäht. Werkstattgespräch mit Georg Baselitz", in: *art. Das Kunstmagazin* 12 (1990), no. 6, 54-72: 69.

¹⁵ Marquardt's photographs were showcased at the exhibition "Gegenstimmen. Kunst in der DDR 1976-1989", curated by Eugen Blume and Christoph Tannert, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, 16 July - 26 September 2016.

*To stand on the other side all of a sudden. There's something pitiful to it. And something extremely absurd. I thought: Hey you, Marquardt, imagine you can stay here, but you will never be able to return home on the other side. Do you really want this? [...] Alas, enough is enough at some point [...]. I'm losing my breath from all I can see and feel. My throat clenches from all this freedom.*¹⁶

[9] For Marquardt, the icon of East German counter-culture, his native environment and the network of interpersonal relations he was immersed in defined his identity. A defection to the West would have entailed breaking up with his artistic *milieu*, friends, family, and reality, each of which had a formative effect on him. This is not to say, however, that he uncritically conformed to the East German way of life; it was quite the contrary. He chose the GDR for personal reasons rather than ideology.

[10] This apparently obvious argument is nowhere to be found in the polemical storm that followed Baselitz's snide remarks.¹⁷ When put together, these arguments boil down to the issue of German identity and the West European notion of art and its social function.¹⁸ Western notions of art, which celebrated freedom and autonomy,¹⁹ banished most of the artworks created in the former GDR.²⁰ As he explained his decision not to invite a single East German artist to

¹⁶ Sven Marquardt, *Noc jest życiem. Autobiografia* [Night is life. Autobiography], trans. Katarzyna Bieńkowska-Szreniawska, Cracow 2016, 148-149.

¹⁷ The artist was endorsed by Siegfried Gohr (b. 1949), then the head of the Ludwig Museum in Cologne, whereas Peter Ludwig (1925-1996), the founder of the museum, entrepreneur, and collector of East German art (including Baselitz's works), replied in a bitter and disenchanting tone. Gohr was consistent in his refusal to put the works of East German artists from Ludwig's collection on public display. In 1983, Ludwig and his wife founded the Ludwig Institut für Kunst der DDR in Oberhausen, which flourished until 1998 and served as a hub for exhibitions and conferences problematising East German art. In 2009, the newly appointed head of the Ludwiggalerie Schloss Oberhausen selected 129 paintings, 33 sculptures, and 500 prints from the Museum Ludwig collection and bequeathed them as a perpetual deposit to the Museum der bildenden Künste in Leipzig and the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg. As a result, the programme of the gallery was thoroughly reshaped, thereby departing from the intentions and design of its founders. Cf. *Bilderstreit und Gesellschaftsumbruch*, eds. Rehberg and Kaiser, 494-503.

¹⁸ Cf. Martin Damus, *Malerei der DDR. Funktionen der bildenden Kunst im Realen Sozialismus*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1991 and Martin Damus, *Kunst in der BRD 1945-1990: Funktionen der Kunst in einer demokratisch verfaßten Gesellschaft*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1995.

¹⁹ This line of thinking is best exemplified by a remark from Siegfried Gohr, the director of the Ludwig Museum in Cologne between 1985 and 1991: "Avant-garde art emerges in a dispute between artists who inconvenience society with their freedom and provoke reflection. Works by avant-garde artists have polemical momentum and spark off debate." Siegfried Gohr, "Ostkunst bleibt ein schwieriges Kapitel", in: *Kölner Stadtanzeiger*, 14 July 1990.

²⁰ Quoted by Walter Grasskamp, art historian Georg Bussmann points out that the apology of the western model of art and its underlying rhetoric of the freedom and autonomy of

documenta 9 (1992), Jan Hoet (1936–2014) made it clear that art was in fact out of bounds in the Communist system of oppression, since freedom was the essential condition for art to emerge.²¹ In *Kunstforum international*, a magazine highly regarded by academic scholars, Hermann Pfütze mocked East German art as "an ambassador of the will against art";²² he did so in a critical review of curator Eckhart Gillen's exhibition *Deutschlandbilder* (1997/1998), which showcased East German artists, including members of the Leipzig School.²³ Leipzig-born curator Christoph Tannert (b. 1955) and the signatories of his open letter in turn called the induction of Bernhard Heisig's works to the Reichstag Building art gallery as "an error of art history" [*ein kunsthistorischer Irrtum*].²⁴

[11] Bernhard Heisig (1925–2011), a doyen of the Leipzig School and a man of principle, strong charisma, and nonconformist attitudes, had a considerable effect on the whole generation of what we now know as East German autonomous

art were indirectly used for the purpose of legitimizing the Western economic model, which needs art to "neutralise" and cover up its negative consequences. Walter Grasskamp, "Die unästhetische Demokratie", in: *Die Zeit*, 28 September 1990, <https://www.zeit.de/1990/40/die-unaesthetische-demokratie/komplettansicht> (access 07 January 2020).

²¹ "Das Mysterium weiß man nie. Gespräch zwischen Jan Hoet, Petra Kipphoff und Hans Joachim Müller", in: *Die Zeit*, 17 January 1992, <https://www.zeit.de/1992/04/das-mysterium-weiss-man-nie> (access 07 January 2020).

²² Hermann Pfütze, "Kunst aus einem geteilten Land", in: *Kunstforum international*, no. 139 (Dezember 1997 – März 1998), 320-321. According to Pfütze, only Gerhard Altenbourg and Roger Loewig could be called artists in their own right (both were pushed to the fringes of the East German artistic scene).

²³ *Deutschlandbilder. Kunst aus einem geteilten Land*, exh. cat. Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, ed. Eckhart Gillen, Cologne 1997. The Leipzig School was circulated as a term in the early 1970s by the Berlin-based critic Lothar Lang. The term refers to the circle of artists affiliated with the Academy of Graphic Art and Book Art in Leipzig, including Bernhard Heisig, Werner Tübke, Walter Libuda, Arno Rink, and Wolfgang Mattheuer. The beginnings of the Leipzig School date back to the 1960s, when Bernhard Heisig was appointed Professor and Rector of the Academy. Literature differentiates between "the first" (the 1960s and 1970s) and "second" Leipzig School (post 1989), the latter including Neo Rauch, Tim Eitel, and Michael Triegel. Cf. "Die Leipziger Schule", in: Lang, *Malerei und Graphik in der DDR*, 120-136 and Karl-Siegbert Rehberg, "Mitarbeit an einem Weltbild: die Leipziger Schule", in: *Kunst in der DDR. Eine Retrospektive der Nationalgalerie*, exh. cat., eds. Eugen Blume and Roland März, Berlin 2003, 45-59.

²⁴ Christoph Tannert et al., *Offener Brief gegen die Einbeziehung von Bernhard Heisig bei der künstlerischen Ausgestaltung des Berliner Reichstages*, 31. Januar 1998. As cited in: *Bilderstreit und Gesellschaftsumbruch*, eds. Rehberg and Kaiser, 425. Cf. *Kunst im Reichstagsgebäude. Im Auftrag des Deutschen Bundestages*, eds. Götz Adriani, Andreas Kaernbach and Karin Stempel, Cologne 2001. Heisig contributed a painting called *Zeit und Leben* to the collection of "Kunstwerke im Reichstagsgebäude". The piece was mounted in the café, and in 2011 transferred to a more 'prestigious' location, namely, the library.

artists,²⁵ and he also supported their experiments with new media. As an academic teacher and the Rector of the Academy of Graphic Art and Book Art in Leipzig, Heisig was in unrelenting conflict with East German authorities while striving to force through his own vision of both art and history. He was one of the first German artists to be working through his personal trauma of the Siege of Breslau, and he did so in a plainspoken and undiplomatic way from the 1960s.²⁶ He also delivered a controversial speech at the Fifth Congress of the German Artists' Union (VKBD) in March 1964, which made him step down as rector; he horrified the members of the party when he began to call up on the artistic circles of the GDR to "take responsibility into their own hands" [*Selbstverantwortung des Künstlers*].²⁷

[12] As pointed out by Hans Belting (b. 1935), Heisig was the only artist inducted to the Reichstag gallery who also fully conformed to the expectations of its founders.²⁸ For the purpose, he contributed a complex panorama narrative on German identity and history.²⁹ According to Tannert, however, Heisig's close rapport with the GDR authorities (his tenure at the state university) and his painterly style as an "instrument"³⁰ of implementing party policy (formalist technique, critical realism, and historiosophical analysis) discredited him as an exponent of the united Berlin Republic.

[13] In 1993, Dieter Honisch, Head of the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, embarked on a risky undertaking when he juxtaposed works from the collections of former East and West German national galleries as he put them on display at this veritable shrine of modern art (designed by Mies van der Rohe).³¹ Suggestions were made at that time to showcase only dissident East German artists such as Hermann Glöckner, an abstract painter and the East German heir to Constructivist art.³²

²⁵ Gabriele Muschter and Rüdiger Thomas, *Jenseits der Staatskultur: Traditionen autonomer Kunst in der DDR*, Munich 1992.

²⁶ *Bernhard Heisig – Die Wut der Bilder*, ed. Eckhart Gillen, exh. cat., Cologne 2005.

²⁷ Eckhart Gillen, *Feindliche Brüder? Der Kalte Krieg und die deutsche Kunst 1945–1990*, Berlin 2009, 327.

²⁸ In 1999, the Deutscher Bundestag purchased works from 29 artists, including Gerhard Richter, Günther Uecker, Markus Lüpertz, Georg Baselitz, Sigmar Polke, Hanne Darboven, and Katharina Sieverding. Cf. Rita Süßmuth, "Kunst im Reichstag", in: *Kunst im Reichstagsgebäude*. eds. Adriani, Kaernbach and Stempel, 12-15: 12.

²⁹ Hans Belting, *Identität im Zweifel. Ansichten der deutschen Kunst*, Cologne 1999, 12-13.

³⁰ Tannert et al., *Offener Brief*, 425.

³¹ The event gave rise to a series of exhibitions under the title *Dialoge* [dialogues].

³² Andreas Hüneke, "Reißverschlussallergie. Darf Kunst aus der DDR in der Berliner Nationalgalerie ausgestellt werden? Eine Antwort", in: *FAZ*, 20 May 1994, reprinted in: *Bilderstreit und Gesellschaftsumbruch*, eds. Rehberg and Kaiser, 386.

[14] In their reasoning, critics and art historians went to ridiculous lengths when they equated art solely with freedom and autonomy at the exhibition *60 Jahre – 60 Werke*, which was held at Berlin's Martin-Gropius-Bau to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the West German Constitution.³³ Each year from 1949 to 2009 was illustrated with one work of art. This gesture established the sole canon of German art from that period. No former East German artist was put on display.³⁴ The curators advanced an indisputable claim whereby art could emerge exclusively from Article 5, Paragraph 3, of the Constitution, which safeguarded freedom of artistic expression.³⁵

[15] The views quoted above recurred many times in the debate. Last but not least, these stigmatising perceptions of East German art, which failed to conform to western aesthetic standards and notions of art and its function, were also expressed by art historians from outside of Germany. An insight by the Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski (1952–2015), one of the most eminent researchers of postwar art in Central and Eastern Europe, is a case in point. Piotrowski, too, failed to escape this rather superficial perception when he wrote in 2005:

*Following a campaign of intimidation by the then President of the VBK, Willy Sitte, Penck was passed over for a GDR contemporary art exhibition which the celebrated art collector Peter Ludwig held in Aachen in 1979. Formerly, his artworks had been showcased at documenta 6 in Kassel in 1977; however, they were utterly ignored by Eduard Beaucamp, one of the leading and most influential West German art critics. Beaucamp's reviews were chiefly concerned with East German mainstream painters, and their author continued to depict artists turned state functionaries as "subversive", even after the fall of the Berlin Wall.*³⁶

³³ *60 Jahre – 60 Werke. Kunst aus der Bundesrepublik Deutschland von 1949 bis 2009*, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, 1 May – 14 June 2009, curated by Götz Adriani, Robert Fleck, Siegfried Gohr, Susanne Kleine; the homonymous exhibition catalogue was edited by Walter Smerling, Cologne 2009.

³⁴ Cf. art historian Matthias Flügge in Deutschlandfunk Kultur, https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/kunsthistoriker-haelt-ausstellung-60-jahre-60-werke-fuer.954.de.html?dram:article_id=144260, 14 May 2009 (last access 15 June 2019); reprinted in: *Bilderstreit und Gesellschaftsumbruch*, eds. Rehberg and Kaiser, 508–509.

³⁵ Walter Smerling, "Das Gestern kann uns nur ermutigen", in: *60 Jahre – 60 Werke*, ed. Smerling, 14–15; cf. *Bilderstreit und Gesellschaftsumbruch*, eds. Rehberg and Kaiser, 504–511.

³⁶ Piotr Piotrowski, *Awangarda w cieniu Jałty. Sztuka w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1945–1989* [Avant-garde in the shadow of Yalta. Art in Central and Eastern Europe, 1945–1989], Poznań 2005, 159. Piotrowski's stance is all the more astonishing in that he seems to retract the claim in his posthumous publication "Czy realizm socjalistyczny był globalny?" [Was Socialist Realism global?]: "The artistic production of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe is not necessarily Socialist Realist, as is customarily believed. In other words, I am far from equating (mainstream) Soviet art with Socialist Realism." For Piotrowski, Aleksandr Deyneka epitomises this "inconspicuous Socialist Realism". Piotr

[16] Notwithstanding the fact that Penck (1939–2017)³⁷ was eventually passed over for documenta in 1977,³⁸ from the 1970s, Beaucamp (b. 1937),³⁹ the art historian quoted by Piotrowski, continued to challenge the simplistic notion of artists turned state functionaries as beneficiaries of state privileges and blind followers of party doctrine. Although Beaucamp held Penck's legacy in great esteem,⁴⁰ he wrote sparingly about his art, since his ultimate goal was to elevate and understand the art of Wolfgang Mattheuer, Werner Tübke, or Bernhard Heisig, who embodied inconspicuous non-conformist attitudes (despite their collaboration with state authorities).⁴¹ Beaucamp also sought to debunk the western model of the avant-garde and its underlying notion of the autonomy of art. He was also keen to demonstrate that division and discord had defined German art since the Reformation,⁴² and any and all depictions of German art would be incomplete without them.

[17] Hans Belting shares a similar insight to that of Beaucamp. He quotes ideological and political conflicts that subsequently shaped German art from the sixteenth century in order to caution those who are likely to ignore them:

We are reluctant to gaze into the double face of German art, since nothing could represent our divided, postwar history more painfully than this double legacy, Piotrowski, "Czy realizm socjalistyczny był globalny?", in: Piotr Piotrowski, *Globalne ujęcie sztuki Europy Wschodniej* [A global view of Eastern European art], Poznań 2018, 87-106: 87-88.

³⁷ A comment by Penck is a perfect reflection of the ambiguous attitudes and biographies of East German artists: "We saw the West as the incarnation of all evil [...]. We felt so self-righteous that we thought we were stronger, more consistent, and doing the right thing as artists, as opposed to those from the West, who were exposed to decadent influence. In fact, we acted in isolation, notwithstanding all the rebellions and watersheds." Otmar Rychlik, "Interview mit A. R. Penck", in: *A. R. Penck. Grafik*, exh. cat. Galerie Chobot, Vienna 1987, 12. Eckhart Gillen, who also quotes Penck's comment, offers an intriguing insight: "Self-esteem of this kind speaks volumes about this tradition, a tradition of Protestant and Pietist origin, particularly vivid in East German dissident circles. 'It was very much expressive of a yearning after power and strength, which apparently enabled a rewarding life in the service of ideology'". Gillen, *Feindliche Brüder?*, 194.

³⁸ See above, note 11.

³⁹ Beaucamp worked as a columnist at the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and visited both East German artists and exhibitions. From 1968, he regularly contributed to the FAZ, most notably on the members of the Leipzig School.

⁴⁰ In 1990, Beaucamp wrote a positive profile of Penck, whom he described as a "genuine dissident" and his art as "driven by defiance". Eduard Beaucamp, "Dissidenten, Hofkünstler, Malerfürsten. Über die schwierige Wiedervereinigung deutscher Kunst", in: Eduard Beaucamp, *Im Spiegel der Geschichte. Die Leipziger Schule*, Göttingen 2017, 169-176: 174.

⁴¹ Cf. April A. Eisman, *Bernhard Heisig and the Fight for Modern Art in East Germany*, New York 2018, 3.

⁴² Eduard Beaucamp, "Zwischen Utopie und Höllenfahrt. Die Ambivalenz des modernen Avantgardismus", in: Beaucamp, *Im Spiegel der Geschichte*, 194-211.

*which we find so easy to reduce to a conflict between free-market art and enslaved state art. [...] (German) art played an instrumental role in the symbolic production of identity so long as it was defined through contradiction. This is an inconvenient subject for many, who would willingly erase this chapter from their national biography.*⁴³

[18] A growing number of voices called for the recognition of East German art in its own right. As a result, a debate on the 'Germanhood' of German art has been gaining momentum since the late 1990s. As the postwar narrative on art history embraced the works of artists with worldviews or allegiances deriving from traditions that were no longer popular in West Germany (Max Beckmann, Lovis Corinth, or Oskar Kokoschka), the whole process called for the revision of German cultural heritage as a foundation for a shared post-unification identity.⁴⁴

Between the canon and the scrapyard of history

[19] Aleida Assmann's definition of the canon suggests that the canon (in other words, canonisation) is an active functional memory that differs from a storehouse (which collects the relics of culture with no recipients) as it preserves the past as present. As such, the canon enables the permanent presentation of certain content and its underlying values, which consolidates collective memory.⁴⁵ It is no wonder, therefore, that processes preceding canonisation (selection-recognition of value-duration) often entail conflict.

[20] Such a separation of artworks into an active canon and a dead archive is often part of a curatorial strategy that presents artworks as if they were placed in a Visible Storage.⁴⁶ Such a curatorial approach found its extreme (and scandalous) expression in the exhibition *Offiziell/Inoffiziell – Die Kunst der DDR*. Held in Weimar, the show was third in a series of exhibitions under the joint title *Aufstieg und Fall der Moderne*, which was organised to celebrate Weimar as the European Capital of Culture 1999. Whereas the first instalment in the series was showcased at the Schloßmuseum in Weimar, the second and the third were held at the Mehrzweckhalle, the post-Nazi Halle des Volkes, which was provided with a new façade in the GDR era. The lower storey of the building, which carried the stigma of two dictatorships, showcased 120 paintings from the private collection of Hitler, who purchased them from 1937 to 1944 at the Great German Art

⁴³ Hans Belting, *Identität im Zweifel*, 23 and 62.

⁴⁴ Cf. Werner Hofmann, *Wie deutsch ist die deutsche Kunst? Eine Streitschrift*, Leipzig 1999 and Volker Gebhardt, *Das Deutsche in der deutschen Kunst*, Cologne 2004.

⁴⁵ According to Assmann, art (artworks), just like religion and history, is key for an active cultural memory to emerge. Aleida Assmann, "Kanon i archiwum" [Canon and archive], trans. Aleksandra Konarzewska, in: Aleida Assmann, *Między historią a pamięcią. Antologia* [Between history and memory. Anthology], ed. Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska, Warsaw 2013, 74-88: 78-79.

⁴⁶ Karl-Siegbert Rehberg, "Deklassierung der Künste als stellvertretender Gesellschaftsdiskurs. Zu Geschichte und Funktion des deutsch-deutschen Bilderstreites", in: *Bilderstreit und Gesellschaftsumbruch*, eds. Rehberg and Kaiser, 23-62: 35.

Exhibitions ("Die Kunst dem Volke – erworben: Adolf Hitler").⁴⁷ In the upper storey, which had served as a factory floor, curator Achim Preiß (b. 1956) showcased the art of the former GDR (Figs. 1 and 2).



1 "Aufstieg und Fall der Moderne, Part III: Offiziell/Inoffiziell – Die Kunst der DDR", Kunstsammlungen Weimar, Mehrzweckhalle, 9 May 1999 – 26 September 1999, a view of the rotunda-like exhibition design (© Klassik Stiftung Weimar, photograph by Roland Dreßler)

Paintings were 'put on display' in a rotunda-like underlit room,⁴⁸ under the backdrop of grey and slovenly drapery. The works were crammed in several rows back to back, with no chronological or stylistic key to them, and with no guiding idea or explanatory comments. In so doing, the curators exposed these works as worthless junk – as nothing but the uniform fruit of mass production in the service of party propaganda. Works from East Berlin's Palace of the Republic were not even mounted on the walls, but merely leaning against them, which only exposed the place as a scrapyard of history. The setting was complemented with plastic garden chairs, which were scattered all around the place.

⁴⁷ The decision to showcase works from Hitler's private collection at one of the largest cultural events in Germany was certainly courageous on the curator's part. The works had previously been put on display only in smaller exhibitions such as "Kunst im 3. Reich. Dokumente der Unterwerfung" (held at the Frankfurter Kunstverein in 1974) or "Rollenbilder im Nationalsozialismus" (held at the University of Bonn in 1991).

⁴⁸ This was an allusion to the former Memorial Site "Early Bourgeois Revolution in Germany" in Bad Frankenhausen (today's Panorama Museum), which features the monumental panoramic painting *Bauernkriegspanorama* by Werner Tübke (created from 1977 to 1987).



2 "Aufstieg und Fall der Moderne, Part III: Offiziell/Inoffiziell - Die Kunst der DDR", Kunstsammlungen Weimar, Mehrzweckhalle, 9 May 1999 - 26 September 1999, a view of the rotunda-like exhibition design (© Klassik Stiftung Weimar, photograph by Roland Dreßler)

[21] Appalled artists took the liberty of removing their paintings from display. The case was taken to court. Eventually, the exhibition was closed earlier than planned.⁴⁹ Neo Rauch (b. 1960), a native of Leipzig and disciple of Bernhard Heisig and Arno Rink, described it thus:

*I have nothing against a critical overview. But accumulating pictures without spaces in between and in front of rubbish wrapping I perceive as a mass execution, with no chance of survival for the offenders.*⁵⁰

The import of this rather demeaning display is all the more visible when confronted with the exhibition of modern classics, who were put on display at the Schloßmuseum, and through this noble presentation elevated as momentous achievements in art history. The controversial juxtaposition in the Weimar Mehrzweckhalle of the artistic production of two totalitarian systems most likely expressed the curator's conviction whereby all of the artists involved in the two regimes shared anti-modern convictions.

[22] The main part of the "Offiziell/Inoffiziell" exhibition was supplemented with a wedge of space adjacent to the rotunda. As explained by the curator, the space featured works by "dissident artists [...], which have nothing in common with the political, social, and cultural reality of the GDR; instead, they appear to belong in the international and transatlantic orientation of art".⁵¹ That said, such typologies

⁴⁹ Cf. Hanns Wershoven, "Chronik" and "Juristischer Briefwechsel", in: *Der Weimarer Bilderstreit. Szenen einer Ausstellung. Eine Dokumentation*, eds. Ulrike Bestgen and Susanne Meyer, Weimar 2000, 27-35 and 256-286.

⁵⁰ Neo Rauch, "[Ich entziehe mich dem Lob](#)", in: *Der Spiegel*, 24 May 1999, 192.

⁵¹ Achim Preiß, "Die Debatte um die Weimarer Ausstellung *Aufstieg und Fall der Moderne*", in: *Der Weimarer Bilderstreit*, eds. Bestgen and Meyer, 9-26: 25. Initially, this part of the

can be totally inaccurate at times. Peter Graf (b. 1937), who was showcased at the rotunda, is a case in point. Graf's career was similar to that of Baselitz in that he was still a freshman when expelled from the Kunsthochschule Berlin-Weißensee. He was later affiliated with Dresden independent artists and became one of the main protagonists in a 1961 experimental documentary depiction of these artists, namely, *Drei von vielen* by Jürgen Böttcher (also known as Strawalde).⁵² In all likelihood, Preiß consigned Graf's works to the scrapyard of history on account of their figurative qualities, which failed to fit in with the modern paradigm (equated by Preiß with "the freedom of art").⁵³ In his *Abschied von der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Preiß argues that while modernism was the expression of unbridled creative individualism, the art of the GDR epitomised "the last conservative orientation in German art".⁵⁴ He juxtaposes two large categories: mainstream art (figurative and commissioned by state authorities) as an anti-modern category, and underground art (intended for private appreciation, non-figurative, and modern). He would later use these two exclusionary categories as a matrix to pass judgements on the quality and function of particular artworks.⁵⁵ Graf's figurative paintings were completely at odds with Preiß's notion of underground art. According to Preiß's binary division, underground art could become non-conformist only if it followed a style that was poles apart from Socialist Realism.

A new interpretation for the new millennium

[23] In the 2000s, German exhibition centres began to demonstrate a growing interest in the art of the former GDR. In 2003, the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin held the first post-unification retrospective exhibition "Kunst in der DDR" (Figs. 3 and 4). The retrospective had a successful turnout (210.000 visitors in three months) and garnered excellent reviews; it was also awarded the title Exhibition of the Year by the German section of the International Association of Art Critics.⁵⁶ Two curators from the former GDR, Roland März and Eugen Blume, were assigned exhibition was intended as a monograph display of Gerhard Altenbourg's artworks on paper.

⁵² The film depicts three Dresden-based artists named Peter: Hermann, Graf, and Makolies, as they prepared for their joint exhibition at Ralf Winkler's (known as A. R. Penck) home. They all met in Jürgen Böttcher's drawing class at Dresden's Volkshochschule; they held day jobs in non-artistic occupations and had no degrees in arts. That is why they are referred to as "three of many" (workers). The film was illegal for distribution for a long time, and its first public screening was held as late as 1998. Cf. *Erste Phalanx Nedserd. Jürgen Böttcher/ Strawalde, Winfried Dierske, Peter Graf, Peter Herrmann, Peter Makolies, Ralf Winkler/ A. R. Penck: ein Freundeskreis in Dresden 1953-1965*, ed. Lucius Grisebach, Nuremberg 1991, 82-85.

⁵³ Kristina Bauer-Volke, "'Aufstieg und Fall' - Der Eklat in Weimar. DDR-Kunst im Nachwende-Deutschland (*Aufstieg und Fall der Moderne*, Teil 3)", in: *Kritische Berichte* 27 (1999), no. 3, 81-84.

⁵⁴ Achim Preiß, *Abschied von der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Weimar 1999, 9.

⁵⁵ Bauer-Volke, "'Aufstieg und Fall' - Der Eklat in Weimar", 83.

the task of organising this large undertaking. The choice of curators could be read as a statement, since after the unification the vast majority of texts on the art of East Germany were penned by West German art historians and critics.⁵⁷



3 "Kunst in der DDR. Eine Retrospektive der Nationalgalerie", Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, 25 July 2003 – 26 October 2003, a view of the exhibition design (© Neue Nationalgalerie, SMB, photograph by Roman März)

[24] März and Blume used the space of the Neue Nationalgalerie to showcase a much wider spectrum of East German art and to provide contexts for a sensitive reading of the displayed artworks. There was one important reservation, however, which they signalled in the title: they were not presenting the art of the GDR, but art created in the GDR. This phrasing completely changed the outlook on the legacy of the artists presented in the exhibition, and it could be read as a critique of the biased exhibition held four years earlier in Weimar ("Offiziell/Inoffiziell – Die Kunst der DDR").⁵⁸ The curators rightly highlighted the quintessential characteristics of the East German artistic landscape: the development of art conditioned by local determinants, as well as different and often competing art centres ["Bezirke"]. This kind of regionalism was beyond the grasp of the West German art world, which was unified and using international categories (rephrased as global from the 1990s on).

⁵⁶ *Bilderstreit und Gesellschaftsumbruch*, eds. Rehberg and Kaiser, 484.

⁵⁷ Eisman, *Bernhard Heisig*, 173-175.

⁵⁸ Eugen Blume and Roland März, "Re-Vision Kunst. Denkmäler und Sinnzeichen", in: *Kunst in der DDR. Eine Retrospektive der Nationalgalerie*, eds. Blume and März, 17-31.



4 "Kunst in der DDR. Eine Retrospektive der Nationalgalerie", Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, 25 July 2003 - 26 October 2003, a view of the exhibition design (© Neue Nationalgalerie, SMB, photograph by Roman März)

[25] The decision to compose the exhibition in a regional key was undoubtedly an excellent idea. However, the amount of space assigned to particular art centres may be seen somewhat puzzling. While East Berlin and Dresden artists were granted three and two rooms respectively, the Leipzig School was showcased in one room, and a poorly illuminated one at that. The same amount of space was devoted to Constructivism, an intriguing phenomenon which nonetheless developed on the fringes of the East German mainstream. With distorted proportions, the role of the Leipzig School was severely diminished. Those visitors who knew little about East German art could have developed an impression that it was on a par with avant-garde Constructivism, while the paintings of "Berlin melancholia"⁵⁹ were ranked higher than Leipzig's "images of wrath", which could not be the case because of the latter's content: politicised and highly charged with ideology.⁶⁰

[26] This could have been in line with the design of the curators, who – as pointed out in the exhibition catalogue by the then Head of the Neue Nationalgalerie Peter-Klaus Schuster – sought to celebrate art created "against any and all cultural and political limitations and repressions".⁶¹ With such a framework, the exhibition may not necessarily deserve its designation as retrospective. What is

⁵⁹ Thomas W. Belschner, "Berlin – Schwarze Melancholie", in: *Kunst in der DDR. Eine Retrospektive der Nationalgalerie*, eds. Blume and März, 180-181.

⁶⁰ Bernhard Heisig, *Die Wut der Bilder. Cf. Eisman, Bernhard Heisig*, 179.

⁶¹ Peter-Klaus Schuster, "Kunst in der DDR. Eine Retrospektive der Nationalgalerie. Zur Vorgeschichte und Absicht der Ausstellung", in: *Kunst in der DDR. Eine Retrospektive der Nationalgalerie*, eds. Blume and März, 9-13: 9.

more, Schuster called the history of East German art "a closed chapter",⁶² which was pointed out by Hanno Rauterberg in his *Die Zeit* review:

*One could even develop an impression that someone sought to incorporate this section of art history into the canon and lock it up once and for all [...]. This is why the exhibition comes to a halt at 1989, as if the end of the GDR had brought an end to the lives and careers of its artists.*⁶³

[27] Based on these premises, two rather questionable conclusions could be made. The first concerns the notion of the GDR as a state doomed to failure,⁶⁴ together with its artists, which necessarily nullifies the efforts of its citizens – including the artists. But then one should keep Walter Benjamin's words in mind: "there are no periods of decline", which seem to be particularly fitting in this context.⁶⁵ Even periods of utmost catastrophe, which defy depictions with discursive and symbolic forms and normative systems as we know them, had a powerful impact on the course of history.

[28] The second conclusion is that any form of artistic activity in East Germany involved repressions and a heroic struggle for autonomy. Bernhard Heisig's biography alone could easily challenge this simplistic notion of art. Based on her many years of research, April A. Eisman demonstrates that Heisig was not victimised by the system, but he deliberately participated in it: he was actively involved in the project of socialist Germany in which he took the initiative to renegotiate the relations of power in a struggle for his own concept of art.⁶⁶ In contrast to Heisig's exhibitions before the reunification, the retrospective in 2005/2006⁶⁷ almost utterly ignored this fact, as it emphasised war themes in his art.⁶⁸ It was similar to the Neue Nationalgalerie "retrospective" in that it provided very little information on other relations in the field of art or the self-perceptions and functions of East German artists.⁶⁹

⁶² Schuster, "Kunst in der DDR", 9.

⁶³ Hanno Rauterberg, "Kunst auf Freigang. Die Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin zeigt großartige Bilder aus DDR-Zeiten, verschweigt aber deren Geschichte", in: *Die Zeit*, 31 July 2003, <https://www.zeit.de/2003/32/DDR> (last access: 07 January 2020); reprinted in: *Bilderstreit und Gesellschaftsumbruch*, eds. Rehberg and Kaiser, 487.

⁶⁴ Cf. Eisman, "Whose East German Art Is This?", 91.

⁶⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge / London 1999, 458.

⁶⁶ Eisman, *Bernhard Heisig*, 184. In a 1995 interview with Lutz Dammbeck, Heisig declared: "I never wanted to emigrate. I always could, but I felt was needed here. Art in the West couldn't live up to my expectations, which is why the West wasn't my world. I wanted to make a difference to this world." As cited in: Eisman, *Bernhard Heisig*, 8.

⁶⁷ "Bernhard Heisig – Die Wut der Bilder", Museum der Bildenden Künste Leipzig, K20 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (Düsseldorf), Nationalgalerie – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin im Martin-Gropius-Bau (Berlin), curator: Eckhart Gillen.

⁶⁸ Eisman, *Bernhard Heisig*, 182.

[29] "Hinter der Maske: Künstler in der DDR", an exhibition which marked the launch of the Barberini Museum in Potsdam in October 2017, could have possibly popularised East German artists and the social, political, and cultural roles they played in the GDR (figs. 5 and 6). A speech delivered by the President of the Federal Republic of Germany, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, was undoubtedly a prominent symbolic gesture which attested to the evolution in the field of German-German remembrance after 1989. In his speech, President Steinmeier called the exhibition "a milestone on the pathway to mutual understanding", and works on display as "art that belongs to our shared heritage".⁷⁰



5 "Hinter der Maske. Künstler in der DDR", Museum Barberini, Potsdam, 29 October 2017 – 4 February 2018, a view of the exhibition design (© Museum Barberini, Potsdam)

[30] That said, the very title of the exhibition seems to challenge the concept of inclusion which President Steinmeier celebrated in his speech. The title suggests a narrative centred on dissident ethos. The exhibition presented the artists as either doomed to hiding or playing a refined game with state power and involved in a collective act of defiance. Subsequent passages from the speech only support this reading: "As the title of this exhibition 'Behind the Mask' suggests, these masks conceal artists who take a critical stance on the expectations of the state or act in downright defiance of it."⁷¹ The opening passages of the essay contributed by the exhibition's curator Michael Philipp offer the following insight: "Although some artists in the GDR regarded themselves and their work as being political in character [...], most artists perceived themselves as being primarily

⁶⁹ Eisman, "Whose East German Art Is This?", 84. Hanno Rauterberg casts the same accusation against the editors of the 2003 exhibition catalogue *Kunst in der DDR*. See Rauterberg, "Kunst auf Freigang".

⁷⁰ <http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Frank-Walter-Steinmeier/Reden/2017/10/171028-Barberini-Potsdam.html> (last access: 10 June 2019).

⁷¹ <http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Frank-Walter-Steinmeier/Reden/2017/10/171028-Barberini-Potsdam.html> (last access: 10 June 2019).

oriented toward their creative endeavours rather than toward the state."⁷² An unfounded and generalised quantitative analysis ('some' versus the 'majority') aside, the author also strives to obliterate the fact that art in the GDR, to a large degree, was driven by ideological motivations. The author also invites criticism when he perpetuates modern mythology and suggests that aesthetics and politics are two possibly impenetrable areas.⁷³



6 "Hinter der Maske. Künstler in der DDR", Museum Barberini, Potsdam, 29 October 2017 – 4 February 2018, a view of the exhibition design (© Museum Barberini, Potsdam)

[31] Such criticism could possibly be refuted with a presentation of 16 large-format paintings from Berlin's Palast der Republik that were on display as a supplement to the exhibition "Hinter der Maske".⁷⁴ The "Palace Gallery" came into being in 1976 following a state competition under the somewhat playful title: "Dürfen Kommunisten träumen?" [Are communists allowed to dream?]. In 1990, the "Palace Gallery" collection was transferred to the storage section of the Deutsches Historisches Museum (DHM) in Berlin, and it was put on display only twice during the entire 1990s.⁷⁵

[32] The Palast der Republik gallery was featured in a richly illustrated publication that initiated the *Barberini Studien*, a series of books gathering research

⁷² Michael Philipp, "Individuality and Historicity. Artists in the GDR", in: *Behind the Mask. Artists in the GDR*, exh. cat., eds. Ortrud Westheider and Michael Philipp, Munich / London / New York 2018, 8-27: 9.

⁷³ Cf. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, ed. Gabriel Rockhill, London / New York 2004.

⁷⁴ The paintings were contributed by: Arno Mohr, Willi Neubert, Werner Tübke, Willi Sitte, Bernhard Heisig, Ronald Paris, Lothar Zitzmann, Wolfgang Mattheuer, René Graetz, and others.

⁷⁵ At DHM's exhibition "Auftrag: Kunst: 1949–1990. Bildende Künstler in der DDR zwischen Ästhetik und Politik" in 1995 (exh. cat. ed. by Monika Flacke, Berlin 1995), and at the much debatable Weimar exhibition "Aufstieg und Fall der Moderne" in 1999.

outcomes from particular exhibitions. It is worth noting as the first elaboration of this kind after 1989. The author Michael Philipp acts in line with the subtitle of the publication, which is presented to the reader as "documentation"; he offers a painstaking account of the foundation of the gallery, and then furnishes a multifaceted analysis of the context, content, and form. The closing chapters of the book focus on the history of the paintings after 1989, and they also provide extended passages from interviews with their authors (conducted many years later). In the interviews, the artists highlight the important role the works for the Palast der Republik have played in their creative development.⁷⁶ These uncritical if not downright (self)affirmative statements prompted Philipp to offer a moralising conclusion:

The personal beliefs of the artists testify to their unwavering acceptance, which was easily expected by the way. They invariably focus on their work, and remain silent on the social situation and its multiple ramifications. The Palace Gallery gathered state art [Staatskunst] as we call it.⁷⁷

[33] The closing paragraphs of the book finally provide a reading of the paintings as an expression of a brief period of ostensible liberalisation under Erich Honecker (Chairman of the State Council of the GDR 1976–1989). "The erosion of the state accelerated only three months after the opening of the Palast der Republik."⁷⁸ Even if the final months of 1976 marked the radicalisation of the East German cultural policy (e.g., Wolf Biermann stripped of his nationality), a conclusion of this kind depicts the artworks as a token of decline, as devalued relics of the state which ceased to exist.

Faces of Otherness

[34] The debate on art in reunified Germany certainly had a major impact on the extension of the canon of German art. What is more, the debate itself also played a prominent role in the complex unification process. The sociologist Karl-Siegbert Rehberg aptly points out that no other field would provoke debates as heated as those on art, and no other discourse, be it a political or historical one, would provide as many suggestions for the understanding of both the past and present, which, in turn, allowed for the public working through of the projections harboured at each side of the Iron Curtain, as well as their failed hopes and hidden animosities.⁷⁹

[35] This conflict of arguments revealed something more, namely, that the extension of the canon provokes reluctance not only because marginalised areas are incorporated into the canon, but because the whole process calls for a revision of the western understanding of art. Revisions of the canon usually

⁷⁶ Michael Philipp, *Dürfen Kommunisten träumen? Die Galerie im Palast der Republik. Eine Dokumentation*, Munich / London / New York 2017, 48.

⁷⁷ Philipp, *Dürfen Kommunisten träumen?*, 48.

⁷⁸ Philipp, *Dürfen Kommunisten träumen?*, 49.

⁷⁹ Rehberg, "Deklassierung der Künste als stellvertretender Gesellschaftsdiskurs", 52.

happen through 'grassroots' efforts on the part of the researchers as these become aware of the need to rethink the established frame in views of geopolitical change, the emancipation of non-European countries, the emancipation of previously marginalised groups, and the democratisation of access to archives or museum storage. This in turn enables the process of discovering hitherto unknown content and making it available to the public. These socially, economically, and politically determined processes stimulate the blood circulation of culture with new and hitherto absent cultural content.⁸⁰

[36] Arguably, the controversial concept of "the trauma of the perpetrators", which was coined by the sociologist Bernhard Giesen, may prove useful here at an analytical level.⁸¹ Giesen used the term to describe a generation that was actively embroiled with Nazism, and was later forced to revisit their self-perceptions, work through guilt, and accept it as an inherent part of their individual psychic structure. Giesen calls this painful process a "traumatic" one. He argues that the whole process is not an intentional struggle for a remembrance of a separate biographical experience in defence of one's dignity and subjectivity, towards an individual vision of history that stands apart from existing narrative patterns; in fact, it is more of a difficult process of admitting one's guilt. A debate on the heritage of the former GDR and its position in the history of German culture as a whole invariably provokes questions about German guilt. Günter Grass rightly pointed out in 1982: "This country and its citizens are visibly more weighed down by Germany's past."⁸²

[37] The second useful concept would be that of the Other, which is one of the fundamental terms in postcolonial studies. The immediate application of postcolonial studies (as a political and cultural practice) to the art history of Central and Eastern Europe may be a daunting task, which was pointed out in detail by Piotr Piotrowski. According to Piotrowski, the chief task of postcolonial studies is to furnish a critique of the centre from the perspective of the remote Other and challenge the leading role of "Euramerica" in the development of modernity. This in turn requires that Europe and America examine themselves from the standpoint of the peripheries.⁸³

[38] That said, Piotrowski argues that the concept of the Other calls for necessary corrections and clarifications given the inner divisions of Europe after 1945 and the evolution sparked by political change in the region after 1989. These

⁸⁰ Assmann, *Kanon i archiwum*.

⁸¹ Bernhard Giesen, "Das Tätertrauma der Deutschen. Eine Einleitung", in: *Tätertrauma. Nationale Erinnerungen im öffentlichen Diskurs*, eds. Bernhard Giesen and Christoph Schneider, Konstanz 2004, 11-54: 22.

⁸² Günter Grass in: *Zeitvergleich: Malerei und Grafik aus der DDR*, exh. cat. Kunstverein in Hamburg, Hamburg 1982; quoted according to: Hans Belting, *The Germans and Their Art. A Troublesome Relationship*, trans. Scott Kleager, New Haven / London 1998, 93.

⁸³ Piotr Piotrowski, "1989: Zwrot przestrzenny" [1989: Spatial return], in: *Agorafilia. Sztuka i demokracja w postkomunistycznej Europie* [Agoraphilia. Art and democracy in post-communist Europe], Poznań 2010, 15-55: 43-50.

operations are necessary because the Other from outside of Europe has a different status than that of Eastern and Central Europe. Transoceanic relations involve contact with the Other proper: the Other living in a different culture, communicating with a different repertoire of symbolic forms, and rooted in a different *episteme*. However, Otherness loses its edge when used to describe the inhabitants of the same cultural or geographical area, and when it depicts differences arising from mere political divisions (in practice, a division in two) into ideological zones of influence after 1945. The Other who is not-exactly-the-same should rather be called the "close Other".⁸⁴

[39] This oxymoronic expression was coined in 1966 by Paul Celan in his note outlining his plans for a forthcoming volume of poetry: "Titel für den Band 'Übertragungen': *FREMDE NÄHE*" (Title for the volume 'Translations': *STRANGE NEARNESS*).⁸⁵ Celan used the term *fremde Nähe* to capture challenges inherent in the work of the translator. For the task of the translator implies a creative and irreducible paradox of translating, or transferring [*übertragen*], from one language to another, which produces the effect of "close otherness". As such, "close otherness" would be a powerful metaphor of the work of the translator. However, sheer technical aspects aside, for Celan, the issue of "close otherness" also carried cultural undertones, and at a more personal level, identity undertones, too. A quick reminder: Paul Celan was a German-speaking Romanian Jew, and he was forced to leave his native Bukovina during World War II. In 1942, his parents perished in a concentration camp, and he was consigned to more than a year of forced labour in different labour camps.

[40] However, as argued by Hans Belting in his discussion of Max Beckmann, German-speaking citizens of a different denomination or ethnic group did not necessarily partake of the condition of *fremde Nähe*. Accordingly, Belting describes Max Beckmann's existential condition following his political emigration in 1937⁸⁶ as "life as emigration".⁸⁷ For one has to bear in mind that numerous artists and intellectuals, especially those who returned to Germany after 1945, in

⁸⁴ Piotrowski, "Wschodnioeuropejskie peryferie artystyczne w obliczu teorii postkolonialnej" [Eastern European artistic peripheries in the face of postcolonial theory], in: *id.*, *Globalne ujęcie sztuki Europy Wschodniej*, 62-63 and 68-69.

⁸⁵ As cited in: Charles Bambach, *Thinking the Poetic Measure of Justice: Hölderlin-Heidegger-Celan*, New York 2013, 186.

⁸⁶ Beckmann died on 27 December 1950 during a stroll in NYC's Central Park, a day after he completed the triptych *Argonauten*; he was never to see his homeland again. Two of his paintings, *Der Befreite* (1937) and *Cabins* (1948), capture the condition of a perpetual émigré at its most poignant. *Der Befreite* was painted immediately after Beckmann's departure from Germany to the Netherlands, where he had to wait for the non-enemy status until the end of World War II. The painting shows an artist leaving one prison for another. Created after Beckmann's first visit to the US and before his decision to finally emigrate to America, his autobiographical *Cabins* recounts a journey as a metaphor of life, the sole and ultimate destination of which is death. Belting, *Identität im Zweifel*, 152.

⁸⁷ Belting, *Identität im Zweifel*, 146-172.

fact found themselves in a point of no return.⁸⁸ Apart from the multiple discomforts of emigration,⁸⁹ these artists could either choose the disturbing reality of historical amnesia and the continuation (most notably, at a personal level) of Nazi structures in the FRG or the anti-fascist and 'democratic' ethos of the GDR, which was nonetheless occupied by the Soviet Union. The choice of East Germany seemed more natural to many given their prewar Communist allegiances.⁹⁰

[41] While the Other proper (the remote Other) is defined as a subject different in terms of cultural identity (the oppressed postcolonial, subaltern, and subcultural),⁹¹ the close Other is not necessarily so. With East-West German relations in mind, the close Other should rather be defined in terms of differences in worldview, ideology, and social standing, but also (last but not least) economic standing. Hal Foster points out that the blind identification with the remote Other could possibly distort their truthful representation. Such identification has an underlying belief that the Other is the source and carrier of the truth, and as such has access to psychic and social processes from which the white subject is blocked. Rooted in wishful projections, this "primitivist fantasy" at its most extreme produced 'romanticised', distorted, and simplistic representations of the Other.⁹² The close Other should in turn be rather perceived as someone who invites a fully legitimate identification based on shared history and cultural experience. Therefore, the identity of the close Other contains a 'foreign' part of ourselves, which must necessarily be incorporated into the collective body. This calls for a revision of one's subjectivity and/ or self-perceptions at both collective and individual levels.

[42] Authors such as Katherine Pence and Paul Betts⁹³ make references to postcolonial theory in their attempts at the assessment of the GDR: they depict East German everyday life and politics with the term alter-modernity. They advise against the normative use of the western model of modernity, which hampers the understanding of the inner logic of East Germany and often leads to

⁸⁸ See also: Thomas Mann, *Brief nach Deutschland [Warum ich nicht nach Deutschland zurückgehe]*, Frankfurt am Main 2011 (originally: Thomas Mann, "Warum ich nicht nach Deutschland zurückgehe: Antwort auf einen Brief Walter von Molos in der deutschen Presse", in: *Aufbau/ Reconstruction. An American Weekly Published in New York* 11, no. 39 [28 September 1945], 5).

⁸⁹ The fact that he did not speak any foreign languages could have played a part in his life decisions. Beckmann would never feel at home in America because of his poor English.

⁹⁰ John Heartfield, a leading exponent of the interwar Berlin avant-garde, is a prime example in this respect.

⁹¹ Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer", in: Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge / London 1996, 171-204: 173.

⁹² Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer", 175.

⁹³ Katherine Pence and Paul Betts, "Introduction", in: *Socialist Modern. East German Everyday Culture and Politics*, eds. Katherine Pence and Paul Betts, Ann Arbor 2008, 1-34.

misconceptions. Whole masses of society are deprived of their past as a result. As pointed out by the sociologist Karl-Siegbert Rehberg: "Those who were denied the chance to translate their own life story no longer have a feeling they run their own lives."⁹⁴

Postcolonialism: better than Postsocialism?

[43] "A conflict over the meaning of Germanhood in the united Republic was focused on decisions with high symbolic import", points out Fatima El-Tayeb.⁹⁵ According to El-Tayeb, the debate on the reconstruction of the Berlin City Palace also touched upon ways with which to manage German post-unification identity. The building had suffered severe damage during Allied bombings. After the war, it met a similar fate to that of other 'Prussian imperialist' buildings, namely, it was demolished at the behest of the Soviet Occupation Zone authorities.⁹⁶ In the early 1970s, the building was superseded by the Palast der Republik, which housed the Parliament of East Germany and a recreation and leisure centre. The residents of East Berlin remember the latter as a vivid cultural hub and a popular entertainment venue.⁹⁷ After 1989, the abandoned Palast der Republik was a tangible throwback to the 'other Germany' and its 40 years of history, which remains a sore point in the remembrance debate in today's Federal Republic of Germany. Arguably, it was a momentous political decision to obliterate the Palast der Republik and restore the Stadtschloss, which dated to an earlier, Prussian era. The restored Stadtschloss now houses the Humboldt-Forum, which has taken the Humboldt brothers as its patrons in a gesture of continuity with the Enlightenment tradition of Prussia. This newly created museum and research centre is going to hold the collections of non-European art from the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst that until recently were located in the Museumszentrum Berlin-Dahlem in the southwest of the city. As a result, brighter periods in German history were put to the fore, and the causal relations between the legacy of Prussia, Nazism, and the division of Germany were neatly blurred.

[44] Decision-makers and those who supported the demolition of the Palast der Republik faced unexpected resistance from the public. The vast majority of the Ethnologisches Museum collection comes from colonial times, subsequently sparking debate on its origins. A postcolonial discussion returned on the practices of constructing European identity in opposition to the Other and gaining a cultural

⁹⁴ Rehberg, "Deklassierung der Künste als stellvertretender Gesellschaftsdiskurs", 51.

⁹⁵ Fatima El-Tayeb, *Undeutsch. Die Konstruktion des Anderen in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft*, Bielefeld 2016, 87.

⁹⁶ Cf. Dieter Tuscholke, "Negativbilder, Preußische Geschichte", in: *Auftrag: Kunst: 1949-1990. Bildende Künstler in der DDR zwischen Ästhetik und Politik*, ed. Monika Flacke, exh. cat. Deutsches Historisches Museum Berlin, Berlin 1995, 286-295.

⁹⁷ Cf. Moritz Holfelder, *Palast der Republik: Aufstieg und Fall eines symbolischen Gebäudes*, Berlin 2009.

upper hand through the practice of collecting and making meaning of the pillaged and cherry-picked material heritage of non-European cultures.⁹⁸

[45] Meanwhile, as argued by El-Tayeb, the idea of the Humboldt-Forum provided for the enactment of a Prussian-German-European identity by juxtaposing this 'notion of otherness' with the European tradition epitomised by art collections on the nearby Museum Island.⁹⁹ However, one fact passed unnoticed: such a vision would produce certain incontestable norms. The No Humboldt21 initiative web-page, which provides a platform for the opponents of the demolition of the Palast der Republik, says:

*As already was the case during those times when "exotic curiosities" were displayed in the "cabinets of wonders" belonging to the Princes of Brandenburg and the Prussian Kings, the Berlin Palace – Humboldt Forum will apparently serve the purpose of developing a Prussian-German-European identity. This concern is actually directly opposed to the aim of promoting a culture of equality in the migration society and is being pursued to the detriment of others. The supposed "stranger" and "other" will be constructed with the help of the often centuries-old objects from all over the world, and the extensive collection of European art on Berlin's museum island will be put to one side. In this way, Europe will be constructed as the superior norm.*¹⁰⁰

[46] The case of the Humboldt-Forum is symptomatic of the ways with which German past was treated and the strategies that were used in the making of post-unification identity, which has been heavily shaped by hegemonic West German discourse since the 1990s. The 40 years of East German history were ignored, and equated almost exclusively with Stalinism and totalitarianism, which paved the way for its expulsion from a shared German history.¹⁰¹ This fantasmatic 'universal museum', which brings world art to the public,¹⁰² offers no room for the art and remembrance of the close Other. At the same time, the remote Other,

⁹⁸ Jürgen Zimmerer, "Kolonialismus. Die größte Identitätsdebatte unserer Zeit", in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 20 February 2019, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/kolonialismus-postkolonialismus-humboldt-forum-raubkunst-1.4334846> (last access: 21 June 2019); Jürgen Zimmerer, "Humboldt-Forum: das koloniale Vergessen", in: *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, July 2015, <https://www.blaetter.de/ausgabe/2015/juli/humboldt-forum-das-koloniale-vergessen> (last access: 13 July 2020).

⁹⁹ Many of the works showcased at Museumsinsel come from today's Syria, Iraq, or Egypt, which only reveals the nonchalant if not downright selective way with which the legacy of non-European art was appropriated in Germany as 'one's own'. See El-Tayeb, *Undeutsch*, 82.

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.no-humboldt21.de/resolution/english/> (last access: 4 January 2019).

¹⁰¹ As rightly pointed out by Fatima el-Tayeb, this monopolisation of the uniform and "unified" remembrance was to consolidate new Germany, and the GDR "episode" was to reinforce the reading of East Germany as a period of Soviet occupation, which in turn encouraged tendencies to self-victimise the role of East Germans in history ("Nazis" versus "Germans"). El-Tayeb, *Undeutsch*, 84.

less inconvenient with their foreign cultural, historical, temporal, and geographical characteristics, was dictatorially and selectively subordinated to the overriding agenda of an institution, or the impressive staging of a certain vision of the future.¹⁰³

Conclusions

[47] It is quite likely that for the same reason postcolonial art, or the art of the remote Other, rather than the postsocialist art of the close Other, has won the hearts of German art historians and critics (and not only German, Piotr Piotrowski being a prime example). In light of the above, the rewriting of art history using both German perspectives calls for something more than mere decentralised modernity the way it is used in art history and 'classical' postcolonial studies. Decentralisation aside, the Western European notion of art, too, calls for a critical rethinking, including its form and, most notably, function. This newly emerged notion of art could certainly strengthen the identity of the former citizens (artists) of postsocialist countries. Many in the West German artistic milieu see themselves as guardians of history and tradition and the correct understanding of German art, belonging to a shared Western European heritage (brutally disrupted by twelve years of Nazi dictatorship). This preconception was faced with a buried, inconvenient, and unexpressed intuition whereby "they paint more German in the GDR".¹⁰⁴ The unification of East and West Germany

forced not only the adoption of a stance towards disgraced state-sponsored artists, but also the confrontation with a painting tradition expressive of a particular worldview, a tradition preceding the times of "Occidental art". Whenever passing a political judgement proved impossible, these unwanted artistic attitudes could be categorised as anachronistic [...]. In this case, the polemic is concerned with the necessary recognition of this art as inherent in

¹⁰² At the conceptual stage of developing the Humboldt-Forum, the Head of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Peter-Klaus Schuster argued that a dialogue between the European art collections on the Museum Island and the art collections from outside of Europe to be housed in the Humboldt Forum would turn the centre of Berlin into "a place of universal Enlightenment, a place where art and real-world competencies would meet in the largest living universal museum". Peter-Klaus Schuster, "Das universale Museum. Europa und die Welt - vom Betenden Knaben über Nofretete zum Humboldt-Forum", in: *Der Tagesspiegel*, 12 August 2005, <https://www.berlin.de/aktuell/ausgaben/2005/dezember/ereignisse/artikel.230267.php> (last access: 4 January 2019).

¹⁰³ Cf. El-Tayeb, *Undeutsch*, 88.

¹⁰⁴ Günter Grass in the foreword to the exhibition catalogue *Zeitvergleich: Malerei und Grafik aus der DDR*, Hamburg 1982, as cited in: Belting, *The Germans and Their Art*, 93. In 1985, Grass delivered a speech at West Berlin's Academy of Arts on the 50th anniversary of the unconditional surrender of Germany in which he accused West German artistic circles of supporting government policies aimed at "erasing" German guilt. See Gillen, *Feindliche Brüder?*, 127-128.

*German identity, without resorting to any false aesthetic or historical comparisons.*¹⁰⁵

[48] It is extremely difficult to come to terms with the "other (German) Germany" and other history of art, with which western epistemological categories (deriving from particular models of production, distribution, and reception) are often powerless. This is best evidenced by the fact that, although academic and curatorial circles may be showing interest in East German art, it is only occasionally incorporated into a German narrative on art history.¹⁰⁶ In most cases, exhibitions of this art, important as they are, only escalate the feeling of "terror against the close Other". To a large extent, these exhibitions are merely compulsory homework in art history, and they cover a separate chapter concerned solely with art history. Moreover, the vast bulk of these exhibitions follow western curatorial strategies, which only perpetuates semantic inaccuracies and mutual misunderstandings.¹⁰⁷

[49] Admittedly, East German art has been experiencing something of a revival since the early 2000s, and it now attracts interest from various exhibition centres and features in extensive scholarly and popular science publications, which also improves its visibility in public discourse. However, the process of reclaiming memory often engenders a problematic narrative, the discursive framework of which is defined by a dissident paradigm. Consequently, the East German close Other attracts readings that seek those qualities that are homely, shared, and in line with western expectations (a repressed artist committed to formal innovation and personal freedom, an individual struggling with the criminal system) rather than those that are 'foreign' or other. A detailed examination of the latter could facilitate an insight into selected artists and their legacy,¹⁰⁸ which is a

¹⁰⁵ Belting, *Identität im Zweifel*, 9-10.

¹⁰⁶ Some of the publications issued after 1990 that challenged this stereotype include: *Deutschlandbilder. Kunst aus einem geteilten Land*, ed. Gillen; Karin Thomas, *Kunst in Deutschland seit 1945*, Cologne 2002; *Kunst und Kalter Krieg. Deutsche Positionen 1945-89*, exh. cat., eds. Stephanie Barron and Sabine Eckmann, Cologne 2009; Gillen, *Feindliche Brüder?*.

¹⁰⁷ See for example April A. Eisman on the exhibition "Abschied von Ikarus: Bildwelten in der DDR - neu gesehen", Neues Museum Weimar, 2012/2013 (exh. cat. ed. by Karl-Siegbert Rehberg, Cologne 2012), most notably on perpetuating the inaccurate notions of the role and position of female artists in the GDR: Eisman, "Whose East German Art Is This?". For the latest instalment of the German-German debate, regarding paintings at Dresden's Albertinum, see: Stefan Locke, *High Noon in Dresden*, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kunst/bilderstreit-im-albertinum-high-noon-in-dresden-15281890.html> (last access: 27 August 2020).

¹⁰⁸ Gerhard Richter is one of those artists who took a critical stance on their early works in the Socialist Realist style. Richter took a firm stand against the idea of unveiling his graduation mural *Lebensfreude* [Joy of Life], which he had created in 1956 on a commission from the Deutsches Hygiene-Museum in Dresden. Cf. Wolfgang Büscher, "Der verborgene Richter", in: *Die Zeit*, 20 May 2008, <https://www.zeit.de/2008/20/Richter-Wandbild> (last access: 20 June 2019).

prerequisite for a better understanding of the reasons why some of them are still inextricably attached to the works they produced in the GDR era. By way of summary, a tentative conclusion can be made: the acceptance and "socialisation" of otherness were superseded by a peculiar process of integration that celebrates similarities and obliterates differences.

About the Author

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