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Harry & Helen Gray
Humanities Program Series
Volume 4

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CULTURES IN CONFLICT:
VISUAL ARTS IN
EASTERN GERMANY
SINCE 1990

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Edited by
Marion F. Deshmukh
George Mason University

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American Institute for Contemporary German Studies
The Johns Hopkins University

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FOREWORD

Despite the lively interest of art dealers in contemporary German art, American art critics and museum curators have been rather reluctant in including it in their reviews of the international art scene since World War II. It was to a large extent the appearance of Anselm Kiefer, Joseph Beuys, and the so-called neo-expressionists in the early 1980s that directed more attention to German painters and helped situate their work within a distinct current of contemporary art. Given the lack of such a framework, the visual arts of East Germany, the former German Democratic Republic, have remained all but unknown in the United States. Painters like Werner Tübke, Willi Sitte, Bernhard Heisig, and Wolfgang Mattheuer, who achieved a modicum of recognition within and beyond the borders of their socialist state, did not “make” it across the ocean. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the question was raised whether their recognition was just a function of their prominence in East Germany or of the aesthetic quality of their oeuvre.

Thanks to Marion Deshmukh, this question was discussed extensively for the first time in the U.S. in a workshop of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies on December 5, 1997, which focused on the fate of East German painting before and after the demise of this state in 1989/90. This volume presents the revised versions of the papers presented at this event under the title, “Cultures in Conflict: The Visual Arts in Eastern Germany since 1990.” Its audience, consisting of academics, government and embassy officials, museum curators, and independent scholars, enlivened the spirited debates and contributed valuable insights into the often-contentious issue of the relationship of art and society. The discussion is reflected in the revisions.

As Marion Deshmukh remarks in her Introduction, the workshop planning proved to be extremely challenging since almost no scholarly expertise in East German arts exists in this country. The situation is quite different in the area of East German literature which has found, since the 1970s, a relatively broad audience among the students and scholars of German literature in colleges and universities. As a matter of fact, the American debate on East German literature—first concentrated on Bertolt Brecht, later on such figures as Heiner Müller and Christa Wolf—achieved a level of insight and sophistication that at times went beyond the broad, yet scattered reception in West Germany. Art, however, unlike books and despite its reproducibility, cannot easily be

transported and privately shared—aside from the fact that the realistic predisposition of East German art tended to awaken the suspicion against any kind of commissioned public art. Already in the German Democratic Republic debates on art, though not rare, were much less prominent than those on literary works, in keeping with the lack of visual inspiration that has plagued socialism since its conceptualization in the nineteenth century. The discussion about individual painters, if it is to do justice to their predicament within socialism, needs to include a reflection of the strained relationship of socialism and the visual arts in general.

In any case, this conference established agreement about the fact that East German art, trying to negotiate between official demands for visual representation of the socialist world view and the individual desire for self-expression, is more than an afterthought to the notorious socialist realism. This art encompasses an array of interesting dissenters (who mostly went to West Germany), but also its share of impressive painters in a peculiarly German tradition which leads back, via Expressionism, to the art of Dürer and Cranach. It is to Marion Deshmukh's great credit that the discussion of its history before and transformation after 1989 has begun in earnest on this side of the Atlantic.

This volume is part of the series, "The Dismantling and Restructuring of East German Cultural Institutions," which the Harry & Helen Gray Humanities Program of the AICGS began in 1995 with a workshop on the media. It is a companion piece to Marc Silberman's volume on the literature of the former GDR, *What Remains? East German Culture and the Postwar Public*. We are grateful to Marion Deshmukh for having conceptualized and organized this workshop with some of the leading experts in this field. We thank the speakers for their critical, yet balanced contributions to this volume and the artists and museums for their generous permission to reproduce some of the paintings.

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**RED AND BLANK:
THE RECEPTION OF EAST GERMAN ART IN AMERICA**

Marion F. Deshmukh

Let me begin by quoting an interview given by the former director of East Berlin's National Gallery, Peter Betthausen, six months before the official unification of Germany in 1990:

For me, the German Democratic Republic is now a closed chapter. It was an experiment that failed. True, for a while I helped write that chapter, but for the past 15 years, and especially in the last year or two, I've known there was no future for this system or this country. Once it stops being a separate, sovereign state, its art will change. But even if we preserve our sovereignty for a while longer, the art and the whole cultural scene will also change because the Communist system and the party are gone. However, please don't ask me how it will change, I am an art historian, not a prophet.¹

It has been eight years since Betthausen contemplated the former German Democratic Republic's future. Enough time has passed to reflect upon the state of the arts in eastern Germany, the five *Länder* (states) of the former GDR. Enough time has passed from the euphoria of the Berlin Wall's dismantling to the months of worry, recriminations, political backstabbing, and opportunism on both sides of the border, to take stock and to observe what remains, what has disappeared, and what has been transformed into something neither old nor new.

This attempt to survey the arts scene is something I have been personally interested in for a number of years because, at the time of *Wende*, I was working on a project which looked at the reorganization of Berlin's National Gallery after 1945, in the wake of Germany's defeat.² At once eerie similarities emerged in comparing 1945 to 1990: the art community was in turmoil; the art which had been privileged and promoted was now seen to be worthless monetarily and stylistically. Personnel occupying positions of authority in museums, art academies, state bureaucracies, were now suspect and discredited for aiding and abetting a totalitarian regime. Thus, I was interested in finding out whether 1990 would be a kind of recapitulation of 1945; obviously the times were totally different. In 1945, Germany physically and psychologically lay in utter shambles. In 1990, the Federal Republic was the prosperous jewel in the European Union's crown and at peace. But an entire system had collapsed in both cases, and, inevitably, the collapse would wreak havoc upon many lives.

Intellectuals, writers, film makers, and artists all had to examine their pasts and reflect upon their future. Times would not be easy. What would be the American reaction to artistic changes in a unified Germany?

Fifteen years ago and seven before unification, in 1983, a much-reviewed exhibit from the Federal Republic toured the United States entitled, “*Expressions: New Art from Germany*.” The catalogue announced that a group of West German painters, several of whom had fled from the GDR, inaugurated a new chapter in German art. This new art, we were told, differed from the postwar West German painters who depended upon French and American models of abstraction. This new generation, mostly born around the years of *Stunde Null* (1945), included Baselitz, Penck, Lüpertz, Kiefer, and Immendorff, and consciously sought the figurative, the gestural, and German history within their aesthetic. The catalogue stated that: “Jörg Immendorff’s grandest reality has become his vast *Café Deutschland* painting cycle . . . His works concern a divided culture and country, symbolized by hot and cold, open and closed. The divisions of his works are as if all the occupants carry physical traces of bisecting walls with them.”³ (Illustration 1) Not all American critics were pleased with the paintings. In the most famous attack, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh considered the paintings to represent the “collapse of the modernist paradigm” similar to crises in advanced capitalist economies.⁴

Almost a decade later, in a 1991 interview, Immendorff mused that “East Germany and West Germany, as I saw it, were just the bumpers on the two superpower autos, the big East Limo and the big West Limo, and the Wall was the seam, the place where they banged together . . . In the end, too, Germany’s division was really a metaphor for the schizoid division of humanity—for these grinding contradictions in every one of us . . . Now the media are calling me ‘the painter of the reunification’ . . . it’s absurd.”⁵

This schizoid division bore unlikely fruit in Berlin, where both the Federal Republic and the GDR vied to showcase their respective country’s cultural fare. Thus, when the city was reunited in 1990, it could count two symphony orchestras, three opera houses, two national libraries, two art academies, thirty-two theaters, and twenty-nine major museums. But, if one wishes to count some of the minor museums, such as the Dog Museum, the Hair Museum or the Sugar Museum, the number of public collections rises to 135!⁶ In an ironic sort of way, the heavily-subsidized culture industry of pre-1990 Berlin meant that an official “state” art was propagated in both, schizoid, halves of the city.

Whether Americans regard German painting of the last several decades as schizoid, or as anything at all, is a question I wish to raise by way of introducing the workshop’s topic. I have already commented on why I wanted to organize a workshop on Eastern German Art after 1990 and I will later briefly describe

Illustration 1: Jörg Immendorff, *Café Deutschland, III*, 1978, synthetic resin on canvas, 285 x 273 cm, Gillespie/Lange/Salomon, Paris.



the difficulties I encountered in planning the December symposium. I think these difficulties can partly reveal what has been the reception of German art in the United States.

For a few years in the late 1980s and early 1990s, America watched unfolding aesthetic developments in the newly-unified Germany with great interest. A question often raised was what would become of forty years of GDR art? Some, like the former director of Berlin's National Gallery, feared it would be relegated to the "dustbin of history." In fact, a number of prominent East German artists and art bureaucrats, including the National Gallery's director himself, were discarded by the movers and shakers of the art world, primarily West Germans. Thus, there were some telling parallels between 1945 and 1990 which were noted by West German and American observers. Since the mid-1990s, however, there has been less interest in the course of German art, though occasionally gallery and museum exhibitions have been held. But, the level of initial critical interest following unification has not continued.

Why has contemporary German art not held the kind of sustaining commercial and scholarly interest among Americans who generate ongoing publicity, gallery shows and museum exhibitions? Let me issue a caveat here: of course there have been some substantial museum and gallery exhibits in the United States. And given the many countries vying for America's attention, the Germans have fared reasonably well. But, the general public's knowledge of German art, historic or contemporary, is minimal. Unlike Americans' fascination with German history, as witnessed by the publication of bestsellers, film and TV documentaries, primarily on the Third *Reich*, and the frequent periodical and newspaper coverage of Germany's preoccupation with "mastering its past," from the Fritz Fischer controversy over German World War I aims in the 1960s, to the *Historikerstreit* of the 1980s, to the heated debates several years ago over Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, to as recently as a November 1997, *New York Times* review piece titled: "Germany the Unloved Just Wants to Be Normal," where, parenthetically, Eckhart Gillen's current show was mentioned, the visual arts of Germany have not held the same interest for Americans.⁷

And if we further circumscribe our discussion to East German art of the last three or four decades, we are talking about a veritable *terra incognita*. Many may know of the one major traveling exhibition of GDR art held in 1989-1990: *Twelve Artists from the German Democratic Republic*.⁸ Ironically, this show, together with Atlanta's High Museum exhibition of *Art in Berlin, 1815-1989* created quite a bit of interest, coinciding as they both did with the opening of the Berlin Wall and German unification.⁹ American interest in German art generally appears to coincide with major if not seismic historical shifts and

developments. Early twentieth century German expressionism is most familiar to Americans, in part because of exiles bringing over examples of that art during the 1930s and because of its being labeled “degenerate” by the National Socialists.¹⁰ There has been an awareness of German neo-expressionism and figurative painting in the 1980s. The exhibit which I have already mentioned: *Expressions: New Art from Germany*, organized by the St. Louis Art Museum was also shown at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.¹¹ There have been other shows. They include the exhibitions on Anselm Kiefer, on Joseph Beuys, the *Binationale, German Art of the Late 80s*, 1988-89, shown at the Düsseldorf Städtische Kunsthalle and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; and parts of a recent exhibition, *German and American Art from Beuys and Warhol*, shown in London, Germany and Vienna.¹² Some of this interest was generated by current political events and some by the perceived legacy of earlier twentieth century German expressionism. (Illustrations 2 and 3)

Stefan Germer’s assertion in an insightful essay in the Beuys and Warhol catalogue can be a point of departure for this volume’s series of essays. He wrote: “With unification an era has come to an end. The special relationship between Germany and the USA—of decisive importance both to the emergence of West German self-awareness and to the self-definition of the United States from the start of the Cold War onwards—has begun to disintegrate and lose its defining power.”¹³ Germer maintains that after World War II, West Germany enthusiastically accepted all things American, including visual arts exports because of a “deep psychological need: the wish to put their own past behind them, and to give themselves an *Ersatz* identity in the image of the victor.”¹⁴ Thus, the postwar relationship between West Germany and the U.S. was rather asymmetrical. America fascinated Germany; for much of the last fifty years, with a few noteworthy exceptions already mentioned, the United States was relatively indifferent to the German art scene, east or west. Likewise, the referent point for GDR artists and the art bureaucrats was the Soviet Union—hence Immendorff’s metaphoric postwar German bumpers on the superpower limos. The U.S. limo drove full speed ahead during the 1950s when it launched aggressive touring exhibition programs in Germany, highlighting abstract expressionism. In a sense the German-American relationship has been bracketed by two shows highlighting twelve artists: supported by the United States Information Service, an international museum program sent its first exhibition thirty-five years ago (1953-54) to Düsseldorf and other European venues. Its title was *Twelve American Painters and Sculptors of the Present*. With continuous exhibitions and participation at the *documenta* shows, it appeared that New York replaced Paris as the center of the western art world.

Illustration 2: Anselm Kiefer, *Brünhildes Tod*, 1978, woodcut and oil paint on papers, 220 x 158 cm, Private Collection, New York (Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York)

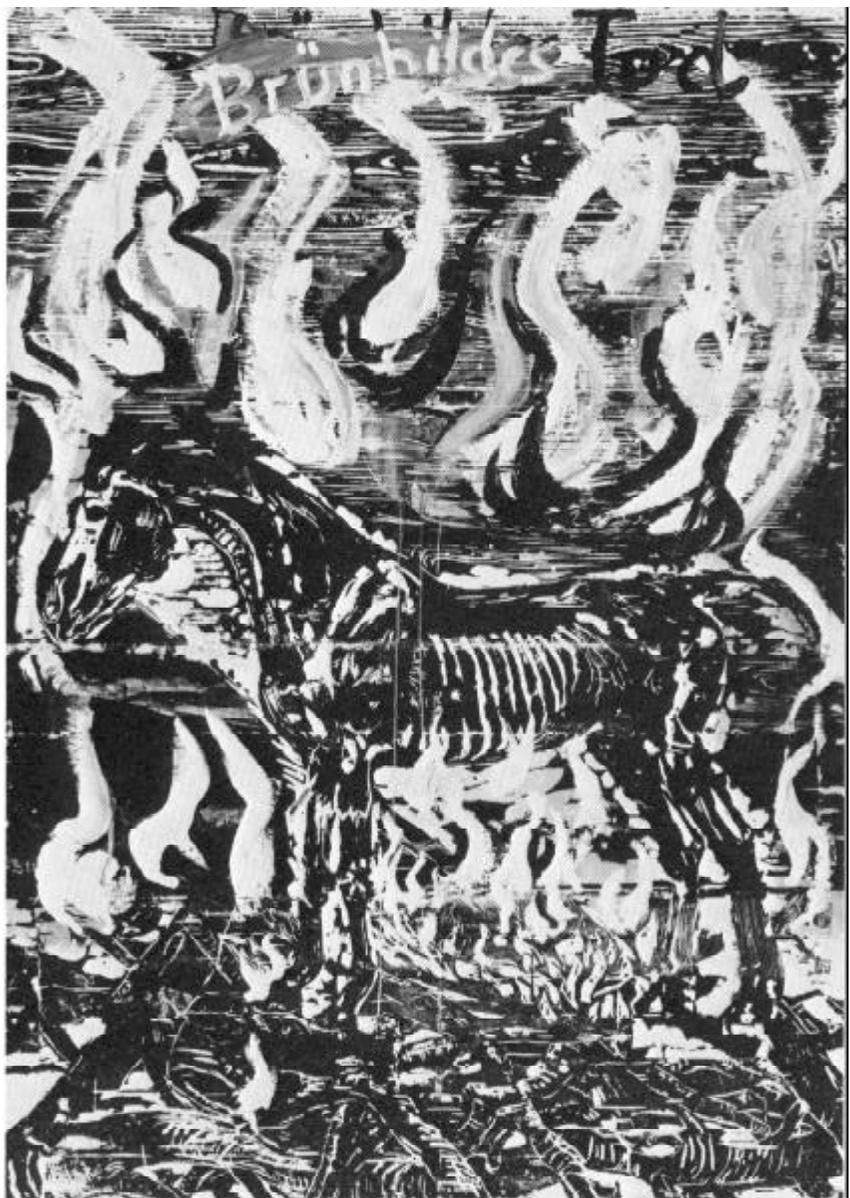
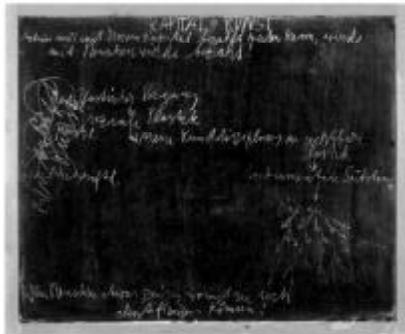
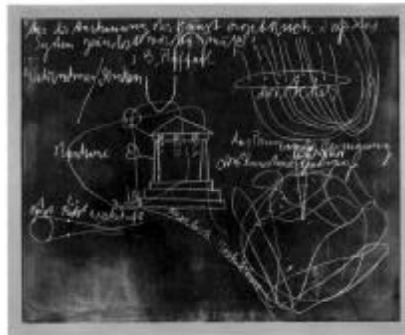


Illustration 3: Joseph Beuys, *Tafel I, Geist - Reich - Wirtschaft, Tafel II, Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler, Tafel III, Kapital = Kunst*, 1978, all three, chalk on blackboard, all three 90 x 110 cm, Galerie Politart, Nijmegen.



And ironically, twelve GDR artists made their U.S. debut right at the time their country was being abolished and swept into the metaphorical dustbin of history.

The catalogue accompanying the GDR exhibition was at pains to note that the artists exhibited “have played steadfast and honorable roles in the long, drawn-out struggle to achieve . . . diversity in the GDR by countering constraints and restrictions.”¹⁵ [Debates over diversity] have usually been carried out over the appropriate definition of the term ‘socialist realism,’ and, by extension, over the proper status for the traditions of modernist experimentation in the arts.”¹⁶

By the late 1940s the East German government had encouraged aesthetic socialist engagement, and had denounced “formalism” (interpreted broadly to mean abstraction). The style was seen as an engine of American imperialism.¹⁷ After two decades of socialist realism, art underwent changes which were not immediately apparent to outsiders. If one observes the course of East German painting beginning in the 1970s, one is struck by the congruence of images which parallel those of some of the West German neo-expressionists, and which also refer back to Germany’s painters at the turn of the century. There are, in both cases, allusions to a common German past fraught with melancholy and dread, a renewed freedom with paint and brush strokes. Examples chosen from two shows, one exhibition held in England in 1984, the other the GDR show held in 1989-90 in the U.S. represent two generations of painters: the senior being Werner Tübke, Willi Sitte, (Illustration 4) and Bernhard Heisig, (Illustration 5) and Jürgen Schieferdecker, well-established and connected to the major GDR cultural institutions, followed by examples of younger painters, such as Sighard Gille, (Illustration 6) a protégé of Heisig, Carlfriedrich Claus, (Illustration 7) Volker Stelzmann, Michael Morgner, Max Uhlig, Wolfgang Smy, and Thomas Ziegler.¹⁸ One can note the very wide stylistic range and also note the allusions to German expressionist painting and to Weimar Germany’s New Realism.

Similarly, in the political sphere, it appeared that Germans were coming together in significant ways even before unification. Many within the GDR and FRG protested the SS-20 missile deployments, protested nuclear power plants, and did not wish to see superpower rivalry played out on German territory, east or west. And likewise, the art of the immediate pre-unification period appeared to be less a divide between eastern socialist realism and western abstraction but rather a rich and often bewildering variety of explorations in aesthetics, from performative to easel painting.

For west German artists, abstract expressionism, and later happenings, pop art, which some Germans cleverly labeled “capitalist realism,” performative art generally, was taken to be at the cutting edge during the 1960s and 1970s and

Illustration 4: Willi Sitte, *Male Nude Putting on Trousers*, 1967, oil on masonite, 125 x 80 cm



Illustration 5: Bernhard Heisig, *Volunteer Soldier*, 1984/1988, oil on canvas, 101 x 90 cm, Galerie Brusberg, Berlin



Illustration 6: Sighard Gille, *Party in Leipzig*, 1979, mixed media on canvas, 111 x 171 cm



Illustration 7: Carlfriedrich Claus, *Conjunctions, Unity and Struggle of Oppositions in Landscape, related to the Communist Problem of the Future, Naturalization of the Human Being, Humanization of Nation*, 1976/82, silkscreen on transparent paper, printed on both sides, 41 x 59.5 cm



a response to socialist realism as well as Nazi Germany's abhorrence of modernism. The Fluxus movement also appeared to connect to the German tradition of cultural critique while "capitalist realism" related to the postwar processes of Americanization and commercialization. Later, with Joseph Beuys partly paving the way through his highly-publicized 1979 Guggenheim show, the U.S. was receptive to a disparate group of painters joined together as neo-expressionists. As Beuys wryly remarked: "I like America and America likes me."¹⁹ Some have suggested the interest in painters such as Kiefer, Baselitz or Penck, had more to do with American stereotypes of "the German mind," and historical clichés than it did with the actual paintings themselves.²⁰ Nonetheless, the continuing exhibitions of such privileged artists in museums and galleries has, since the 1980s, given more attention to German painting than during the early postwar years. Yet East Germany's arts community was unknown in the U.S. until the late 1980s. And if unknown, how could Americans view post-1990 developments in the former GDR or even understand them?

A 1993 *Wochenpost* headline exclaimed that "we are somebody again. But who?" Clause 35 of the 1990 Unification Agreement stated that: "art and culture were—despite the different development of the two states in Germany—a basis of the continuing unity of the German nation . . . The status and prestige of a united Germany in the eyes of the world are dependent not only on its political weight and economic achievement, but equally on its importance as a cultural state."²¹ Additionally, the sense of the agreement was that because the GDR took a different course from the Federal Republic [read inferior], it would appear that not all its artistic activity can continue in the same way and direction as before.²² However, the East German journalist, Rolf Schneider, mused when discussing writers: "Among other things I said that reality consists of the fact that we are thrown back upon the market. The market is more than just a philistine political bureaucracy . . . The market is an ancient institution. It was always diverse, loud, public, and multiple, which almost signifies democratic. Artists had their stands there as calligraphers and storytellers, as illuminators of manuscripts, as minstrels, town-pipers, and clowns, who were appropriately paid for their services. We were never more than that. We should not want to be more either, and it would be good if at long last we were to publicly admit to that once again."²³ Most East German painters, particularly the ones privileged prior to 1990, despaired of their reduced status: as one of the contributors to this volume, Eckhart Gillen noted in an essay, quoting an East German artist: "I would like to exhibit in the west, but I don't feel I would be bought."²⁴

Penetrating the commercial market was a frightening thought for most East German artists. Beyond a unified Germany, would Americans be interested? For most Americans, even those connected to the museum and commercial art world, what has occurred aesthetically in the GDR both before and since unification is unknown. Stories have appeared about the removal of socialist monuments and statues to Lenin. But beyond the occasional piece in art journals and newspapers, Americans hardly noticed the tumultuous developments occurring after unification.

I alluded to the reasons for wanting to hold this workshop earlier. What I discovered when attempting to enlist the aid of American academics and art historians was the realization that there are very few scholars or critics who are involved in an ongoing way with current east German art. Nor are there those who even have much knowledge about east German art historically. Obvious reasons can explain this lacunae. The U.S. government did not recognize the GDR as a legitimate state until 1974. One of the first visions of GDR art appeared in Washington in 1978 at the opening of the east wing of the National Gallery. At the time, a show, entitled *The Splendors of Dresden* not only displayed the magnificent paintings and decorative arts of a royal and state collection, but did show one example of a socialist realist artist, Hans Grundig, albeit from his Weimar period.²⁵ But exhibitions were confined to one or two New York galleries, a few academic venues and these were widely spaced in time and geographically. Prior to the 1980s, travel to the German Democratic Republic was still difficult for most Americans except on organized tours. Hence the 1989-90 *Twelve Artists from the GDR* show was essentially the first comprehensive look Americans had of recent East German aesthetics. This was a very different situation from Americans' understanding of East German literature, which has had a substantial following among academics, if not the general public. And thus I was extremely pleased to be able to invite two very knowledgeable individuals from Germany to enlighten us about events in east Germany since 1990. They provide valuable information about the visual landscape in contemporary Germany, particularly the five *Länder*. In addition to learning what career paths the approximately 6,000 GDR artists belonging to the government-sanctioned Art Union have been able to accomplish professionally since the *Wende*, it will be important to understand the changing role of galleries, museums, exhibition practices, and the methods used to merge the two quite different arts bureaucracies in the east and the west. Both commentators have discussed how West Germans perceived the privileged painters of the GDR: the Tübkes, Sittes, the Heisigs. Were they seen to be tainted with the socialist brush of authoritarianism and hence, damaged goods? Or were their very diverse styles seen to be forms of carefully-constructed

dissent within a closed political system; their “niches” within a niched society? Parallel debates have raged over painters and exhibition practices which were raging over Christa Wolf and other GDR authors.

The two German contributors to this volume are experienced art historians, critics and curators, having written extensively on contemporary east and west German art and having mounted numerous shows, both in Germany and abroad.²⁶ Hence Matthias Flügge examines the East German art scene from the vantage point of his role as editor-in-chief of *neue bildende kunst*, the leading East German art journal to survive the *Wende*.²⁷ Eckhart Gillen, the curator of the innovative and much-discussed 1997-98 *Deutschlandbilder* exhibition at Berlin’s Martin-Gropius-Bau, presents a panoramic view of the various art controversies which have engaged artists, critics and the German art world more generally.²⁸ Richard Pettit, Program Officer of the Council for International Exchange of Scholars, CIES-Fulbright Commission, and one who owned an art gallery in Berlin for several years, following the careers of several painters, will discuss a specific case history, that of Werner Tübke, one of the most admired and commissioned painters in the GDR. Jost Hermand, Professor of German at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, brings his many years of expertise as a distinguished *Germanist* and cultural observer to bear upon this large and complex topic. He has provided some trenchant observations on the papers presented in this volume.

The author Peter Schneider has written eloquently about the former GDR as a “no-man’s land between the borders.” In the November 1997 *New York Times* article referred to earlier, he was quoted as reflecting upon Germany’s obsession with its problematic past: “One almost has the impression,” he wrote, “that Germans set out not to be loved at all . . . Is this absence of self-love a result of Hitlerism, or conversely, the cause of Hitlerism?”²⁹ How has the double-burden of Fascist and Communist authoritarianism affected the post-unification east German arts community?

In conclusion, given the current questions still being raised in east Germany regarding the unification process and its political, social and cultural impact, it is critical and timely to learn about the current arts scene, its confrontation with its historic and recent aesthetic past and its search for a usable future. And I appreciate the participants’ interest in this important topic.

ENDNOTES

- ¹. Quoted in *ARTnews* (May 1990), 160.
- ². Marion F. Deshmukh, "Recovering Culture: Berlin's National Gallery and the U.S. Occupation, 1945-1949," *Central European History*, 27:4 (1994), 411-439. A shortened, translated version will be published in 1998 as: "Die Wiederherstellung der Kultur: Die Berliner Nationalgalerie und die amerikanische Besatzung (1945-1949)," in a volume on the history of the *Nationalgalerie*, published by the Richard Schöne Gesellschaft für Museumsgeschichte e.V., Berlin, 1998.
- ³. Jack Cowart, *Expressions: New Art From Germany*, [exh. cat., St. Louis Art Museum] (St. Louis, 1983), 18-19.
- ⁴. Donald B. Kuspit, "Flak from the 'Radicals': The American Case Against Current German Painting," in *Expressions*, 43.
- ⁵. Interview with Jörg Immendorff, "Art and National Identity," *Art in America* (September 1991), 129-130, 145.
- ⁶. Cited in David Galloway, "The New Berlin: 'I Want My Wall Back,'" *Art in America* (September 1991), 100.
- ⁷. Alan Cowell, "Germany the Unloved Just Wants to Be Normal," *New York Times* (23 November 1997) Week in Review, 3.
- ⁸. *Twelve Artists from the German Democratic Republic*, Peter Nisbet, ed., [exh. cat. Busch-Reisinger Museum, 1989]. The artists shown included: Gerhard Altenbourg, Carlfriedrich Claus, Sighard Gille, Bernhard Heisig, Walter Libuda, Michael Morgner, Theodor Rosenhauer, Willi Sitte, Wolfgang Smy, Heinrich Tessmer, Max Uhlig, and Thomas Ziegler.
- ⁹. *Art in Berlin, 1815-1989*, [exh. cat., High Museum of Art] (Atlanta, 1989-1990).
- ¹⁰. See the several Los Angeles County Museum of Art exhibition catalogues, edited by the museum's curator, Stephanie Barron, among them: *German Expressionism, 1915-1925: The Second Generation*, [exh. cat., 1988-1989], "Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany," [exh. cat., 1991], *Exiles+emigres: The Flight of European Artists from Hitler*, [exh. cat., 1997-1998]. These exhibitions traveled to other museums in the United States, such as Fort Worth, Texas and Washington DC, as well as to Germany.
- ¹¹. *Expressions: New Art from Germany*.
- ¹². *Binationale: German Art of the Late 80s*, [exh. cat., Boston, The Institute of Contemporary Art, 1988] *German and American Art from Beuys and Warhol*, [exh. cat., Tate Gallery] (London, 1996).
- ¹³. Stefan Germer, "Intersecting Visions, Shifting Perspectives: An Overview of German-American Artistic Relations," *German and American Art from Beuys and Warhol*, 9.

¹⁴. *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁵. Peter Nisbet, "Editor's Introduction," *Twelve Artists from the German Democratic Republic*, 11.

¹⁶. *Ibid.*

¹⁷. On Soviet cultural policy in occupied east Germany, see David Pike, *The Politics of Culture in Soviet-occupied Germany, 1945-1949*, (Stanford, CA., 1992).

¹⁸. The representative illustrations are taken from *Tradition and Renewal: Contemporary Art in the German Democratic Republic* [exh. cat., The Museum of Modern Art] (Oxford, 1984) and *Twelve Artists from the German Democratic Republic*.

¹⁹. Quoted in Germer, 9.

²⁰. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Repression," *October* 16 (1981), 39-68.

²¹. *Die Vereinigung Deutschlands im Jahr 1990*, 125, quoted in Rob Burns, (ed.) *German Cultural Studies* (Oxford, 1995), 328.

²². *Ibid.*

²³. Rolf Schneider, "The Silence of the Sheep, on the East German Culture Industry," in Hermann Glaser (ed.), *What Remains-What Lies Ahead: Cultural Upheaval in East Germany* (Bonn, 1996), 56-57.

²⁴. Quoting Eberhard Göschel, in Glaser, 133.

²⁵. *Splendors of Dresden* [exh. cat., National Gallery of Art] (Washington, DC, 1978).

²⁶. See, for example, *Stillstand: Studies in German Art*, with essays by Matthias Flügge, Eckhardt [sic] Gillen, Eduard Beaucamp, and Christoph Tannert (Oslo, Norway, For Art, 1995); *Interface: Berlin Art in the Nineties*, with an essay by Gillen [exh. cat., The Corcoran Gallery of Art] (Washington, DC, 1992).

²⁷. In addition to his editing *neue bildende kunst*, see his *Der Riss im Raum: Positionen der Kunst seit 1945 in Deutschland, Polen, der Slowakei und Tschechien*, [exh. cat., Martin-Gropius-Bau] (Berlin, 1995).

²⁸. See *German Art from Beckmann to Richter: Images of a Divided Country*, Eckhart Gillen (ed.) (Cologne, DuMont Buchverlag, distributed by Yale University Press, 1997).

²⁹. Quoted in Alan Cowell, "Germany the Unloved Just Wants to be Normal," *New York Times*, Week in Review (November 23, 1997), 3.

THE CHANGING ARTS SITUATION IN EASTERN GERMANY SINCE 1990

Matthias Flügge

After the Wall fell nine years ago, the so-called “valuation processes” began. The illusionary hope for a third political, economic and cultural path in a reformed GDR was buried under the “mantle of history,” using a term from the conservative Chancellor Helmut Kohl. This third way was to bridge the divide between a totalitarian model of communism and a perceived free-wheeling western capitalist system. Suddenly, artworks by those in the East were judged on all societal levels. Of course, these judgments were drawn by West Germans. The word “valuation” (in the way this term is used in the banking industry) was new to East Germans, and the procedures were also novel. However, the consequences were not.

At first, it appeared that the misunderstandings would never end. Old ways of thinking from the Cold War virulently surfaced. The dictum “art can only exist in freedom” became the battle cry of the “artists’ civil war” (Eberhard Roters). In 1995, Dieter Honisch, the then-director of the *Nationalgalerie* in Berlin, created a storm of anger when he attempted to integrate East German art into the regular collection, and made the mistake of displaying the Dresden neo-expressive painter Hubertus Giebe next to Francis Bacon. Young artists demonstrated in front of the new *Nationalgalerie*’s Mies-van-der-Rohe building wearing protest t-shirts they had printed themselves. A mini-“happening” almost lived again. But, the demonstration was not about the works of art, but rather about the individual biographies of the artists. Persecuted and exiled artists protested against those who they felt were associated with the system which they held responsible for the injustices of the GDR cultural industry, and which they found—right in front of their noses—in the *Nationalgalerie*.

The opponents in these debates developed their artistic judgements more or less directly from the analysis of the relationship of the artist to the state or, more generally, to society. The famous and obscure were recognized through their art by simplistic political attitudes equating half the works with affirmation of the regime and half with resistance to it. The art from the GDR, which was previously seen almost entirely through the ideological (and also economically oriented) screen of art export policy, had difficulty claiming its place anew in the fabric of European aesthetic practice.

Four interrelated conditions were responsible:

1. The seclusion (of artists)

2. The concentration on nationalism
3. The pseudo-communicative structures
4. The lack of a market

Let me quickly explain the individual points:

1. Once the Wall was erected in 1961, opportunities for artists to travel were eliminated. In contrast to literature, film and theater, the creative arts are determined by direct familiarity with original works. Although West German media could be received in the GDR, books and magazines were difficult to bring across the border. Only at the end of the 1970s were artists given the opportunity to travel. The discourse about art took place entirely internally in the GDR.

Teacher-student relationships played a very important role, as did regional connections. The small country was divided into specific “schools,” which operated relatively separate from one another and between which “cultural wars” routinely broke out.

2. From this seclusion and also from the interest of the artists in the German tradition (which had been interrupted after 1938), a predominantly national discourse on GDR art resulted. This was supported by the construction of a “socialist GDR nation,” which, since the late 1960s, had ideologically downplayed the separation from the West. It is interesting to recall that at the time there was little contact with artists living in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, or the Soviet Union.

3. Through the ever-present control and censure of public discourse in the media, the visual arts, particularly painting, took on a substitute role in visually relaying the weaknesses and failures of socialist life. Over one million visitors to the 8th *Kunstaussstellung der DDR* in 1978 found pictures, after in-depth discussion and analysis, with which they could describe their reality more closely than was possible in the [other] media. The so-called *Problembild* (problematic picture) raised questions about the discrepancies between public and private ideals and reality—about ideology and reality issues, such as care for the elderly, health, ecology, economics, and city planning.

4. The lack of an internal market for art and the far-reaching subordination of artists for public assignments made a critical dialogue about art difficult until the late 1970s. An [oppositional] public was first made possible by the creation of private and semi-private distribution structures. Out of this, private print shops with their own clientele arose, some of which published original graphic newsletters. The state-run art industry played an important role in the internal market in the late 1970s as well and brought such previously-obscure artists, such as Claus Altenburg or Glöckner, to the public eye.

From these factors, the nature of art in Eastern Germany is derived. I will now attempt to describe it in more detail and to discuss the causes of the current situation. I will refer primarily to the visual arts, which play a special role in the literal, one could say literature-based, socialism. Spectacular actions against artists were just as rare as a real underground was. Cases like the defection of Wolf Biermann in 1976 had no parallels in the visual arts, just as the extraordinarily active literary scene in the 1980s found practically no parallel among artists. The exceptions are found in some collaborations in a few projects and in the case of A.R. Penck. The waves of defection among artists in the 1980s were caused more by general boredom and greater travel opportunities than by any substantial governmental impediment to their work. The relationship of many artists to the state was that of an unfulfilled and undeniable love. Biographies of such artists as Hans Grundig, John Heartfield and others show the difficulties in dealing with the continuation of a proletariat and anti-fascist realization of art. The introduction of the Stalinist concept of “socialist realism” at the end of the 1940s and the almost complete instrumentalization of the arts during the Cold War led to a fateful dilemma in the GDR. Increasingly grotesque developments began within the cultural struggle as the Western European avant-garde tended toward reactionary politics, and, with the widespread failure to come to grips with the fascist inheritance—idealistic communism. Under the directive, *Parteilichkeit und Volksverbundenheit* (party spirit and unity among people), those who deviated from the narrative-propagandistic concept of art were called to order and also not infrequently “adjusted.” Despite, or perhaps because of, the backlash, the vision of free socialism increasingly gained followers and life force. The history of art in the GDR mutated into a history of the softening of ideologically-based positions, but not into a history of their basic undermining.

The supposedly hermetically-sealed cultural realm of the GDR was split inside from the beginning. Even if there had not been any opposition—or dissidents—who declaimed not the core of their teachings, but their appearance and packaging, there would have been at least two cultures—not in the Leninist sense of the separation between ruling and revolutionary culture, but rather more as an alternative between an orthodox idealism and a principle oriented on realism and history. As the borders between these became more flexible, the system showed itself over time to be teachable, even reformable, on the cultural level. What was criticized and torn down yesterday could soon completely become part of the ruling culture. Artists like Willi Sitte, Wolfgang Mattheuer, Bernhard Heisig, and Werner Tübke, who were made into export market champions in the 1970s, all fought their own individual battles over their personal artistic ideals. This made them respectable—even in the West.

In 1977, at the *documenta 6*, the first East German works were exhibited in the West. Artists with experience in German-German relations, such as Georg Baselitz, Jörg Immendorff and others, refused to participate. They did not dispute the aesthetic concepts, but rather the moral ones. Therefore, the discussion among artists, which began at a low point, became a disaster once the Wall came down. The social-democratic political concept of “change through rapprochement” created curiosity about what was supposedly an authentic expression of life behind the Iron Curtain. It created a picture which was chiseled out of paternal gestures of embrace. The sense of loss, which many West German critics felt about the international practice of art in their country, created strange fulfillment projections about the GDR.

“In der DDR wird deutscher gemalt,” (Painting is more German in the GDR) observed Günther Grass. Alfred Nemczek, in a catalog of works for an exhibit organized in 1984 by his publication “art,” suggested that within the GDR opposition, “every stout-hearted realist is more believable when compared to GDR abstract painters.” Siegfried Gohr, who during his time as the director of the Ludwigsmuseum in Cologne, consistently refused the addition of GDR art despite the wishes of collectors, analyzed this leftist fascination. But even he had only the official view in mind when he wrote:

“The problem with this art was sociological. In terms of content, art returned back to the lowest level, to the salon from whence the avant-garde had freed it. The capability of understanding this art could only be redeemed, in that the pictures deceived rather than enlightened consciousness. The artists of the GDR slid into a role as subjects of history and no longer wanted to create it, as they had surrounded themselves with a deadly Wall. This Wall is apparent in their works, in that the GDR artists were cocooned as apparent subjects.”

Gohr continues: “Realist art, painted by dissidents with professor titles, based on the ostracized art of Expressionism with its humanistic pathos—this must be the true national art of the Germans.” The aspect of humanistic instrumentalization—on the small-minded level—of a central pathos and true national art, comprise the criticism that younger art historians in the GDR practiced. But Gohr misses the point that in the media the literal picture of an enlightened consciousness was depicted—such as in the work of Lutz Dammbeck, who in the late 1970s dealt with the most taboo subject there was in the East: the continual survival of fascist-totalitarian thought. The artistic courage it took to do this could hardly be understood by outsiders then and even now.

In August of 1990, when the discussion was still stuck in its beginnings, Wieland Schmied wrote an essay for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, in which he, as far as I can see, was the first to deal with the problem differently, and made clear that moral judgments, such as state allegiance or individual well-being in an oppressive system have nothing to do with the quality of artworks—that the GDR art could not be an alternative to the discomfort with that which is modern, as it is in no way “brushed with the tenets of a well-designed value system, which so many dearly miss.” Schmied noted that there can be no West scale and East scale for art, rather only the one of indivisible quality. This does not mean that everything was worthless, but, according to Schmied, the hierarchies are to be considered. It can be agreed that the pronouncement was also politically correct in the spirit of the Reunification, but it did not help anyone further the discussion, because both sides were so identical. The two sides found it impossible to learn from each other under these new and changed circumstances. Exactly the aforementioned *Nationalgalerie* debate showed that the historical criteria and methods failed to explain it. The primary reason for this did not lie in western arrogance—as was often used as a defense in the East—but in the constraints and personal experiences from which a judgment by contextual viewpoints (both internal and external) were contrasted. Criteria, such as internationalism, authenticity, quality, or innovation, are bound to the aesthetic systems in which they are developed. This is just as true for North-South relations as it is for East-West.

Unlike the currency union, the cultural union of East and West could not to be accomplished overnight. In fact, neither side was sure if it desired a marriage of the two cultures. (We are also still dealing with consequences from the former.) If such a thing as the equalization of cultural standards were to occur, the equalization of the criteria on which the social acceptance and valuation of art is oriented would be a long process; besides, the aesthetic conceptions of the West will have changed. As I am to write about the relationship between identity and valuation, and less so about the future of this process, I would like to quote from Baudrillard when he perceptively wrote in 1991 about the revolution in Romania and the media:

“In the name of ‘democracy of enlightenment’ we have judged these [eastern European] people for the last 40 years as if they lived in a coma; as if by their mystification they were taken hostage, and for 40 years we have seen them as victims of history, for whom no other route was possible than to join with our beautiful West. As if we have not also long been hostages to an equally terrorist system, namely a terrorism of information and transparency, which sets an end to history

just as adroitly as the bureaucratic iron bars in the countries of the East.”

The new valuation of artworks from the East is done today, for lack of a better gauge, according to each work's “closeness to the system.” We have already determined that this is an unsuitable gauge; but, it is closely related to the problems of identity. With German thoroughness, according to the new standards, only the art which is able to legitimize itself through criticism of the system has a right to exist. As soon as socialist realism fell, the question was raised: to what degree was art (or artists) prepared for or warned of the sudden end and unexpected collapse of the old GDR state? Interestingly enough, the movement of socialist realism was placed with the moral rigor with which the consensus of anti-fascism was practiced in the GDR, and followed the protestant art hierarchy of the GDR which drew primarily on literature. The visual arts became a backward showplace, primarily through Georg Baselitz's well-known *Arschloch* (asshole) perspective (Illustration 1). This struggled not with the differences, but, armed with the clean conscience of those who had preceded and with an avant-garde style supported by the market, damned all equally. Precisely because of this, the verbal insult was just as shocking as it was useful. It struck the artist right in the heart, where the previously-mentioned question remained unanswered. The reactions were suitably strong. But, in the end, contemplation remained.

Today it is rather easy for the artist and the intellectual to push off self-analysis as to whether demands of the *ancien régime* should have been dealt with more actively. Even today there is, beneath the guilt, no psycho-social study of results or motivation. And, still, the authoritative and self-righteous judgments in the West exist, as the Federal Republic cannot come to terms with calling the history of the GDR part of its own history. Even today, the syndrome of self-exculpation is prevalent in the East, accuser and accused irreconcilably opposed, the bitter political tribunal atmosphere prohibits clear historical thought. But, the differences at the hand of *Stasi* collaborators and innocents are rather simple; the simple demonization of the system goes too far.

The primary debate polarized artists and intellectuals between the cleansing of consciences and accountability, between suppression, justification and denouncement of mistakes from the position of their own supposedly secure dogma. The morality of the warning voice backfired on those whose hopes for a reformed GDR could not hold with the current developments. *Das Volk* and their representatives dismissed such suggestions when the debate really came to pass. The intellectuals' illusion of their influence on the social process broke apart, certainly not for the first time in German history. The

Illustration 1: Georg Baselitz, *Das Letzte Selbstbildnis I*, 22.IX, 1982, oil on canvas, 250 x 200 cm, Galerie Rudolf Zeirner, Cologne



divergence of will was covered by the quasi-devout atheism of the communist “grand utopia.” The laughable material privileges for intellectuals and artists which the GDR offered, were not the reason for the blindness; rather, it was the spiritual privilege to live the “principle of hope.” Without forcing one to deal with its real transmogrification, one recognized the symptoms and thought they were curable until the very end.

The level of estrangement that the illusionists’ felt from reality must have been frighteningly obvious to them—how else can it be explained that they managed until then to ignore it, and allow this grandiose material to become art, which painfully bared their own snares as an occurrence of a renewed historic experience? Where there was an opening, journalism jumped in, and unencumbered by the secrets of creative survival under dictatorships, chose the national archives as their first field of study. Prisons, spies in all social spheres and tragic fates were also a reality of the monitored society. But, in their lack of cultural traditions, their difficult search for instances of legitimization and attempts for acceptance by their economically superior “opponent” in the West, the monitors in the East created a crude type of reverence for this surveillance. The arrogance of the “proletariat” power structure, who as “avant-garde” labeled the social and political processes only a half century after they drove their aesthetic avant-garde to labor camps and into exile, shows a growing blindness vis-à-vis the impulses of the media and art to undermine the ideology.

This estrangement from reality was particularly true for the visual artists, which, during the days of liberal socialism, had borders that were expanded upon from generation to generation. It was insubordination that led to a spiritual land rush to oppose the ever-returning tide of official culture politics and its ideological crown of thorns. This area of tension determined the quality and limits of the majority of artworks which were created in the GDR. It foretold the tragic mix-ups in the power structures and also revealed the cynical game from the position of those who made the rules. Perhaps more successfully than the Wall, this tension prevented communication with Western European and American art and the chance to participate in its energetic potential. It ripened the void of an internally directed exposition of differing tendencies—not the least of which was fear of splitting the forces apart. For those who could not adapt to this lifestyle, exile was the only other option. Fewer artists were driven from the GDR for reasons of political oppression than those who left because they felt that their art had no room to grow under such circumstances.

Gerhard Richter, who, along with Penck and Baselitz, was a member of the *Grenzgänger*, wrote in 1962: “I didn’t come here to escape materialism—which rules here more exclusively and without spirit—but rather I had to flee the criminal idealism of the socialists” (Illustration 2). Richter also fled his own

artistic beginnings in socialist-realist diction. He fled the pigeon-hole which he did not believe he could escape in the GDR. In 1991, the *Staatliche Kunstsammlungen* (State Art Collection) in Dresden tried to document the permanent exodus of creative forces in their exhibit *Ausgebürgert*. At the end of their research, almost 1,000 biographies of exiled visual artists were found—a number which makes the legends about conforming to the state or “power-shielded introspection” of GDR artists somewhat relative. It is clear here which artistic thrusts were made from East to West. No artist of repute moved from West to East after the building of the Wall.

The discussion about western art began right after the Second World War and was typified from 1948 on as the “struggle against formalism.” The SED (Socialist Unity Party) sanctioned formalism by vote in 1951 at their fifth party meeting of the SED Central Committee. The concept of formalism was not a Stalinist topic of contention: it already appeared in 1920 in Lunacharski’s work at a time when anti-modernism waves flowed through the European art scene. The “basic refutation of GDR cultural policy” in the early 1950s typified on one hand the entire German orientation, which was open vis-à-vis the West, and on the other hand the hegemony of the representatives of socialist realism and, with this, the separation from “western formalism.”

It should be remarked that this resentment towards modernist styles was also a dowry for communist functionaries grown out of the nationalistic “responsibility ethic” vis-à-vis a romanticized, also very materialistically constructed “community.” That a convergence of national-socialist art pursuits and socialist “formalist” hunts had a common root was often pointed out by western authors during the time of the Cold War. The national protest against “foreign infiltration into the German arts,” strengthened a small-minded proletarian stance against those aesthetic expressions which had the crisis of modern man as their main theme. Heiner Müller quoted the following in his memoirs of a GDR literature functionary: “Kafka’s methods of turning a man into a bug can not be taken lightly.” Müller continues: “It’s true, the [functionaries] had others.”

The historical reasons and mechanisms for the dissolution of the short-lived union of revolutionary social theory and avant-garde art, as well as the tragic fates of its protagonists in the Soviet Union after 1928, have been investigated thoroughly. This trauma had a particular effect on the GDR even until its end showing itself above all in a certain faint-heartedness and in the consciousness of the past, in regards to the strong German academic tradition in the arts, which, in the isolation of the GDR, was not undertaken as revision and took their specific ideal of the modern style up into the 1970s from the pre-expressionist influences. The Cézanne ideal of autonomy of form, which was

Illustration 2: Gerhard Richter, *Party*, 1962, oil on canvas, 150 x 182 cm, private collection, Baden Baden



a primary construct for the “Berlin School,” served also as a medium for the protest of ideological directives, but was seldom taken further. The official euphoria about progress contradicted the quasi-modern classicism, which referred not only to the timeless aesthetic values, but also brought analysis to bear on its ethical implications and thereby served an important function in protesting the gauges of art. In opposition, a neo-academic movement had certainly established itself by 1978 after the 8th *Kunstaussstellung der DDR* in Leipzig. Its pseudo-critical affirmations of these relationships attempted in many ways to render a new conception of a national GDR culture supportive of identity. The discussions were carried on primarily as retrospectives. The state, which had waved the flag of social progress, allowed itself to celebrate preferably anachronistic art forms, such as Werner Tübke’s “Bauernkriegs-Panorama” or the colossal memorial art imports from the Soviet Union. The central theme was not necessarily an international proletarian art concept of the long departed avant-garde, but rather the debates concerned with the “inheritance of the citizens;” and that, which after the favorite Hegel transmogrification of the time, could be “dialectically suspended.” The attempts at retrospective legitimization rather than the avoidance of renewal was the structurally aesthetic anticipation of the decline and simultaneously the cultural style of the isolationist strategy of GDR politics. The frugality of the painters and the expectations of the party functionaries, who had learned in the interim to attach critical potential to art in the framework of the socialist concept, met on the plain of the 19th-century art models. The so-called *Problembild* portraying the daily inequities of life, appeared in the visual arts—such analysis was suppressed in the media. Like similar developments in literature, analysis was seen in the West as a sign of the potential reformability of realist socialism and was instrumentalized as such up until the aforementioned participation in the *documenta* by Heisig, Sitte, Mattheuer, Tübke, Jastram, and Cremer in 1977 (Illustration 3). The ruling party saw this affirmation “critique” as useful, and bestowed honors upon creators of such works—the same ones they could not get rid of quickly enough once the Wall fell. It only occurred to a few that an artist like Wolfgang Mattheuer (who always set the Beckmann-like enrichment of the post-Impressionist GDR realist canon in opposition with the internationally-valid pictorial conventions of the late 1960s) never disclaimed the propagandic extrapolations of his work. Mattheuer’s canvases, which are today often interpreted as icons of resistance, were primarily projections of legitimate efforts by those in power. In the GDR collective conscience, Sisyphus and Icarus, who overcame physical and historical ways of being, became progressive figures in the service of the communist eschatology. Their mythical failures were used as propaganda to

Illustration 3: Wolfgang Mattheuer, *Der übermütige Sisyphos und die Seinen*, 1976, oil on board, 200 x 200 cm, Galerie Neue Meister, Cologne



proclaim the possibility of the impossible. But, in the end, Mattheuer's pictures broke through the socialist-realist convention—the secret of their success lay in their ability to invoke a variety of moods. The mix of the “principle of hope” and the disgust with the tangible effects of capitalism during the Vietnam War contributed to the promotion of a national identity in the GDR of the 1970s. Considered in this light, Mattheuer's work carried forth an impulse for “reform” in the GDR, in the sense that Honecker came to power to “reform” the GDR.

The believers were suitable, only the dogmas had to be modernized. Tübke's pictures of laborers, iconographically created in a Renaissance spirit, completed the short circuit: Christ, the saviour, appears as the top worker in a hard hat. Social and mythical reality were equalized. It was the GDR version of post-modernism, or, as Heiner Müller mused under different circumstances: “The birth of mannerism from the spirit of cowardice.” This socialist version of post-modernism did not miss its effect in the West either; whereby the commuted iconographic connections proved to be dissolved, the value of remembering them was, for the most part, lost. These paintings were the only available vessels, in which each artist could pour his/her interpretations, and both enlightened functionaries and reformed opponents could rationalize.

Today, however, a strange larmoyance prevails. In the words of the East German essayist Friedrich Dieckmann, one can read the following about the current state of the arts: “as this society has no positive concept of itself, other than that each person is allowed to have their own idea (an undenounceable, substitute metaphysical moment—the principle of profit—takes care of the transposition of the whole), the gauge by which one judges one's own deficiencies is missing. Now that the pressure lies on the individual instead of on the whole, it is much harder to express this concept visually.” Dieckmann, who here describes the aforementioned *Problembilder* according to GDR observations, finally struck upon the aphorisms of the official GDR art. It was this GDR-oriented and often trivial interpretation of art, as a motivating (not *bildhaft*) place of deliverance for societal problems, which failed with the fall of the GDR, as is evident in the continuation of the works of its protagonists. One actually can not regret it.

There is another interpretation which can be found today which is yet stranger: From the intellectuals and museum types in the social-historical school of art history comes the interpretation that GDR art was a type of delayed Middle Ages in which pastoral life, monastic adherence to place, and unflagging loyalty to a patron led to results with high “source worth.” Even today, these sociologists and art historians exchange SED meeting minutes and party proclamations pulled from the archives, and analyze them for creative processes; whereby the medieval and anti-reform analogies of worldly and

church power, of a hierarchically structured society and artistic court toadyness, reached its pinnacle as the tactics of the *Stasi* more and more resembled the Inquisition. The *Kunstaussstellung* cemented this misunderstanding—this is how myths become legends.

Two points are most commonly missed in remembrance of GDR art: First, at least since the late 1980s, the work of the artistic opposition was known, if not easily accessible. And, it was not created without presupposition; rather, there existed a network of connections, a type of “other culture,” which often shared a capillary exchange with the official culture. Second, art which differed from the official culture had developed its own system of valuation, which is not immediately apparent in the works, and because of this too often and too easily escaped Western critique. One sees better when one knows. And yet, the step into the open made some falter. This strongly encouraged every individual artist, whose own sense went against conformity, to overcome the problems of internal GDR criticism and the new place in the expanded context of artists.

What could be the criteria now that it was possible to participate in a fruitful exchange of individual artistic opinions, in an exchange which supersedes the plain acknowledgment of the phenomenon and searches for comparative roots? As can be seen by the recent extraordinary bloom of the art scene in Berlin, the young generation seems to have no problems with this type of exchange. The situation is energetically contradictory as if no room or excitement for a new orientation existed. But, since the fall of the Wall, we must look at the history of Europe differently and write about it in new ways.

The inner-German discourse is only enlightening when it is considered in this context. I have my own experiences with it through my work with the journal [as editor-in-chief of *neue bildende kunst*] and also from exhibitions. In a joint exhibition which took place in 1994/5 in Berlin’s Martin-Gropius-Bau under the title *Der Riß im Raum* (The Tear in Space), we tried by example to confront innovative art from the Eastern neighbor countries Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, with East and West German art since 1945.

The reactions were very informative. Of interest was the confirmation of a predominant perplexity, which, in beneficial cases, articulated itself as a sense of discrepancy along the chronological axis, and in detrimental cases as a projection of dissatisfaction with their own artistic practice of the so-called *Ostkunst* (eastern art). Certainly one could expect surprises after the opening. The picture that one had of a closed totalitarian society in the East lay close to the presumption of the existence of a lively and creative underground, which, after all, did not exist in such form. Our research for *Der Riß im Raum* determined that in the countries of the East Bloc, for many different reasons, this underground articulated itself, if at all, in the literary-publication realm. In

the field of visual arts, the few individuals of repute who had not left their countries were already well known. The reason certainly lies in the lack of a market in the East. The “market,” also understood as the free exchange of ideas, was more established in the much more liberal country of Poland than in East Germany. Although an active internal and external trade in art was practiced [in the GDR], a traditional *Kulturidee* (idea about culture) determined the strategies of all artists, which led to an internal opposition to the system. From this concept of culture, the criteria for quality of East German art up until the mid-1980s, when a new anarchic generation came into play, were derived. That is, a concept of the programmatic internalization was contrasted with the official euphoria of progress, which sought and found a connection to the western European classical modernism, at least by the time of Giacometti. This was an imminent political strategy of a cultural quest for identity; and it was also the crux that caused the works of the GDR artists who stayed in their country to fall out of the international context as their system of references disappeared. That begs the questions of the criteria for quality. Even when we now observe a universal artistic development in which artists thematicize their social identity, this takes place, as always, in a traceable frame of reference, a social group or ethnicity. The problem of the independent GDR artist was to extract themselves. They wanted to be citizens of the world, but they lacked the world view; paradoxically, the only place to flee was towards privacy.

For our neighbors to the East, this was different. The Polish writer Andrzej Szypiorski, in an article for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* some time ago, defined the differences between Poles and East Germans, averring that Poles never internalized the communist ideology, that their anarchic character permitted the opposing and exceptionally cynical affirmation. Szypiorski correctly notes that in the GDR, identification with the system was stronger even in dissent. Here we come back to the problem of nationalism and here is also the key to the present questions: even the dissenting art—one can hardly speak of “dissident” art—was oriented toward the ideological, propaganda markers of the official business. Their rejection took place not in the search for new forms and suggestions, rather mainly in a historicism of that which was modern. From experience, the idea of something new was suspect. The concept of authenticity measured itself only too often by the level of flight from society, in the concept of *Autonomen*, such retrospection could only be incorporated in a limited fashion. Autonomy is a category of free exchange, which exists only through the existence of a market, which freed art from the strings of the patron. Autonomy in the GDR was not possible in a structural-aesthetic sense, but rather in a practical sense—as economic independence, deftly made possible by the low cost of living. An art criticism which always orients itself toward

renewal and floating value could and can only create dull conservatism. Thereby, the loneliness of these artists is increased more today. They can not appeal to the old *topoi* and their identity is less defined than it was before.

Today's reception is not, in the meta-speech of the group in question from which the works result, adequately possible without a view of the concrete circumstances. Today the language of the artworks must be translated. The question about leaving this out in the context of contemporaries touches over time on the core points of themes of identity, history and memory. The political realm seldom left the discussion. The recognition of GDR art as an informative, special path of recent European history will mean a redefinition of art from the West. The preparation place for this is limited in Germany. It is simpler to place it in a history museum in an exhibit about totalitarianism: as unpleasant memories, past history and displaced identity.

**PASSAGES:
THREE EAST GERMAN ARTISTS BEFORE AND AFTER 1989**

Eckhart Gillen

“The issue is one of transition - of processes, change and transformation.”

“Divisions are important, breakdowns, purifications.”

“If a man went into the desert, he would paint differently than he would in a primeval forest.”

(A.R. Penck)

With the construction of the Wall running right through Berlin on August 13, 1961, the GDR regime cut the last connection between East and West Germany—the connection which had been a matter of survival to the artists and intellectuals in the East. Until that point, the over and underground public transportation lines still ran between “Berlin - Capitol of the GDR” and the Western Sector existing under the allied supreme sovereignty (USA, England, France). With a green card (called ‘*Propusk*’ in Russian), doctors, artists and scientists were even allowed to cross the border by car. Because the West German federal government did not recognize the GDR state citizenship, the young painter Gerhard Richter, for example, could still fly in 1959 from Dresden with a West German passport via the unguarded air passage over West Berlin to the *documenta 2* in Kassel, and from there, if he wanted, travel further on to Paris or Amsterdam. Along with exhibitions of American “Abstract Expressionism” art in the *Amerika-Haus*, the “Cinema on Steinplatz” was the main attraction for intellectuals and artists from the GDR.¹

But after August 13, 1961, the “antifascist protection wall,” as Günter Kunert described it in his memoirs, became “the existence caesura for those affected by it. ‘Before the Wall’ and ‘after the Wall’ is the colloquially observed point of rupture.”²

On August 13, the case was snapped shut. The artists as individuals were taken by the hand: “Now we have the Wall, and we will crush anyone against us,” Walter Ulbricht said in 1961, according to a statement by Heiner Müller, while many artists at the time thought “now that the Wall is there, we can talk openly about anything.”

Like the classical state utopias of Bacon or Campanella, which were only imaginable on islands or in cities screened off by walls, the “real, existing Socialism” could also only work “in a country” isolated from the “normal” outer world, respectively, by wall and barbed wire. The Wall became the symbol for history closed down and silenced, for time held still.

For the poet Durs Grünbein, born 1962 in the walled-in GDR city of Dresden, the reading of “Mass and Power” by Elias Canetti became the “Ariadne thread, with which the labyrinth of the damned society in which I grew up and finally left, the construction of its tunnels and dead ends, could be grasped . . . Following Canetti’s schema, it can be understood how the population of East Germany constituted itself as a self-contained mass, by means of a frontier that was equated with the death threat against those who tried to cross it. With this view, the Wall appeared to be what it was from the beginning: the cattle fence around an unwilling herd of people who had been forced into confinement and subjugated by models and special laws. . . Prevented by the border from breaking away, an entire population became a mass available for summoning either to silence or to attend parades and meetings.”³

During the year the Wall was built, Roger Loewig drew, in red and black ink, how the tanks drove up and how all movement between guards and guarded froze.⁴ (Illustration 1) These drawings were the only items to elude the confiscation of his artistic and literary works when his apartment was searched after his arrest in August, 1963, because they happened to be elsewhere at that moment. Until 1972, when he was granted an exit permit to West Berlin, he worked in total obscurity.

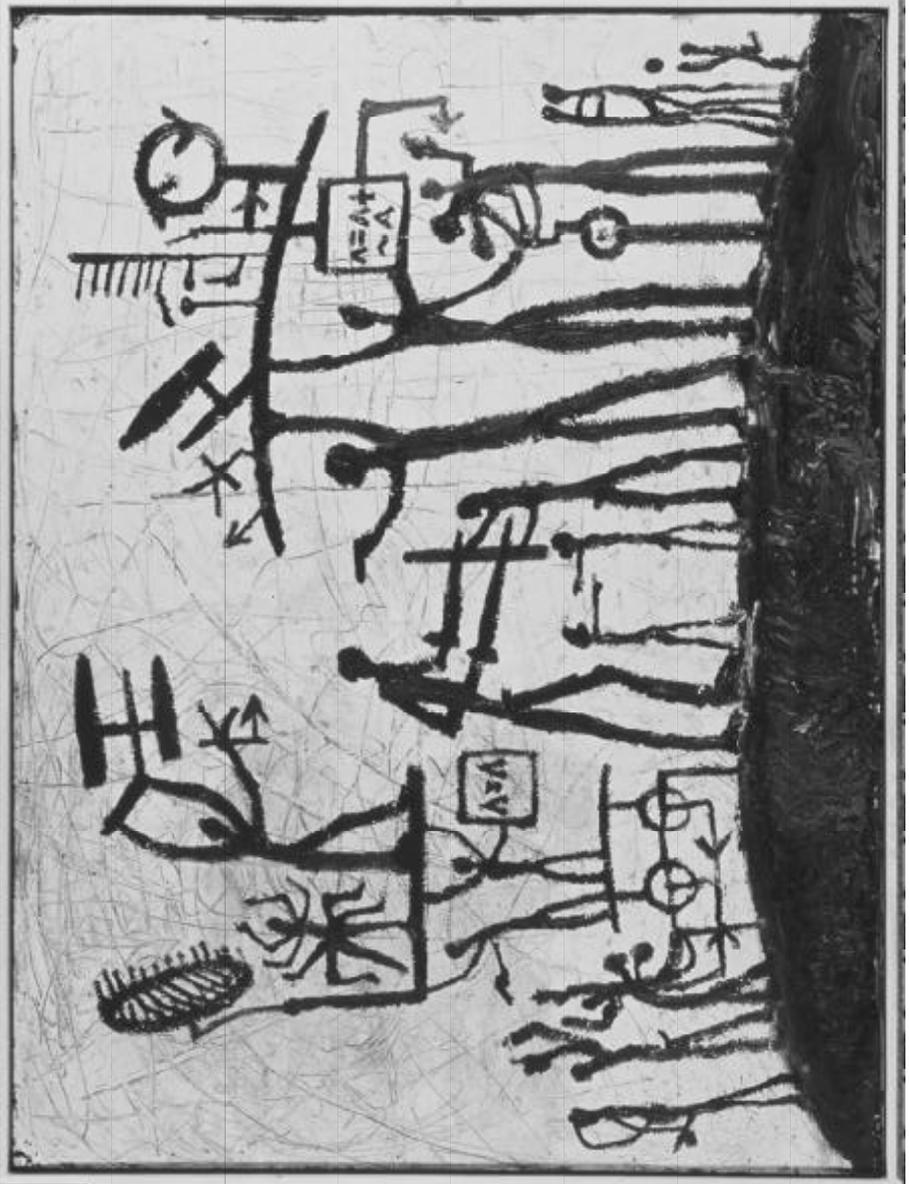
How did artists of various generations in the GDR deal with being sealed off from the West? Why did they remain in the GDR, respectively, why did they leave the country? How did they react to the surprising fall of the Wall? The following text will look into these questions using the example of three artists from three generations (A.R. Penck, born 1939 in Dresden; Lutz Dammbeck, born 1948 in Leipzig and Via Lewandowsky, born 1963 in Dresden).

By 1961, Ralf Winkler (alias A.R. Penck) saw himself as a political artist. His first painting in pictogram style (Illustration 2) defended the building of the Wall as the defining line of a just and humane state against militarism and exploitation. The left and right sides of the picture correspond to the East-West confrontation of the Cold War. In the East (GDR), we see a child playing and a couple embracing. In the middle of the picture, people stand across from each other, threatening the other side with weapons. In the West, violence and fear rule: one form standing on the assembly line threatens two figures with a pistol. They lift their arms helplessly, a figure nearby bends over the assembly line. A figure far to the left turns away; he denies all awareness of the situation. Here, the East is still distinctly the moral victor in the contest of systems. “We found the building of the Wall good, from our political conviction, we saw it as correct . . .”⁵

Illustration 1: Roger Loewig, *Guard and Guarded*, 1961, ink on paper, 42 x 60, collection of the artist. (One of three drawings from the series, *From German History and Present*, 1961).



Illustration 2: A.R. Penck, *World View I*, 1961, oil on masonite, 122 x 160 cm, Kunsthaus Zurich, Vereinigung Züricher Kunstfreunde



With the naiveté of a sleepwalker, he applied the propagated socialism to his art and took it at its word. His concept “touched Socialism. Nearly a Communist artist”⁶ he wrote retrospectively in 1978 about his work in the 1960s.

“I wanted to paint pictures that work as signals, which lift themselves up from the space from which they come, from me and my studio. . . Standing at the basis of Socialist theory, we wanted to push forward to the societal core. . . At that time, it was a closed society in the East. Everyone only saw its system. For me, it was important to examine the other, to get a picture of Germany in its division. . . And I wanted to attain clarity about these two systems and my own position with regard to these systems.” Ralf Winkler remembered how very much “this latent danger of war influenced us all” in the 1960s. “Many people had the feeling that their existence was threatened.” Four years later, “World View II” (Illustration 3), in contrast, relativized the unambiguous images of the enemy. Two over-sized figures shake hands over the line of confrontation. A “subjective point of rupture” indicates the small figure who protestingly holds up a name-plate (“Ralf”). “More distinct class divisions again arose in the East and an increasingly subjective arbitrary use of power also came to rule. In contrast, the systems in the West became stronger.” In the end, this process was to have disintegrated the order of the Cold War. “This was then later called convergence or coexistence.”⁷

In 1961, Penck broke away from his paragons, who until that point included Rembrandt and Picasso.⁸ He no longer wanted to generate illusions in the sense of Marxism’s materialist aesthetic, but rather to question and analyze social powers and structures, and to determine processes of development. “I want to determine I, and anything else, but only as that what it is - free of illusion.”⁹

It was no coincidence that he began with these world and system images shortly after the Wall was built. The famous stick figures are for him an expression of imagistic thinking, a means of representing the myriad of processes and principles of a society. The divided Germany as image theme was for him an attempt to see the world “as the system of referring attitudes.”¹⁰ He wrote to his friend, the painter Georg Baselitz: “I have come away from artistic in the traditional sense of painting, and occupy myself with mathematics, cybernetics and theoretical physics. What I have in mind is a kind of physics of human society.”¹¹

Until he was forced to leave the GDR in 1980, he had set an example for many younger artists through his freedom from fear and his sleepwalking balance along the border between the allowed and the not allowed. In his painting *Passage*, his I-figure still balances with supreme ease over the abyss

A.R. Penck, *World View II (Large World View)*, 1965, poster paint on masonite, 172 x 260 cm, Museum Ludwig, Cologne



like a tightrope walker, while in the second—the night version—it falls from the burning footbridge with arms raised in fright. (Illustration 4) Between 1963 and 1966, the art political situation worsened dramatically for him as well.¹²

Despite his basically positive attitude to socialism in the GDR, he was systematically excluded and pushed into the underground. Since 1966, Ralf Winkler was a “candidate” of the Artists’ Union. Theo Balden and Gerhard Kettner had taken over the “patronage” for him. When the three-year run of candidacy was out, he was refused the status of full membership, which was the decisive requirement for existence as “professional artist.” With biting irony, he accepted society’s rejection and wrote a “last letter” to the Artists’ Union. He wrote that after thorough analysis of his situation, he had resolved to drop his professional goal as “visual artist.” “The intensity with which I strived for this goal made me into a fool, a lunatic, even into an enemy of the State in the eyes of my co-citizens and colleagues. I regret that greatly.”¹³

On the occasion of his first exhibition in the West at Gallery Hake (Michael Werner) in Cologne in 1968, Ralf Winkler took on a pseudonym which would later be followed by other pseudonyms. His choice of names was programmatic: Albrecht Penck, geographer and Ice Age researcher (1858-1945), corresponded with his conception of art as empirical science in the “Glacial Period” of the Cold War. Analogous to the natural scientist Albrecht Penck, who sought information about the history of the earth and a chronology of the Ice Age in layers of rock and sediment deposits, Ralf Winkler worked through many layers of information, through all of art history. “I saw, at the time, certain parallels to societal events, to behavior, to human psychology. . . It was really the runners of the Cold War . . . and this Ice Age was put upon to look for parallels.”¹⁴

Durs Grünbein wrote, looking back in 1997, about the “icon painter of the Cold War:” “Now that the walls have been razed, the mine-fields cleared, and the radio signals decoded, the allegorical meaning of his painting has come to light. . . The Ice Age from which his pictures came ended yesterday—a geographical Ice Age. Caught in the pack ice of blocks, boxed in between immobile masses (of population, weapons technology, architecture), he tried to develop, from nothing, a pictorial alphabet with which the dead-end situation could be described—as state of the art. . . The transition from a traditional image of humans to the no-man’s figure of his stick figures follows the disappearance of humans on new shores. His warnings extended the political horizon to the planetary. His pictorial formulas translate the ‘Dialectic of the Enlightenment’ into nothing but no-man’s dances before a still nameless catastrophe.”¹⁵

Illustration 4: A.R. Penck, *Passage*, oil on canvas, 94 x 120 cm, Ludwig Forum, Aachen



Penck's consequent conception of art as communication and enlightenment for everyone met with the same enormous lack of understanding in the GDR as did Jörg Immendorff's polemic against a painting "which for itself is enough, and takes no position to any problem . . . , when you can point a finger at many" in the FRG. In Autumn of 1976, the painters Jörg Immendorff from Düsseldorf and A.R. Penck from Dresden met in the Lindencorso, an East Berlin café at the corner of Friedrichstraße and Unter den Linden. Immendorff remembers: "The first meeting with Penck was completely absurd. I was still a convinced Maoist . . . it was a café that catered only to functionaries and westerers, not to everyday people. Everyone sat there reading *Neues Deutschland* (official newspaper of the United Socialist Party) . . . , and he came and shouted: 'Red front' . . . I wanted to know everything and found the situation downright historic. But he talked only in science-fiction formulas. I said, now we have to paint pictures for Stalin and Mao Tse Tung, and he answered in science-fiction phrases. That was two monologues next to each other."¹⁶

Immendorff, the agitprop painter from rich, capitalist West Germany, must have initially made a strange impression on Ralf Winkler, alias A.R. Penck. As shrewd East German, he first let Immendorff talk himself into a corner with his radical declarations of intention, to test his earnestness. That was part of the usual ritual when dealing with a "visitor from the West."

Two politically involved artists, outlawed and isolated in both the Federal Republic and GDR societies, each saw their own situation reflected in the other. In a playful usage of socialist jargon, they resolved to become a good collective that would also embrace contradictions. As the issue was not one of a political verbal boxing match, but rather of painting, they wanted to "connect the joy of painting with the wish to transcend the Wall." In January, 1979, they met in Penck's atelier in Dresden. In a "conversation with drawings and colored pages," they went through the mutual East-West clichés ad absurdum: "The West is bad / The East is good," "The West is good / The East is bad," and drew up a German-German artist's contract.

The encounter with Penck in Café Deutschland inspired Immendorff's painting series "Café Deutschland" (19 paintings, 1977-83). The inner room of a punk-disco in Düsseldorf (Rattinger Hoff) became an imaginary stage for the division of Germany. In the painting *Café Deutschland I* (1978, oil on canvas, 278 x 326 cm, Museum Ludwig, Cologne) Immendorff sticks his hand through the Wall, reaching toward a man on the opposite side—recognizable in the mirror reflection as Penck. Behind the glass column, the leaders Schmidt and Honecker stand opposite each other at a round table covered with black-red-gold colored cloth. The "Division of Germany also as a symbol for

divisions—up to the individual: a nation’s problem with identification with history, the crushing of identity by fascism, the fact that the German contradiction is worldwide, namely, the contradiction of both superpowers.”¹⁷

In 1980, A.R. Penck applied to leave the country for the West. “It is not that you can talk about ‘voluntary’ or ‘compulsory.’ It corresponds to the logic of the system that you have to make the application yourself, so that the system cannot be criticized for taking away someone’s citizenship.”¹⁸ On August 3, 1980, it was time: at the moment of passage, the thoughts and feelings split. “There’s no turning back! Time stands still and goes on at the same time.” He quickly realized that the accustomed reflexes and mechanisms no longer worked. “The confrontation with political power doesn’t happen the same way as I knew it.” Now he was suddenly confronted with the entire history of art and the modern in exhibitions and museums: “In the East I was relatively innocent, because I knew nothing of modern culture, unless it was from books. In the West, I lost my innocence because I saw all the effects and I knew what may no longer happen to me.”¹⁹

In contrast to the autodidactic Penck, Lutz Dammbeck studied at the Academy for Graphics and Book Design in Leipzig (1967 to 1972). In the poster class, he was able to remove himself from the conservative influence of the old masters. The class counted as a kind of free space from which everyone could make something for himself. Dammbeck’s search for new materials and forms of expression in order to tell stories, to be able to express complex impressions and feelings, evaded the stiff hierarchy of creation; painting, sculpture and graphics—which was cultivated particularly by the “Leipziger school.” In the no-man’s land between painting and book design, Dammbeck began to experiment with materials, to try out their qualities, to combine them, to paint over them. The work with film animation then became a kind of grammar of his artistic work, a departure point of the free text, sheet music and pictures. In the GDR of the 1970s, there had been no such dialogue between these boundary transgressing forms of art.

“Western art,” on the other hand, was accepted more subliminally, unconsciously; it reached the artist through western television like the shadows of the outside world reached those in Plato’s cave. “You didn’t relate it to yourself, there wasn’t the meat on the societal bones for that, it wasn’t analyzed because we didn’t see any reference to our own reality, even when there were formal analogies” (Lutz Dammbeck). Self-dependent like Penck, he began in 1982/3 an archeology of memory using the figure of Heracles. On this, he analyzed and dismantled the construction of a “New Person” since the French Revolution of 1789, which in 1989, 200 years later, had hopefully fallen forever. Taking the classical heroic myth as his basis, Dammbeck

explored the ideology and aesthetics of National Socialism and Stalinism. Using images, collages, texts, film, and media collages, he reflects the tabooed functioning of parallel structures: The East German party leaders, who had fought in the anti-Nazi resistance, regarded their own population, which had followed Hitler, as a domestic foe. They interned themselves in a hermetically sealed government ghetto surrounded by walls and watchtowers in Wandlitz, north of Berlin, right near the former concentration camp in Sachsenhausen. The two German dictatorships—the Nazi regime, 1933-45, and the GDR regime in the following forty-four years resembled one another in their totalitarian methods of surveillance, seduction and subjugation through the leader cult, mass processions and state security organs. All these components were meant to shape the population into a *Volksgemeinschaft* (Nazi jargon) or *sozialistische Menschengemeinschaft* (GDR jargon). The mere mention of that structural resemblance was taboo in the GDR; and so the psychological deformations of everyday Nazi life could survive without interruption and consolidate in East Germany.

During his initially harmless research through the family album, in the archives of the anti-fascist resistance (whose drawers were surprisingly empty), he came up against a wall of silence, which in West Germany as well had shoved itself like a rubber wall between the generations.

Suddenly, a connection between the generation of parents formed and marked by the “Third Reich” and the GDR was revealed. Had there been something like a repetition of the Nazi system but with a completely different political sign, only more mysterious, even more frightening and unspeakable and more forbidden? The insanity of a programmatic anti-fascist state, which itself exhibited fascist features, brought the generation of post-war children to a breaking test between the agreement with anti-fascism and the rejection of the totalitarian repression. The silence of the parents was only broken in the dispute over conflicts which rose up at Dambeck in his dissent against this “new German state.” The daily forms of living under control by others, double morality, fear and distrust, exclusive knowledge held by those in power and slave language, “which had definitely determined my parents’ mentality during the Nazi time. And the advice they gave me when they were worried about my future . . . was of the same useless pattern with which they had loaded themselves with complicit guilt.”²⁰

A point of departure for his media collage is the Brothers Grimm’s black pedagogy in their fairytale “The Stubbornness of the Child,” who is punished with death as the last resort of the failed teacher. This educational method ended in Auschwitz and in the *Gulag*. Dambeck works with concept pairs such as obstinacy and punishment, tact and unreasonableness as leitmotifs.

Dammbeck urges his audience to say no, to leave the protective cave of “Father State” and “Mother Party” and from now on to only trust its own sense. “The dark cave, the expressive gesture with which the willful child wiggled out of the tetrahedron as if out of a cocoon, was well received by the audience, touching on the feeling of being betrayed and imprisoned. Everyone felt a vague sense of unease in this old GDR, yet had long ago settled into the fetid warmth of the nest. You could spend twenty years describing this deeply felt moment but that would be unproductive. This work, for always the same in-the-know audience, soon seemed to me like a stepping-on-the-same-spot, there was no more response.” Dammbeck left Leipzig and settled in Hamburg in 1986. Even there he trod contaminated grounds.

With the kidnapping of Adolf Eichmann in 1960 and the Auschwitz Trial in Frankfurt/Main in 1963, the long successfully suppressed-history “returned to West Germany wearing the mask of terrorism.”²¹ The Red Army Faction terrorists as willful Heracleses hardened themselves as a reaction to their parents’ emotional torpor and political apathy, until nothing more differentiates them from their opponents. Lutz Dammbeck mounted the heads of Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin as a material picture series with sculpture portraits by Arno Breker, which he named *Nibelungen* (1986/88), later only numbered as *Experimental Arrangement* (1987/90) (Illustration 5), when he included himself and his parents. The members of the “Red Army Faction” unconsciously reproduced the suppressed guilt of the culprit, the uncomprehended German history.

In *Experimental Arrangement* with phantom pictures from the high-tech machines of the Federal Department of Criminal Investigation, which were developed to hunt down the terrorists, he used his own childhood photo as departure material for the trying out of role models. That would now be remodeled with the most varying portraits. One still guesses who could be in there. Who could I be? Who am I? Dammbeck goes after the question in a scientific long-term experiment: “where is my place in this spectrum up to Auschwitz? In the meantime, we know quite well that we are basically not any different from our parents and we become more and more distrustful of ourselves. The material that you collect betrays very simply that you are jeopardized. We are afraid of that. We want to be one of the ‘good ones’.”

It was in Hamburg that he first became conscious that from the beginning he had developed his art based on content. “In the meantime, I order the *topoi* only formally.” His material has become increasingly transparent. Mounting as narration of concrete stories, the combining of pictures, feelings, dates, family histories, myths, and fairy tales into a “fine, hovering tissue” for which it is important to find a form without destroying it in the process, connecting

Illustration 5: Lutz Dammbeck, *Experimental Arrangement*, 1987/90, mixed media, photographs



all the forms of expression that he uses. He does not put much store in truths, certainties. He does not strive for any historical reconstruction in the definite sense of maintaining how it had been, but rather in the sense of how it could have been. Talk of “truth” and “lies” belongs in a category of thinking which throughout history, for example, in the crusades and the religious wars, has proven to be deadly. At the moment “in which you talk about truth, a politicum arises, and you attempt to dominate other conceptions and to control other people. If the notion of truth no longer came into play, we could presumedly live with each other peacefully.”²²

Lutz Dambeck does not want to enlighten and teach, but rather, to show others what he sees and senses. “The impulse to reach an audience is legitimate. The fact that the film, for example, always seems different to me on the screen than it does in my head, is something I have to accept and live with like something that grew. You don’t become more stupid that way, but rather more smart.”

Lutz Dambeck experienced the fall of the Wall on November 9, 1989 in the same way as hundreds of other artists who had emigrated to West Germany since the beginning of the 1980s: as a brief feeling of luck (end to the country’s blocked entrance) quickly followed by the sobering: “Now a lot of what we left behind will return. And probably what made us leave the GDR will return most quickly.” His first visit to his native city Leipzig strangled him. “You have lived so long there, in this destroyed, dark gray country. How can anyone let people live like that?”²³

Via Lewandowsky came to a similar conclusion at the end of 1989. Born after the Wall was built, like the poet Durs Grünbein, he came quickly to the idea that the GDR was a state to which the sad metaphor “a huge cage” applied. The state, which as a closed facility granted leave to its subjects according to its own whim, barricaded itself behind the Wall as “anti-fascist Shield,” and legitimized its repressive dictatorship with an offensive anti-fascist policy against an ostensibly latent fascism in the western part of Germany. A real “de-nazification,” however, was even less of a reality in the GDR than in the FRG. Lewandowsky was one of the “Autoperforation artists” (Micha Brendel, Else Gabriel, Reiner Görß) in Dresden. There, they found their free space in the basement of the art academy in the stage design department and remained there despite the wave of emigration since Penck left Dresden in 1980. However, they made no contribution to the psychic stability of the system and did not make themselves at home in any kind of inner world diaspora of asceticism. In contrast to many artists in the GDR who tried to spread their belief in a better socialism within the real existing socialism, their public remained without consolation, alternative or hope. They blew apart the

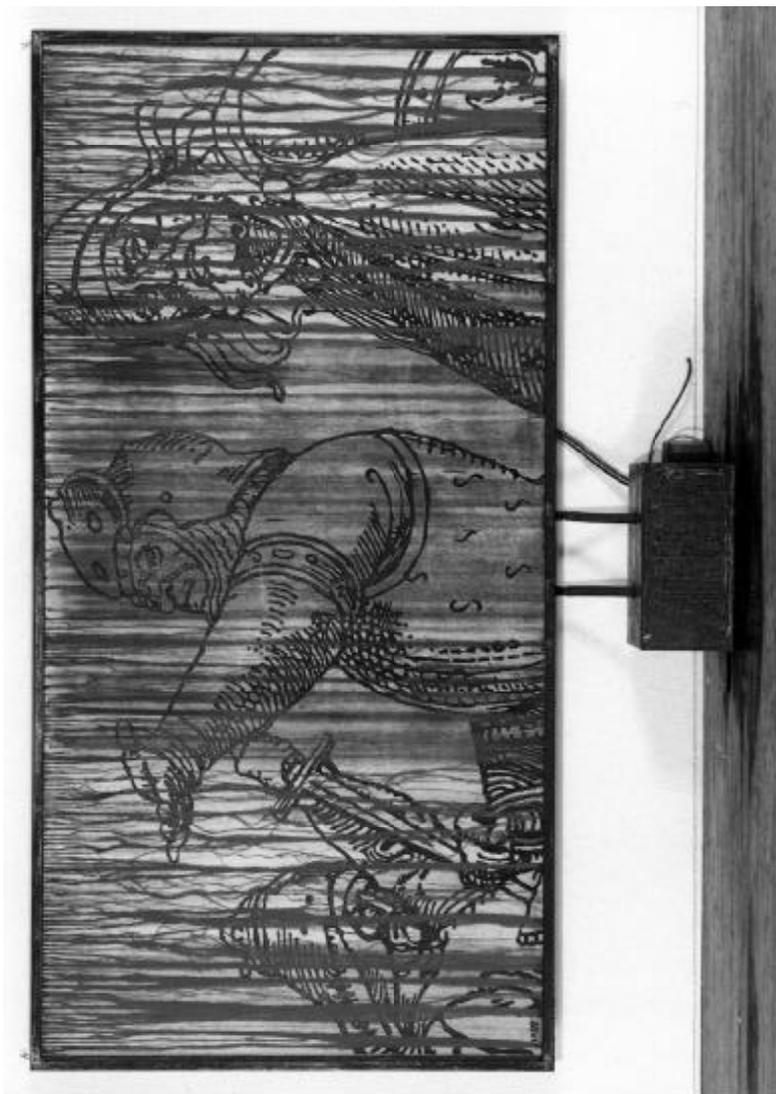
familiar but unspoken consent of the alternative art scene of which Lutz Dammbeck said blocked his artistic work. With their performance work, they developed shock techniques, transgressed boundaries of shame, gave a body to the tortuous silence and continually created new unclarity, fakes, farces, and confusion. The performance group, a community of necessity, quickly dissolved itself after the GDR fell. Each was left alone with his or her own histories.

Via Lewandowsky submitted his series *You Can't Hear the Screaming - Eight Portraits about Euthanasia* for his first exhibition in West Berlin at the end of 1989. (Illustration 6) The reference to the Nazi euthanasia programs contained in the title is conceived by the artist as a post-trauma statement about the GDR, which suddenly vanished from the picture like an evil spirit. Only after it was over did it become clear to him what a monstrous "brave new world" he had escaped and he then lost his usual sceptical-sarcastic casualness. The sudden disappearance of the stress helped sharpen his insight into the past. In the reversal of the ancient notion of beautiful death into the cynicism of killing "unworthy life," the GDR is revealed as an asylum "of people who did evil to their own—put them to sleep, anesthetized, administered and caged them in with rules, ideologically bribed them, and so on."²⁴

His portrait gallery shows terse faces which provoke the viewer to ask, why, of all people, would such a person be selected as sick. The presentation of the heads is ambivalent: The clamped tongue (*Rede und Antwort*—which in English has the sense of "to justify oneself") is, to begin with, the first-aid against the danger of suffocation after becoming unconscious. At the same time, however, it is the muzzle of dictatorship. Via Lewandowsky outright denounces the transcendence of barbarism through beauty and the analogy to a Christian iconography of passion on gold a base in Middle Age paintings. The canvases as image carriers are placed in their steel frames like broken bones in a splint with lining in between.

A.R. Penck, Lutz Dammbeck and Via Lewandowsky say in unanimous agreement that they have attained clarity about themselves and their artistic work through their change to the West. The incredibly silent implosion of the GDR was a liberation for them. They had nothing more to lose. Utopias and ideologies have fallen like a row of dominoes. The point is now that of a sober assessment. "Prick up yours ears and keep going! . . . For no discourse maintains itself in transience beyond the next name change, the next collapse of the hierarchy . . ."²⁵

Illustration 6: Via Lewandowsky, *The One Born of a Lucky Hour*, from the series, *Eight Portraits about Euthanasia*, 1989, acrylic, glue, urine, cotton, wool on canvas, 130 x 110 cm, Berlinische Galerie, Berlin



ENDNOTES

1. The East German writer Günter Kunert wrote in his memoirs: "I write on the application: 'For purposes of study and visiting the library.' Actually, we only want to drive to Steinplatz and go to the movies. My wife's name also has to be written on the card so that the police officer at Brandenburger Tor - the border crossing assigned to me - lets both of us cross over." (211, cont'd.) After August 13, Kunert, with papers, drove his car once more past heavily armed combat teams through the Brandenburg Gate, "which would only be opened again nearly thirty years later" (219). He asked himself afterwards why he voluntarily drove back. I am stuck "in that antifascist trap, incapable of flying, incapable of escaping. In the West, the Globkes rule, those who contributed to the 'Final Solution,' the SS comrades, the murderers, who I assume no longer reside among us in the GDR...patience with the childrens' illnesses of socialism." In: Günter Kunert, *Erwachsenenspiele. Erinnerungen* (Munich, 1997), 221.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Durs Grünbein, "Wir Buschmänner: Eine Erinnerung an Elias Canettis 'Masse und Macht'" in: Durs Grünbein, *Galilei vermisst Dantes Hölle und bleibt an den Maßen hängen: Aufsätze 1989-1995* (Frankfurt am Main, 1996), 198, 205 cont'd.
4. Roger Loewig, three drawings from the series "From German History and Present," 1961, "Tank, Tank, Tank," "Guard and Guarded," "Woman Shot Dead in the Canal," all three ink on paper, 42 x 60 cm.
5. Catalog A.R. Penck (Berlin, 1984), 91. When he was seventeen, he wanted to join the "Socialist Unity Party" (Sozialistische Einheitspartei/SED). He was a member of the Young Pioneers, the Free German Youth (FDJ), the Society of German-Soviet Friendship, Chess Club Rotation Mitte, Chairman of the Group Advisory Board and class spokesman, member of the swimming team and candidate of the Artists Union (Verband Bildender Künstler Deutschlands/VBKD) from 1966-69. "My writing (running petitions with suggestions for improvement) were honored by the authorities with silence." (Quoted on the cover of *Was ist Standard?* (Cologne/New York, 1970).
6. Penck, 1978, quoted in catalog A.R. Penck, National Gallery Berlin, 1988, 80.
7. A.R. Penck im Gespräch mit Wilfried Dickhoff. *Kunst heute* Nr. 6. Ed. by Wilfried Dickhoff (Cologne, 1990), 15-22.
8. "I already had the idea very early on, of overcoming Picasso with Rembrandt. But that was a fallacy. You also certainly cannot overcome Einstein with Aristotle." Quoted from footnote 7, p. 55.
9. Penck, *Was ist Standard?* (Cologne/New York, 1970). In: Catalog A.R. Penck, National Gallery Berlin (Berlin, 1988), 78.
10. Penck, 1978, in conversation with Dieter Koeplin. Quoted from footnote 9, 75.
11. Quoted in: Dieter Koeplin, Catalog Penck, Basel, 1978.
12. A.R. Penck, *Passage*, 1963, oil on canvas, 94 x 120 cm, Ludwig Forum, Aachen. A. R. Penck, *Passage By Night*, 1966, oil on patterned fabric (table cloth), 100 x 130 cm, Essen, private collection. Penck said of the first version from 1963: "That was

personally also a time of passage. . . . It is a picture of danger. The fire as element of danger can certainly not be overlooked. By the way, during that time, I had worked as a night watchman in a factory. I developed a very close relationship to fire there, because every night I stood by the cauldron and had to shovel in more coal. . . . It is an image of doubt. . . . I fell from cliff to cliff when I was night watchman. But there is only a real risk when you reckon that you'll fall. That is the important thing in the picture. It's not yet decided if he'll make it or not." (see footnote 7, 26)

Between 1963 and 1966, there was the 1964 5th Congress of the Artists's Union (VBKD), with reprisals against the three congress speakers Fritz Cremer, Bernhard Heisig and Hermann Raum, and in 1965, the notorious 11th Plenum of the Central Committee (ZK of the SED).

¹³. Documentation, 75.

¹⁴. Interview, 1984, Quoted from footnote 9, p. 32.

¹⁵. Durs Grünbein, *ICON AND COSMICON*. On A.R. Penck. In: *From Beckmann to Richter. Images of a Divided Country* (Yale University Press, 1997), 174.

¹⁶. J. Immendorff talking with Pamela Kort. In: *Kunst heute*, Nr. 11, edited by Wilfried Dickhoff (Cologne), 631.

¹⁷. Immendorff in conversation with Walter Grasskamp. In: Catalog "*Source and Vision*" (Madrid, 1984), 31, cont'd.

¹⁸. Interview 1980, quoted from footnote 9, 55.

¹⁹. Quoted from footnote 9, 55-57.

²⁰. Lutz Dammbeck, Herakles-Notizen, In: *Niemandsland: Zeitschrift zwischen den Kulturen*. Eds. W. Dreßen, E. Gillen, No. 1 (Berlin, 1987), 66.

²¹. Sylvère Lotringer in a conversation with Heiner Müller, in: H. Müller, *Gesammelte Irrtümer* (Frankfurt am Main, 1986), 80.

²². "Wahrheit ist die Erfindung eines Lügners." The philosopher and physicist Heinz von Foerster in a conversation with Bernhard Pörksen. In: *Die Zeit* Nr. 4 (January 15, 1998), 41.

²³. L. Dammbeck, Filmtagebuch "Zeit der Götter" in: L. Dammbeck, catalog *Herakles Konzept* (Berlin, 1997) 46.

²⁴. Durs Grünbein, *Alibi für Via*. In: *Sie können nichts schreien hören: Acht Porträts zur Euthanasie*, catalog (Berlin/West 1989), 27.

²⁵. Durs Grünbein, *Transit Berlin*. In: *Interface: Berlin Art in the Nineties*, [ex. cat., Corcoran Gallery of Art] (Washington D.C., 1992), 33.

WERNER TÜBKE AND THE FRANKENHAUSEN PANORAMA PAINTING

Richard W. Pettit

In 1989, just before the fall of the Berlin Wall and the sudden demise of the German Democratic Republic, a group exhibition of twelve East German artists was sponsored by the Busch-Reisinger Museum at Harvard University.¹ It traveled later to Los Angeles and Ann Arbor and was the first and last exhibition of its kind in the United States, where the visual arts of East Germany were and remain relatively unknown. If one views the life of GDR culture overall, the lopsided concentration of American academic interest on East German literature, rather than art, can not be readily explained. The visual arts played a very central role in GDR culture from the state's founding in 1949 to the very end in 1990. The leading East German artists certainly enjoyed a level of social esteem and privilege—as well as controversy—similar to that of their literary counterparts.

Part of the reason for this imbalance in American coverage of East German culture has to do with the very basic difference between literature and the fine arts; one being more abstract, and narrative, while the other is more concrete, immediate, and visual—Lessing's famous *Lookoon* essay with its time/space distinction between the two media still applies. Literature, by nature, is more easily transported and disseminated and more difficult to control or censor than visual art. Another reason for the general lack of American interest and knowledge of East German art stems from the fact that this art has, for decades, been overshadowed by the work of a few East German artists like Georg Baselitz, Gerhard Richter and A. R. Penck, who fled to the West and became extremely successful. Politics, especially the peculiar brand of East-West German politics and all the related social tensions played perhaps the greatest role in discouraging interest in the West, including the U.S., for East German art and culture.

With reunification, both sides have been forced to reassess their respective notions of each others' culture, as imbalanced as this process may have been so far. Although it is still too soon to say with precision what will emerge, at the minimum a more objective, less politicized view of East German culture seems likely. With respect to GDR literature, it has been clear for some time in the U.S. that the repressive isolation of East Germany brought forth astounding productivity and creativity. This same realization for the visual arts is beginning to dawn among western German art critics and art historians and it seems probable that it will at some point also affect how East German art and artists are viewed in this country. For this to occur, however, and to arrive at an answer

to the question of what has happened to the visual arts in eastern Germany after reunification—the topic of the workshop that generated this and the other papers—then one first needs to gain at least a basic understanding of how the visual arts developed in the GDR. To this end, I would like to focus on one particular East German artist, the painter and graphic artist Werner Tübke and his major work, the huge panorama painting, “The Early Bourgeois Revolution in Germany,” located in Bad Frankenhausen. To better understand the larger developments in the visual arts, it may be easier to observe the career of a single unusual, yet in many ways, still representative artist.

As little known as Werner Tübke is in this country or even in western Germany, he was one of the few most prominent, more successful East German artists during the final two decades of the GDR. Three other artists usually named at the top together with Tübke are Willi Sitte, Bernhard Heisig and Wolfgang Mattheuer. Sitte and Heisig were both included in the 1989 Harvard exhibition. The following discussion will cover Tübke’s entire career, but will focus more on his pre-1990, rather than his post-1990 work. Tübke himself, and art critics familiar with his work confirm, that his painting and drawing have not changed significantly in content nor style as a result of the *Wende* in 1989/90. The marketing of his work has changed, but not the work itself. The same could probably be said of many other prominent GDR artists. Tübke’s art is often referred to as a study in art history, especially the art of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The paintings and frescos from this period have indeed shaped his artistic output more than anything else. How this came to be, and how Tübke evolved into one of East Germany’s leading, but also most complex and controversial artists, will be the subject of this essay.

Despite the political hostility and general lack of cultural exchange between the two Germanys before unification, East German art and artists began to find their way into West German galleries already in the 1960s. By the mid 1970s a kind of East German “chic” had developed among certain collector circles in West Germany and a number of West Berlin and West German galleries began to specialize in East German art. Galerie Brusberg in West Berlin was the most prominent among these galleries, but even such rather unlikely venues as the *Worpsweder Kunsthalle* near Bremen mounted quite impressive exhibitions of contemporary GDR art in the 1970s and 1980s. It is difficult to categorize the different styles of the East German artists who became popular in the West at this time, but Tübke, with his particular brand of historical realism was among them. The bulk of his considerable artistic output, however, remained and still remains in the East, in museums and private collections, where it landed during GDR times. Included in this oeuvre in the East is Tübke’s major, most impressive work, the Frankenhausen Panorama painting.

This painting, which was completed just eleven years ago in 1987, is now listed in the 1990 *Guinness Book of Records* as “the largest oil painting in Germany.”² It is remarkable for other reasons as well. It is part of one of the grandest, most expensive cultural projects ever undertaken by the GDR government and is currently housed at the Thomas Münzer Memorial in the town of Bad Frankenhausen, about 50 kilometers northwest of Weimar, on the site of one of the last decisive battles of the Peasants’ War in early 16th century Germany. The painting’s official title is *Frühbürgerliche Revolution in Deutschland* (Early Bourgeois Revolution in Germany), but is known now by many other names, including the *Monumental Painting of Frankenhausen*, *The Peasants’ War Painting*, *Theatrum Mundi*, or simply, “cylindrical painting.” Regardless of how one assesses this work artistically or politically, it stands as a unique phenomenon of late GDR culture. It continues to attract upwards of 100,000 visitors annually. It is also the crowning achievement of Tübke’s career, a monumental effort which took him more than a decade to complete.

Stylistically Tübke stands very much outside the mainstream of contemporary German art, both west and east. In a recent interview in the *Berliner Zeitung*, Tübke indicates how aware he is of his own *Sonderstellung*, and also reveals what he thinks about contemporary West German art.³ He is asked how it felt to be one of the six GDR artists first invited to participate in 1977 in West Germany’s most renowned forum for international avant garde art, the *documenta* exhibition in Kassel. Their participation in this 6th *documenta* sparked a strong protest from a number of well-known emigré artists from the East living then in West Germany, like Georg Baselitz and Markus Lüpertz, who withdrew their works from the exhibition. Tübke commented:

I don’t think about that any more. We GDR painters got hung off to the side somewhere and there were a few personal annoyances so that we felt we had to raise our voices. Otherwise it was quite clear, and is today even clearer that East and West are two different worlds. I really have nothing in common with official West German art. But this is not a question of East-West politics. By chance I happen to live here [in the East], and also by chance I don’t happen to like very much the kind of loud, abstract art that is produced so often these days. . . My interest in this kind of art is next to zero, but I don’t reject it. What is understood as “artistic modernism” in West Germany and my art can both exist parallel to each other.

In the same interview Tübke relates an earlier incident, when he won the Gold Medal at the 1972 Graphic Art Biennale in Florence, Italy. He was

courted at this exhibition by West German art museum curators, who openly offered him the opportunity to flee to the West, assumed he would accept the offer, and wanted to know in which West German city he would like to settle. Tübke thanked them for the offer and said simply that he would be returning to his family in Leipzig the next day. According to Tübke, he asked them to order him a taxi, they refused, and he had to walk back through the rain for three quarters of an hour to his hotel. One might well wonder why Tübke decided to relate this particular incident from twenty-five years earlier in an interview recorded in September, 1997, but it does point out that already in 1972 he was among the most privileged artists in the GDR. He was content with his career in East Germany and had no desire to leave Leipzig.

Biographical Background

Werner Tübke was born in 1929 in Schönebeck, a small town on the Elbe just south of Magdeburg. He studied art first at the Leipzig Academy for Book Design and Graphic Art in 1949/50 and then switched to the University of Greifswald, where he studied psychology and art history and took his *Staatsexamen* (state exam) in 1952. He returned to Leipzig that same year, joined the Artists Union of the GDR and began his career as an independent painter and graphic artist. Like many other young students at this time, he also joined the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (SED, Socialist Unity Party of Germany), East Germany's communist party. He remained connected to the Academy for Book Design and Graphic Art, where he began teaching as an assistant in 1955, later as professor, and from 1973-76 he was the rector of the Academy.

He had his first solo exhibition at the age of twenty-eight in 1957, and began in 1962 his regular participation in the GDR's most prominent forum for contemporary art, the *Deutsche Kunstausstellung* in Dresden. About this time, in the late 1950s, early 1960s, Tübke started to receive the series of major state art commissions which led eventually to the massive *Panoramabild* in Frankenhausen. His relationship with the GDR cultural authorities was, however, not without wrinkles. In 1959 after the first Bitterfeld Conference about the proper role of culture in the GDR, Tübke and a number of other leading young painters, like Willi Sitte, were singled out for criticism and accused of "concessions to modernist views of art."⁴ In 1968, a decision to fire Tübke from his teaching post in Leipzig was reversed after student protests and intervention by Alfred Kurella, a member of the SED Politbüro and a leading cultural figure in East Germany at this time.

As the GDR began to loosen its ideological constraints on the arts in the early 1970s, Tübke had his first exhibition in the West in 1971 in a private

gallery in Milan, Italy. This marked the first of his many trips to Italy; the landscape and the art, especially that of the Italian Renaissance, became a major source of inspiration for Tübke's own work. From the early 1970s on, Tübke's career and high artistic rank in the GDR were secure. He began to receive ever-wider international recognition and also started traveling and exhibiting throughout western Europe; his first solo show in the Federal Republic took place in Munich in 1972. Over the years he received nearly every distinction and honor the GDR could award an artist, including three National Prizes, the Käthe-Kollwitz-Prize from the Academy of Arts of the GDR, and the Karl-Marx-Order in Gold, which he received as part of the official inauguration ceremony for the Frankenhausen Panorama Painting in September 1989. A few months later, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Tübke gave back all these official state prizes and donated the prize money to charitable organizations in Leipzig. At this time, like many of his fellow GDR artists, he also resigned from the SED party.

Since 1990 Tübke has received two major commissions, both from institutions in western Germany: the first in 1991 for a series of set design paintings in a production by the Bonn State Opera of Carl Maria von Weber's *Der Freischütz*, and the second in 1993 for a large altar painting for the St. Salvatoris Church in the town of Clausthal-Zellerfeld in the Harz Mountains, near Göttingen. This altar painting was just finished in early 1997 and brings his list of completed works, including paintings, drawings and prints, to well over 7,000.

Artistic Development

From his earliest artistic beginnings in the 1940s through to the present, Werner Tübke has been a realist. Some of his watercolor landscapes show a looser, more abstract tendency, but nearly all the oil paintings, his primary medium, and his many drawings and lithographs are quite detailed and very realistic, some even tending towards photorealism. His focus on the human figure, often his own, has also been a constant throughout his career, as has his fascination with Biblical themes. In the above cited *Berliner Zeitung* interview, Tübke claims to have drawn his first crucifixion at age twelve or thirteen. Very soon in his artistic career he learned to combine the portrayal of Biblical themes with the dictates of socialist realism, which were particularly stringent during the first decade of the GDR. Tübke himself refers to this period as the "idiotic 1950s" that were "a bit tough," in terms of the didactic demands they placed upon artists. In the same interview Tübke also claims that nobody has ever told him what to paint.

Be that as it may, one of Tübke's earliest works, the unfinished oil painting "*Weißer Terror in Ungarn*" (White Terror in Hungary, 1956/57)⁵ shows clearly his use of religious motifs, and Christian iconography—here the Descent from the Cross—to convey political themes. This merging of the religious with the political is a very basic and essential characteristic of his approach to art and can be found in many of his works, including the Panorama Painting in Frankenhausen. Another later, better-known example of this aspect of Tübke's work is the large oil painting *Gruppenbild* (Illustration 1) (Group Portrait, 1972), which features a team of construction workers in hard-hats grouped around one central figure.⁶

At first glance it appears to be a very typical, almost stereotypical example of socialist realism, yet on closer inspection one senses religious overtones and recognizes unmistakably a reference to classical Renaissance renderings of Jesus and the Apostles, a reference, incidently, that even the officially sanctioned *Kunst der DDR* found worthy of noting.⁷ *Gruppenbild* was derived from a section of a much larger work by Tübke, *Arbeiterklasse und Intelligenz* (Working class and Intellectuals, 1971-73), a 14-meter long mural painting in the foyer of the Rector's Building at the Karl-Marx University in Leipzig. It was Tübke's largest, most important commissioned work prior to the Panorama Painting. It shows many of the Renaissance influences that he absorbed on his first trips to Italy, but is also perhaps the clearest expression of Tübke's debt to socialist realism.⁸

As difficult as it was for most GDR citizens to travel into the West, Tübke was apparently considered "loyal" enough to be granted considerable freedom early on and was able to travel all over western Europe during the last two decades of the GDR—usually leaving his family behind, of course. His favorite destination was Italy and these trips undoubtedly had the greatest, most obvious impact on his own artistic work, but all of his travels were in a sense "Studienreisen," for which he prepared himself very carefully, and all left a mark on his work. One of his earliest and his longest trips abroad was the first state-funded, year-long study tour through the Soviet Union in 1961-62, which was encouraged and facilitated by the aforementioned SED functionary Alfred Kurella. Overall the trip generated a wealth of new work, but the extended travels in Central Asia were especially productive. Two very striking, extremely detailed, realistic portraits stand out among the paintings inspired by this trip: *Bildnis des Viehzuchtbrigadiers Bodlenko* (Illustration 2)⁹ (Portrait of the Cattle Breeder Brigadier Bodlenko, 1962) and *Selbstbildnis in Samarkand* (Illustration 3) (Self-Portrait in Samarkand, 1962).¹⁰ The latter, one of Tübke's many self-portraits, marks his tendency to paint himself into the local scenery and architecture of the place he is visiting, here as the young artist and

Illustration 1: Werner Tübke, *Gruppenbild*, 1972, mixed media on canvas/wood, 148 x 148 cm, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Neue Meister



Illustration 2: Werner Tübke, *Portrait of the Cattle Breeder Brigadier Bodlenko*, 1962, mixed media on canvas/wood, 146 x 97 cm, Museum der bildenden Künste, Leipzig

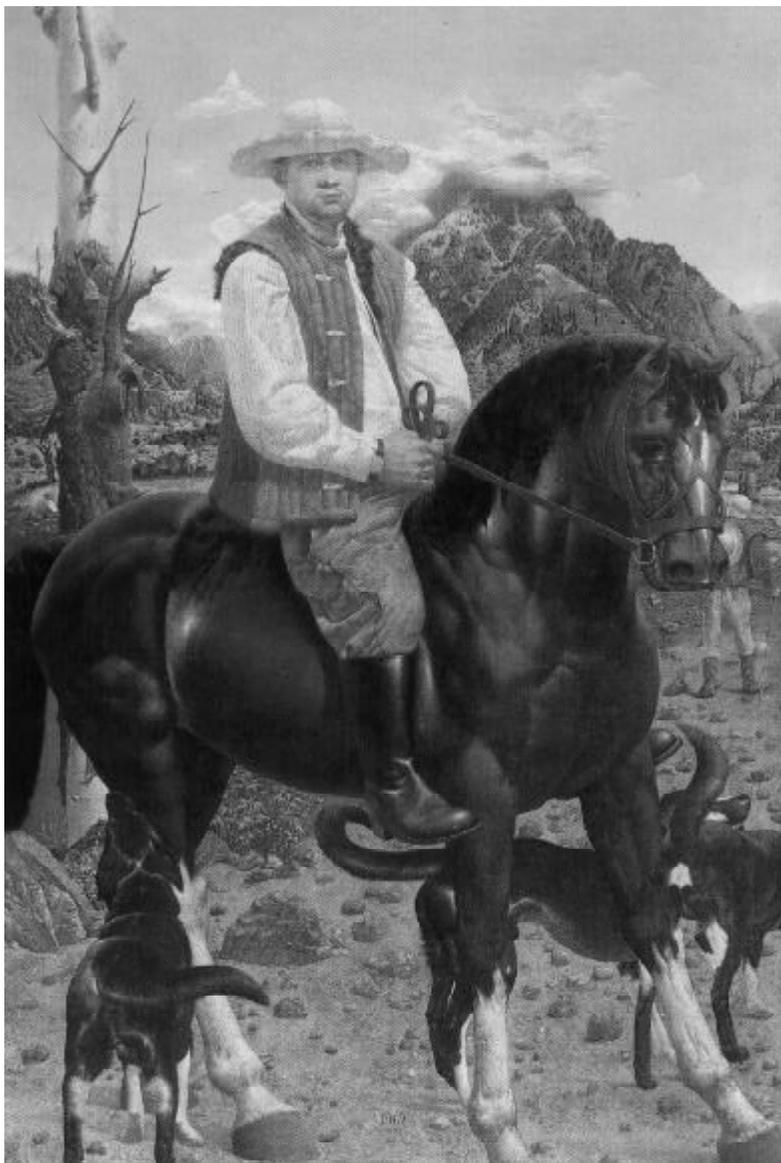


Illustration 3: Werner Tübke, *Self-Portrait in Samarkand*, 1962, mixed media on cardboard, 42 x 35 cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie



Wandervogel in hiking gear with straw hat and his drawing portfolio slung over his shoulder, the exotic onion domes and cupolas of Samarkand in the background. Later he even paints himself in the local, and historical dress of the place and period he is summoning up with his brushwork.

The Bodlenko portrait, which shows a Caucasian peasant mounted on a strapping, shiny black stallion, has a surrealistic air about it and reminds one of equestrian portraits of medieval knights or *condottieri*. The painting caused quite a stir at the 1962 *Deutsche Kunstausstellung* in Dresden—due in part to a conspicuous, “realistic” detail: Bodlenko sports a wristwatch—and provoked this comment from a contemporary critic writing in the Dresdener art magazine *Bildende Kunst*: “Tübke’s way of painting conveys a ghostly, bizarrely estranged, aesthetic relationship to life in a country that is engaged in building a communist society.” Referring to the same painting, *Neues Deutschland* asks the question, “Can one still paint today the way one did 450 years ago?”¹¹ Hermann Raum, a leading East German art critic who helped curate the 1989 Harvard GDR exhibition, comments on the controversy this painting produced with the following observation: “All kinds of things were discovered in this painting of a horseman: a surrealistic miniature landscape, Don Quixote, Altdorfer and Breughel, and above all a modern wristwatch. One could see what time it was, but not in which century!”¹²

Despite Tübke’s early and continued success in landing major state art commissions, his reputation within the GDR as an esoteric outsider and puzzling special case persisted for quite some time. In West Germany he was much less well known, yet there, too, the reception of his work has been problematic. Although much of his work, especially that from the 1970s and 1980s, moves clearly beyond the traditional boundaries of socialist realism, his fascination with earlier periods of art history and his apparent rejection of modernity and current artistic styles, has caused consternation among Western art critics. Eduard Beaucamp, who writes on art for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and has shown the most interest in Tübke among western observers, makes the following comment about the artist’s reception in the West:

Tübke’s disregard [for modern trends] is a provocation, his journeys through art history are unique in this century. His work is determined by history, but comparisons with the historicism and academicism of the 19th century are nevertheless inaccurate, because Tübke’s strategies for appropriation do not follow any norms or rules. On the contrary, in very unacademic fashion, his fluid, contemporary consciousness sees, profanes, estranges, and transforms the changing historical subjects of his work. An insatiable talent and an often bizarre

fantasy roam restlessly through imaginary historical spaces and reveal ever new artistic possibilities. The tendency towards pure mannerism and aestheticism—the greatest danger with Tübke—was countered by the fact that the artist’s virtuosity was repeatedly bound to contemporary subjects and commissions or to historical themes.¹³

Although Beaucamp wrote the above statement in 1985, while Tübke was still working on the Frankenhäuser Panorama Painting, it can still be applied very directly to this work and to many others as well, such as Tübke’s controversial, now-famous series of paintings from the mid-1960s: *Die Lebenserinnerungen des Dr. jur. Schulze I-VII* (Illustration 4) (Memoirs of Doctor of Laws Schulze).¹⁴ One of Tübke’s most overtly political works, this seven-part series was inspired by a number of neo-fascist incidents in West Germany and by a much publicized trial in Frankfurt am Main in 1965 of former commanders and overseers in the death camps of Auschwitz. The subject of the Schulze series is the perverse and perverted Nazi justice system during the Third Reich, represented by the fictional figure of Doctor of Laws, Schulze. With his stereotypically-ordinary German name, he stands for all the *Blutrichter* (bloodthirsty judges) who committed crimes against humanity in the name of Nazi justice, and who, in some cases, were still seated as judges or were practicing law in the Federal Republic. The main theme of the series, which was not a commissioned piece, is in fact, as Tübke himself states, “neofascist tendencies in the Federal Republic,”¹⁵ which he attempts to reveal through a new, highly complex allegorical style of painting referred to again by the artist himself as “realistically absurd.”¹⁶

The third and most remarkable painting in the *Lebenserinnerungen des Dr. jur. Schulze* cycle shows judge Schulze as a huge, dehumanized marionette, surrounded by a teeming mass of smaller, mostly rather grotesque figures and objects, representing both the lustful, erotic appetites of this judge and the many victims of his brutal Nazi “justice” and violence, as well as a number of surrealistically-altered symbols, some from Christian iconography, others more contemporary, such as Picasso’s dove of freedom combined with a woman’s portrait. The jumble of images and figures is reminiscent of apocalyptic scenes from Bosch and Breugel and the painting, now considered one of Tübke’s most powerful, caused great controversy in the GDR when it was completed in 1965. Although the self-selected subject matter of this painting and of the whole series should in fact have guaranteed Tübke unconditional approval from the GDR cultural authorities, he was attacked openly and vehemently for the “narrowly subjective idealism” of his mannered painting style, for his pessimistic world view, and, most damaging, for his

Illustration 4: Werner Tübke, *Memoirs of Doctor of Laws Schulze III*, 1965, tempera on canvas/wood, 188 x 121 cm, Staatliche Museen zur Berlin, Nationalgalerie



suspicious proximity to surrealism—considered then in the GDR to be among the most decadent of all the “late bourgeois” cultural phenomena.¹⁷ Even his earlier defender and supporter, Alfred Kurella, now turned on Tübke and his colleague, Willi Sitte, claiming in 1967 that their art had “left the path of socialist realism and could no longer contribute to the socialist education of mankind.”¹⁸ It was in the aftermath of such criticism sparked by the Schulze series, that Tübke’s reputation as an art teacher came into question and the attempt was made to fire him from his position at the Academy of Art in Leipzig in 1968.

How rapidly the critical climate for the visual arts changed in the GDR can be seen in part through the reception history and changing attitudes towards Tübke’s Schulze series, and by the fact that just ten years later, in 1977, the third painting in the series was included among the works that Tübke showed at the “*documenta 6*” exhibition in Kassel, the most prestigious debut of contemporary GDR art in the West at this time. That third painting in the Schulze series came to be regarded as one of the first examples of a *Simultanbild* (Painting of Simultaneous Images), a technique that positively challenges the viewer’s intellect, and was later praised as “one of the most important paintings in GDR art history.”¹⁹

At the time of the sixth “*documenta*,” Tübke’s artistic reputation in the GDR was, of course, fully restored and he was already quite engaged in the Frankenhäuser Panorama project. Before turning to this monumental work, we should at least mention two other major commissions from the early 1970s, which more or less predestined Tübke to receive the commission for the Panorama Painting. The first, *Arbeiterklasse und Intelligenz* (Working class and Intellectuals, 1971-73), a long mural at the University of Leipzig, was already alluded to in connection with Tübke’s painting *Gruppenbild* (Group Painting, 1972). The second, *Der Mensch—Maß aller Dinge* (Man—Measure of all Things, 1975), is a large six-panel painting commissioned for the *Palast der Republik* in East Berlin, and now on display at the *Museum Moderner Kunst* in Vienna. Both works, especially the first, are well within the then-condoned and expanding stylistic and content limits of socialist realism and both were received enthusiastically by GDR officialdom. They are also typical of Tübke’s historicizing style, including many “citations” from Italian Renaissance painting and other periods, as well as numerous obvious Biblical allegories. When compared to the Panorama Painting, however, neither of these important commissioned works gives much indication in terms of content, scale and style of the massive, incredibly complex painting that was to define Tübke’s career as an artist, and was already taking shape as he completed these two earlier works.

Early Bourgeois Revolution in Germany, the Frankenhausen Panorama Painting

The idea for such a monumental representation of this particular phase of German history, the Peasants' War in the 16th century, was "in the East German air" at this time. It came hand in hand with a general loosening of official artistic guidelines in the early 1970s under the motto *Weite und Vielfalt* (breadth and variety), and with a reassessment of German history, triggered in part by a change in GDR leadership. Walter Ulbricht, the hard-line SED party chief and founding father of the GDR, was replaced in 1971 by Erich Honecker. In his summary chronology of GDR art history in the catalog for the 1989 Harvard exhibition of East German artists, Peter Nisbet describes this period as follows:

During the 1970s, the GDR reevaluates its attitude towards German history, discovering valuable aspects to previously condemned figures such as Martin Luther, Frederick the Great and others. This process parallels the struggle for a more open-minded approach to the German artist heritage. . . . There is a turning away from utopian projections and somewhat simple-minded affirmations of commonplaces. Instead, art begins to address real problems of socialist life or historical themes, thereby fostering an intellectual dialogue about reality. Art criticism in the GDR begins to speak of "dialogical pictures," which are not to be understood by simple looking. Metaphors and symbols play an increasingly important role. There is also an expansion of the acceptable range of styles and media.²⁰

A number of events in the early 1970s signal that the time is ripe for an undertaking as unusual as Tübke's Panorama Painting. In 1971 a conference of art historians in Leipzig was held on the theme of "Albrecht Dürer and the Art of the Early Bourgeois Revolution." In the following year an international colloquium in Wittenberg was organized under the title "The Artist and Society: Early Bourgeois Revolution and Socialist Culture in the GDR." That same year the GDR celebrated the 500th anniversary of Lucas Cranach's birth in grand style.

In the summer of that year, 1972, an article appeared in *Neues Deutschland* by a cultural functionary in the SED from Halle, Edith Brandt, calling for the construction of a panorama monument on the Schlachtberg near Frankenhausen in 1975 to commemorate the 450th anniversary of the German Peasants' War. The idea caught on, gathered propagandistic steam, and was followed in 1973 by a decision of the SED *Politbüro* to go forward with the plan.

The Ministry of Culture then took over and determined in 1974 that the proposed painting should be modeled after large-scale Soviet historical panoramas, like the one commemorating the Battle of Borodino near Moscow, during which Napoleon defeated the Russians in 1812. Ground was broken in the summer of 1974 for the massive round building to house the Panorama Painting.²¹ After an extended debate within the “Panorama” working group of the Ministry of Culture over the desired historical focus of the painting, the Central Institute of History at the Academy of Sciences was consulted and their judgement was accepted as the historical basis for the proposed project:

We recommend that the planned panorama be conceived as a memorial to the German Peasants’ War and that—following Engels—the role of Thomas Münzer in Thuringia and Saxony and the culmination of the Peasants’ War in Thuringia should be highlighted. This could be achieved through a series of five to six scenes which illustrate the social causes of the early bourgeois revolution and the character of the social classes in conflict. The Reformation must also by all means be taken into consideration, in order to confirm the Marxist conception of the connection between the Reformation and the Peasants’ War. The focus should be concentrated on actual scenes from the Peasants’ War itself and on the role of Thomas Münzer. . .²²

Münzer was a radical Protestant reformer who was originally linked to Martin Luther, but then diverged sharply as he became increasingly iconoclastic in theology and radical in political and social beliefs. During the Peasants’ War he established a short-lived communistic theocracy in the town of Mühlhausen, fifty kilometers west of Frankenhausen.

Apparently after several other East German artists turned down the offer, Werner Tübke was contacted by the Ministry of Culture in the Fall of 1974 as the “most suitable artist” to execute the painting.²³ It is noteworthy that the project was already well underway with an initial budget of ten million Marks, a fairly precise historical concept, and a whole team of historians and other experts working on it before the artist became involved. His talent and willpower undoubtedly had the most decisive and lasting effect on the finished product. Equally remarkable is the degree to which Tübke actually followed the original conception of the painting laid down by the Ministry of Culture, notwithstanding his own creative input and the many artistic liberties he took with the subject matter. (Illustrations 5-7)²⁴

A new “Panorama work group” was formed in the spring of 1975, which Tübke joined and became involved with refining the original concept for the

Illustration 5: Werner Tübke, *Early Bourgeois Revolution in Germany*, Panel I, (1:10 version), 1979-81, mixed media on wood, 139 x 244 cm, Staatliche Museen zur Berlin, Nationalgalerie



Illustration 6: Werner Tübke, *Early Bourgeois Revolution in Germany*, Panel III, (1:10 version), 1979-81, mixed media on wood, 139 x 244 cm, Staatliche Museen zur Berlin, Nationalgalerie



Illustration 7: Werner Tübke, Detail from the Panorama painting, *Thomas Münzer in the Battle of Frankenhausen*



painting and with the details of his own contract as the main artist. Early on in the negotiations over the contract, he stipulated that his participation would be contingent upon having a free hand artistically to approach this task as he saw fit—*es redet niemand rein* (no one can interfere)—and that it should not be conceived as a pedagogical, propagandistic illustration of history, as was originally intended. He also wanted to focus the painting on a single battle, the actual battle that was fought in Frankenhausen in the Spring of 1525, during which the peasants were defeated, Thomas Münzer was captured and soon thereafter decapitated.

In 1976, Tübke signed the contract for the painting with the Ministry of Culture, including a scaled down, 1:10 version, and began intensive historical research into the period and the specific circumstances of the battle in Frankenhausen. He made it clear from the outset that his goal was to interpret metaphorically a whole epoch, in all its relevant economic, intellectual and religious concepts. Although the painting focused on one important battle, it also encompassed a multitude of simultaneous historical events. In 1979, Tübke completed the first phase of the project with over 142 preliminary drawings, twelve lithographs and ten paintings, and began work on the five large panels of the detailed, scaled-down 1:10 version, which took over three years to complete.²⁵ During this second phase, Tübke traveled to Spain to study the works of El Greco, Velazquez and Goya, and also traveled to Moscow to consult with the team of Soviet artists responsible for the Borodino-Panorama. Later another team of Soviet specialists was hired by the GDR to prime the 1.1 tons of specially-prepared, Soviet-produced canvas for the final version of the painting. In 1982 Tübke hired and carefully trained his own team of fifteen painting assistants, mostly graduates from the Leipzig Art Academy, and in early 1983 with a core group of five assistants he began the final phase of transferring and adapting the 1:10 version onto the nearly 2,000 square meters of stretched and primed canvas. (Illustration 8)²⁶

The working conditions and Tübke's demands on the team were so strenuous, that only one of the assistants lasted to the end of the project. Tübke ended up painting approximately two-thirds of the huge canvas himself, and was at a point of complete physical and psychic exhaustion when he finally finished the painting four years later in the summer of 1987.

The final product is 14.5 meters high, 123 m around, and encompasses more than 3,000 individual, and individually painted figures. The project cost 54 million Marks. Its official title at the handing-over ceremony to the Ministry of Culture was *Panorama Bad Frankenhausen, Memorial to the Peasants' War—Monumental Painting by Werner Tübke 'Early Bourgeoisie Revolution in Germany 1525.'* Its official inauguration and opening to the public was delayed

Illustration 8: Werner Tübke, Panorama of *Frühbürgerliche Revolution in Deutschland*, Bad Frankenhausen



two years until September 1989 to coincide with celebrations commemorating the 500th anniversary of Thomas Münzer's birth. In 1993 the site was renamed "Panorama-Museum Bad Frankenhausen."

Within the confines of this essay it would be impossible to list even superficially the many historical scenes and countless Biblical and allegorical allusions that Tübke finally included in this monumental work, but to give an indication of the larger historical context he attempted to convey, it might be helpful to name a few of the famous historical figures he painted into the panorama. (Illustration 9)²⁷ At the bottom of the battle scene portion of the painting, directly below the central figure of Thomas Münzer in the midst of the battle, we see a group of twenty figures, separated from the combatants by a wall of shrubs and standing around a Renaissance fountain, the "Fountain of Life," under which Tübke signed his name to the massive painting. These figures in this strangely peaceful oasis on the edge of the raging battle represent the great men of the era, the giants of the time from church and religion, literature and art, philosophy and science, business and manufacturing. A central trio stands out: Albrecht Dürer, Martin Luther and Lucas Cranach; others include: Hans Sachs, Sebastian Brant, Philipp Melanchthon, Erasmus von Rotterdam, Ulrich von Hutten, Nikolaus Kopernikus, Paracelsus, Christopher Columbus, Johann Gutenberg, and Jakob Fugger. Here, as elsewhere in the painting, Tübke attempted to illustrate the connection between the Peasants' War and the Reformation and the Renaissance.

In addition to its distinction in terms of size—duly noted, as was mentioned earlier, in the *1990 Guinness Book of Records*, Tübke's Panorama Painting holds another record: with over 1000 published reviews, books, catalogs, films, and TV documentaries spread over the past twenty-five years, it is now the most publicized work of any living German artist.²⁸ To close the discussion of this painting, I would like to quote now from one of the many publications, a 1993 catalog text by Edward Beaucamp, in which he attempts to place the Panorama Painting in the broader context of Tübke's artistic career to date and to illustrate how the painting surpasses and even confounds the original intent of its sponsors:

What ever the present may lack in meaning, humanity or ideality, Tübke borrows from ancient and Christian mythology. One can see therein the ennoblement of a GDR reality that is anything but humane, but one can also see admonition, contradiction, yes even conjuration of opposing images. Tübke's strange homelessness [in the present] while being at the same time historically at home in nearly all periods since the late Middle Ages, this predicament expresses itself in magical

Illustration 9: Werner Tübke, Detail from the Panorama painting, *Fountain of Life with Representatives of the Era*



hermaphroditic creations and dream scenery. The Peasants' War Panorama from the 1980s is also one of these strange hermaphroditic amalgams, and certainly not a large-scale chronological illustration [of history]. Tübke took here the images of the era and poeticized them further. He translated the language of the Bible, the sermons, the metaphors, the symbols, the sayings, and the prophesies of the time into scenic allegories. An alchemical fantasy appears to be at work. It has penetrated and assimilated the epoch and set it in new syncretic images. The Panorama Painting forces the relationship between art and power to a paradoxical extreme. In this case the artist triumphs in the end over the sponsor. The painting was supposed to become the "most important artistic monument of the GDR," to set a revolutionary example, to engender GDR national feelings, to become part of an army museum and serve as a backdrop for agitprop, flag-waving and yes, even for the defense of the East German Peoples' Army. But from this ideological subject and state commission, Tübke developed an apocalyptic mystery play, he transformed the state monument into a pure art monument, yes, into a museum for his own universalistic life's work.²⁹

Tübke's Post-Panorama Career

Compared to the monumental Panorama Painting, everything Tübke has completed since then tends to appear as anticlimactic. In his paintings he continues to explore many of the themes from the panorama, including religious motifs and his fascination with harlequins, clowns, buffoons, fools and other related theatrical and historical figures. The composition and historicizing style are basically the same, but the palette is much more muted, less dazzling than the bright color contrasts of the Panorama Painting. Tübke remains rooted in Leipzig, but continues to travel widely, especially in southern Europe. He also continues to exhibit his work throughout Europe, and even in the U.S. In 1988 a private gallery in Chicago held a Tübke exhibition. As mentioned earlier, his two main commissions since 1990 have come from western German institutions. Both are large, very involved projects. The first one, for the State Opera in Bonn, took two years to complete and consists of eight oil paintings which were reproduced and transferred onto more than 1,200 square meters of set paintings for a 1993 production of Weber's opera *Der Freischütz*. Like the enlargement of the 1:10 version of the Panorama Painting, the final phase was carried out by a team of four opera set painters from Bonn and two of Tübke's Leipzig assistants from the Frankenhausen project.

The second, recently-completed commission, which took three years to finish, is a large eight-panel winged altar painting for the St. Salvatoris Church

in Clausthal-Zellerfeld. This is Tübke's first commission from a Christian congregation, and has sparked more than the usual amount of controversy. The Bishop and church fathers who commissioned the altar have heaped praise on the artist and appear to be quite content with his very traditional rendering of Biblical scenes. Others are less complimentary. A Christian theologian, Winfried Stoellger, attacked Tübke vehemently in the German magazine *Art*, and asked how one could invite such a confessed atheist and former Communist to portray the most holy images of Christian faith?³⁰

The art critic of the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, Peter Iden, called Tübke's altar painting: "Elevated devotional Kitsch . . . for the living rooms of tasteless believers."³¹ When confronted with this criticism, Tübke stated that one can certainly argue about the style of his altar painting, but he is convinced that in terms of aesthetics and spiritual function, it fits perfectly into the church where it now stands.³²

I would like to conclude with two short quotations by Tübke, which were characteristic in terms of what they reveal about the artist, his self-perception and his world view, and his tendency to provoke controversy, no matter what context he finds himself in. The first quotation comes from an interview in 1978, when he was about to begin work on the scaled-down 1:10 version of the Frankenhäuser Panorama Painting. He commented about the relationship between past and present in his painting: "It seems important to me these days that one remain open to the notion of utopia, including a past utopia. I joke sometimes that everything remains as it never was—and yet I mean it seriously."³³

In his 1997 interview with the *Berliner Zeitung*, he was asked about his very thorough, meticulous method of working, Tübke responded that his work is basically art for art's sake, "l'art pour l'art," and that he does it really just as an excuse to go to his studio each morning and develop his ideas. His interviewer asks if this does not sound just like bourgeois subjectivism? Tübke's response: "Of course it does. I agree with that completely. That's a very good choice of words."³⁴

ENDNOTES

1. Peter Nisbet, ed., *Twelve Artists*. The catalogue contains an extensive bibliography of literature on GDR visual arts.
2. Cited by Günter Meissner in *Werner Tübke*, 162, hereafter cited as, Meissner, 1995. Meissner has published extensively on Tübke and is generally considered to be the leading expert on the artist.
3. “Reiner und unbefleckter geht’s gar nicht”(It doesn’t get any purer and more innocent), interview with Werner Tübke conducted by Sebastian Preuss and Gustav Seibt in the *Magazin* section of the *Berliner Zeitung*, No. 208, 53rd year (6/7 September 1997), 2. Translation into English and all other translated passages are by the author.
4. Cited in Nisbet, 151.
5. Reproduced in Peter Betthausen & Claudia Bube, eds., *Werner Tübke*, 68. This catalog, which accompanied the exhibition marking Tübke’s 60th birthday, is the most recent and complete retrospective catalog of his work. Unless otherwise noted, all works mentioned in this essay are reproduced in this catalog.
6. *Gruppenbild*, 1972, mixed media on canvas/wood, 148 x 148 cm, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Neue Meister.
7. Ullrich Kuhirt, ed., *Kunst der DDR*, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1983), Vol. II, 151, cited in E. Beaucamp, 34-35, and see below, note 8.
8. See Eduard Beaucamp’s book on the painting, *Werner Tübke, Arbeiterklasse und Intelligenz: Eine zeitgenössische Erprobung der Geschichte* (Frankfurt am Main, 1985), *passim*. The volume focuses on *Arbeiterklasse* but gives a concise overview of Tübke’s entire career from a western perspective.
9. *Portrait of the Cattle Breeder Brigadier Bodlenko*, 1962, mixed media on canvas/wood, 146 x 97 cm; Museum der bildenden Künste, Leipzig.
10. *Self-Portrait in Samarkand*, 1962, mixed media on cardboard, 42 x 35 cm; Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie.
11. Both quotations cited in Beaucamp, 37.
12. Hermann Raum, “Manierismus, Realismus und das Zeitgenössische,” in Betthausen, *Tübke*, 44.
13. E. Beaucamp, 43-44. Ten Years later, Beaucamp uses almost exactly the same language to describe Tübke’s historically-determined approach to art in an exhibition catalog essay: *Werner Tübke*, [exh. cat., Galerie Claude Bernard] (Paris, 1995), 3-4.
14. *Memoirs of Doctor of Laws Schulze III*, 1965, tempera on canvas/wood, 188 x 121 cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie.
15. Cited in Berthold Naumann, *Rationalität und Innerlichkeit*, 145.
16. Cited in Gerd Lindner, “Sinnbilder wider das Vergessen,” 204.
17. Joachim Uhlitzsch, cited in Lindner, 205.
18. Cited in Naumann, 150.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Nisbet, 157.

²¹. Matthias Flügge, editor-in-chief of *neue bildende kunst* in Berlin and a contributor to this AICGS publication, informed the author that this building in Frankenhausen is now known *im Volksmund* (local dialect) as *das Elefantenklosett* (elephant's lavatory).

²². Cited in Meissner, 156.

²³. *Ibid.*

²⁴. This and the following details from the painting are taken from the portfolio of 18 large format reproductions of painting details photographed by Klaus and Constantin Beyer with accompanying text by Günter Meissner, *Werner Tübke, theatrum mundi*.

(Illustration 5) *Early Bourgeois Revolution in Germany*, Panel I, (1:10 version), 1979-81, mixed media on wood, 139 x 244 cm, Nationalgalerie Berlin.

(Illustration 6), *Early Bourgeois Revolution in Germany*, Panel III, (1:10 version), mixed media on wood, 139 x 244 cm, Nationalgalerie Berlin.

The above are two of the five original panels, used to create the ten times larger Panorama painting in Frankenhausen.

(Illustration 7) Detail from the Panorama painting, *Thomas Münzer in the Battle of Frankenhausen*.

²⁵. These five Panorama panels were later sold to the National Gallery in East Berlin in 1988 for 1 million Marks, reportedly the highest sum every paid by the GDR for a painting.

²⁶. Photo of Panorama painting in construction.

²⁷. Detail from the Panorama painting, *Fountain of Life with Representatives of the Era*, From left to right: the poet Hans Sachs; 3 sculptors, Peter Vischer Veit Stoss, and Tilman Riemenschneider; the revolutionary artist, Jörg Ratgeb, who was executed in 1525; central group: Albrecht Dürer, Martin Luther, Lucas Cranach, Sebastian Brandt, Philipp Melanchthon, Erasmus von Rotterdam, Ulrich von Hutten. Cut out of this detail: Hans Hut, Melchior Rinck, Nikolaus Kopernikus, Paracelsus, Christopher Columbus, Johann Gutenberg, Bartholomäus Welser, Jakob Fugger.

²⁸. Meissner, 162.

²⁹. Eduard Beaucamp, *Werner Tübke*, [exh. cat., Kunstverein] (Coburg, 1993).

³⁰. Winfried Stoellger, *Art*, No. 8 (August 1997), 62-65.

³¹. Cited by Stoellger, 63.

³². Werner Tübke interview with the *Berliner Zeitung* (6/7 September 1997), 2.

³³. Werner Tübke interview in *Mitteldeutsche Neuste Nachrichten* (19 May 1978) cited in Beaucamp, 1985, 52-53.

³⁴. *Berliner Zeitung*, 2.

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Werner Tübkes Altar in der Zellerfelder St.-Salvatoris-Kirche, text by Lothar Meyer (Clausthal-Zellerfeld: Oberharzer Druckerei und Verlag, 1997).

Werner Tübke. Leipzig. Lithografien, text by Hans-Georg Sehrt (Halle:

Hallescher Kunstverein, 1995).

Werner Tübke. Zeichnungen, Aquarelle und Lithografien, text by Günter Meißner (Galerie im Schloß Siebeneichen bei Meißen, 1995).

Werner Tübke, text by Eduard Beaucamp (Paris: Galerie Claude Bernard, 1995).

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COMMISSIONED ART VERSUS FREE ART: A RESPONSE

Jost Hermand

In view of the diversity of the four papers presented I feel somewhat at a loss to come up with a coherent argument. But at closer look there was one feature that was common to all four papers: they all opened up avenues into a field of inquiry which has been hitherto almost totally neglected, namely that of GDR painting and of GDR cultural policy vis-à-vis the visual arts in general. While the literature of East Germany enjoyed relative fame in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s—especially among the young American women studying German during this period, who were glad to discover the wealth of interesting GDR women writers such as Anna Seghers, Christa Wolf, Brigitte Reimann, Irmtraut Morgner, Helga Königsdorf, and others—GDR painting, even the works of such outstanding artists as Werner Tübke, Willi Sitte, Wolfgang Mattheuer, and Bernhard Heisig—remained almost unknown in the U.S. or were dismissed out of hand as antiquated examples of a type of socialist realism not worth investigating. This blatant discrepancy was caused to a great extent by the simple fact that GDR books—either in the original or in translation—found their way easily into the United States, whereas the major works by GDR painters remained almost entirely in the possession of GDR museums or in official buildings and offices there.

Only after the opening of the Berlin Wall did this situation gradually begin to change as more and more became known about the true situation and the tremendous variety and multiplicity of GDR painting. This contributed to a general reevaluation of these works in the West—first by the art connoisseurs in West Berlin, then by west German art lovers, and now by Americans interested in modern painting, who are also beginning to shake off their former political, ideological and aesthetic biases with regard to this field of artistic endeavor. This conference, organized by Professor Marion F. Deshmukh for the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, is a significant indication of the general reevaluation. Suddenly the Cold War gestures that distorted so many discussions seem to be gone. Instead of acts of fierce backstabbing and political opportunism based on ideological bias and a lack of positive knowledge about the aesthetic objects at hand, a mood of academic curiosity and a genuine willingness to learn and to become better informed prevailed at this conference, which I found to be exemplary for further investigations into this field.¹

But there was not only curiosity with regard to the hitherto unknown, the exotic, the “other.” There was also a general openness toward questions concerning the function of the visual arts in any society, be it capitalist or

socialist, liberal or totalitarian. Especially in the lively discussions many voices were to be heard who—upon being confronted with an art mainly commissioned by the state—realized for perhaps the first time in their lives that the unlimited “freedom” of visual artists in the West to express their own “inner being” in paintings, graphic works, installations and other forms of art might not always result in strokes of genius, but sometimes in expressions of a solipsistic, bizarre or even meaningless nature. And these debates led necessarily into general questions of cultural politics and the societal function of the visual arts in general: in the so-called West, on the one hand, the predominance of the private art market and the problematic function of wealthy art collectors; in the so-called East, on the other hand, the commissioning of art, the limited scope of the art market, and the socially representative character of the art works.

Having been brought up in a society where corporate liberalism sets the tone, many people in the United States and in Western Europe are conditioned to reject out of hand the concept of commissioned art. Something being commissioned smacks to them immediately of totalitarianism. The fact that this attitude was problematized in the discussion following the four papers was one of the major advances of this conference. Ultimately, most participants had to admit that almost all of the major art works of the last five thousand years were commissioned. Without commissions of one sort or another we would not have the Egyptian pyramids, the Greek temples, the Gothic cathedrals, Michelangelo’s frescos in the Sistine chapel, the Baroque castles, Bach’s Saint Matthew Passion, most of the operas of the nineteenth century, Stravinsky’s ballets, the murals of the New Deal period in the United States, and so forth. A commission is not necessarily a bad thing in itself, most people agreed. It is the quality of the ideological intent and the artistic craftsmanship that distinguishes great commissioned art from bad commissioned art.²

It was the general opinion of the audience at this conference, expressed either publicly or privately, that this conceptual recognition should also be applied to GDR art. For without a recognition of the commissioned character of the majority of art works being shown at GDR art exhibitions or placed in museums and public buildings, the aesthetic and ideological specificity of this corpus of art would be unduly overlooked. There was general agreement among the audience that one cannot hold up the non-representational character of so-called western art as the only yardstick against which all other forms of art should be measured. There are apples and there are oranges, to use an overused metaphor once again. Both of them are neither good nor bad in themselves. Some are sweet, some are sour—for a variety of reasons, among which the ideological quality of their political intent should not be overlooked. One thing should not be forgotten: it is not the political intention in itself that gives the

works of Francisco Goya, Jacques-Louis David, Honoré Daumier, Käthe Kollwitz, George Grosz, Diego Rivera, Otto Dix, and Picasso's *Guernica* painting their greatness. It is the quality of their political commitment to be counted on the side of those who are commonly overlooked, repressed and exploited. And with this perspective in mind we should also look at GDR painting, as one of the art forms that, according to all public statements, placed itself on the side of the formerly oppressed and exploited.

Admittedly, judgments of this kind are not easy, neither with regard to the early phase of GDR painting, which still followed the maxims of socialist realism, nor with regard to the second phase, when various influences from western modernism as well as older forms of German expressionism made their way into the art scene of this state. Instead of seeing this development as only positive due to the ever closer approximation to western art, some of the lecturers and discussants at this conference cautioned against schematic oversimplifications of this sort. At closer look, they said, it is not socialist realism or western art that is good or bad per se. In the final analysis, some of them maintained, it is the aesthetic quality as well as the ideological sincerity that make a work of art great. We should therefore be hesitant to disregard all works of socialist realism. After all, the proponents of this concept saw in their state the logical outgrowth of the anti-fascist tendencies among German exiles during the 1930s and 1940s. It was their hope to establish on the territory of the GDR the "other, better Germany" after all the atrocities committed by the Nazis in all of Europe, including the killing of twenty-two million inhabitants of the Soviet Union, six million Jews, five million Poles, and uncounted leftists, members of resistance groups, Gypsies, gay men, mentally retarded people, and so on.

In early GDR literature and painting we therefore find many extremely sincere and committed artists who were willing to do their utmost to help establish a truly antifascist state, which would be a bulwark against the dangers of warmongering, anti-Semitism and militarism, and would support the time-honored postulates of classical humanism and socialism which had already been put forth by the best representatives of the Weimar Republic and the People's Front movement in exile. But as always there were also opportunists and fellow-travelers jumping on the political bandwagon and producing works of socialist realism that gave this direction a bad name. To be fair, the same can be said about the second phase of GDR painting, which is generally viewed nowadays in the West as a period of liberalization, meaning a relaxation of the so-called doctrine of socialist realism. As in the first phase, there were again sincere artists in the second phase, beginning around 1970, who longed for a better balance between self and state, between their private identity and their

commitment to the collective. But there were also others who—in a bohemian, anarchic, sometimes even childish way—wanted only to produce a kind of dissident art that would appeal to western sensibilities.

The discussion, centered around the developments and contradictions, led at the end of the conference to a productive debate about the function of the visual arts in general. While some participants adhered to the belief that an artist should not intervene in political or social affairs and problems and should stay aloof from all forms of ideological engagement, others supported the idea of a public art which is not only created for the small circles of the galleries and the collectors, but which tries to incorporate wider social, political, cultural, and even ecological issues. Such pronouncements would be superfluous with regard to literature, which always addresses a wider audience. But paintings and other works of the visual arts would lose their public function if they were no longer commissioned. This is a loss that is not compensated for by the advantage of total freedom, which can take on the form of irresponsibility, childishness or bizarre solipsism.

In view of these problems, many of the GDR paintings have at least the factor of irritation on their side. They point to something that is missing in our society, namely works of a public nature. And that should make us stop and think. If there were no longer public support and public space for art in our society, it would clearly indicate a lack of the democratic communitarianism we so urgently need.³

ENDNOTES

¹. For a fair evaluation of GDR literature cf. *Literatur und Literaturtheorie in der DDR*. Peter Uwe Hohendahl and Patricia Herminghouse, eds. (Frankfurt am Main, 1976) and *Contentious Memories: Looking back at the GDR*, Jost Hermand and Marc Silberman, eds. (New York, 1998).

². Therefore I would not see any major difference between Michelangelo's frescos in the Sistine Chapel and Werner Tübke's panoramic painting of the battle of Frankenhausen, as far as the way they were commissioned is concerned. Both works were sponsored by the higher authorities and both artists tried extremely hard to find the best aesthetic and ideological solution to the given task.

³. Cf. in this context Seyla Benhabib: *Situating the Self* (Cambridge, 1992).

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