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The German Bilderstreit

The Inter-German Controversy about the Value of the East German Art

Introduction

After the fall of the Wall and during the Unification process, the Germans did not discuss the different developments of the two Germanys after the war. The East and West Germans didn't talk about how these two different societies could come together again, or what they could learn from each other. They didn't even think about the possibility to discuss a new constitution even though they had two different constitutions for forty years. They did not talk about a common future and what it could possibly look like. Instead, they had their '*Bilderstreit*'. This debate on the different images and art works in East and West between 1990 and 2009 turned out to become a pseudo-debate, a substitute for a real political debate in Germany.

The 'Inter-German Iconographic Controversy', as we will learn in this article, could have been the chance to improve our understanding of –the mirror of artworks – the different systems and mentalities which developed during the the Cold War. The wall between the two blocks became a sort of time lock.

To learn about an unknown alternative to capitalism, the mental slowdown of a socialist or communist system, was the reason for me to move from Southwest Germany to the Cold War enclave of West Berlin in the early 1970s. At that time ruins, bombsites and large areas of wasteland were still common features there, especially near the Wall. Money poured into West Berlin from West Germany to enable it to survive as an island of democracy in the hostile sea of communism. Until the early 1990s this showcase of Western capitalism was surprisingly gloomy and without the veneer of wealth of the other West German cities. It was West Germany who won the war. Berlin, East and West, and the German Democratic

Republic (GDR) were the losers.

For me, a West German without a national identity, who was brought up with the daily music program of the American Forces Network (AFN), West Berlin became at that time the ideal outpost for looking at the GDR and its art. It was like looking at the face of Germany through a distorting glass. In this landscape, cut off from events in the international art world, many artists were proud of their anachronistic status. The system of co-ordinates that works for Western concepts of art can therefore not be carelessly applied to the art produced in the East, for its yardstick is one of truth and morality.

This stimulated my own interest in GDR art. It had something to do with the unresolved relation of the post-war generation with the past and present of their own nation. My generation wanted to learn from the past, and primarily from the failed national history. For people who wanted to become good internationalists, or at least good Europeans, West Berlin was the ideal island between two concepts of Germany. When you looked at it from the East it was located in the Far West near Las Vegas, when you looked at it from the West it was Far East near Moscow.

The Anti-Fascist Consensus

When the Wall came down on 9 November 1989, the all-powerful Father State and the all-providing Mother Party suddenly vanished from the scene, leaving behind a mental vacuum. Many artists were faced with the question of whether the supposedly specific character of an independent 'socialist national culture', which had been invoked for the last forty years, rested only on a negative identity, depending on a view of the enemy that had become more and more chimerical thanks to the '*Ostpolitik*' of the social-liberal coalition of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). According to this view the West stood for capitalism, imperialism and latent neo-fascism. The anti-fascist consensus that held the GDR together was at the same time an anti-capitalist, anti-Western or anti-democratic consensus. It went back to the antagonistic world view of the extreme right and the extreme left during the Weimar Republic.

The 'bourgeois-capitalist' FRG, along with America, was the chief enemy in the ongoing class-struggle and was credited with a latent readiness to promote 'further fascist putsches'. The former communist resistance fighters, who became the political leaders of the GDR, were moulded by the experience of emigration and the concentration camps; as victims they identified themselves

with the perpetrators and unaccountably emulated their tormentors, even in the matter of torchlight processions and uniforms. They regarded their own population, which had followed Hitler, as the enemy within and interned themselves in a governmental ghetto in Wandlitz, north of Berlin, close to the former concentration camp of Sachsenhausen near Oranienburg. The two German dictatorships employed the same totalitarian methods of surveillance, seduction and subjection through the cult of the leader, mass parades and state security organs; by these means the population was to be dragooned into a *Volksgemeinschaft* (community of the people) following the national socialist jargon or a *Menschengemeinschaft* (socialist community) in the GDR jargon. This structural affinity was thus a taboo in the GDR.

Uwe Johnson attempted to explain the political system of the GDR to citizens of the Federal Republic. Johnson was a famous novel writer, born in 1934 who had left the GDR in 1959 to West Berlin and died in 1984 in Sheerness on Sea, England. He made it clear why so many important figures in the artistic and scholarly intelligentsia clung to the GDR ideology right to the bitter end, whether they belonged to the party or not: 'The GDR as a teacher, however strict and alien she appeared, could for a long time rely confidently on the two moral roots of antifascism and anti-capitalism. For the sake of the truth, the citizen and the state could simply stand side by side against the inappropriate interpretation of western rabble-rousers.'¹

Antifascism in the GDR – and the 'socialist humanism' that derived from it – was strongly influenced by the German cultural criticism of the nineteenth century. It operated with the antithesis of *civilization* (denoting what was merely practical, useful and superficial) and *culture* (denoting the spiritual, the creative and nationally idiosyncratic). During the Cold War, after 1945, this antithesis of spirit and matter, culture and civilization, was transferred to the dichotomy of the two Germanies. Whereas the FRG was regarded as belonging to the Anglo-American civilization of consumerism, capitalism and materialism, the GDR saw itself as the 'better Germany', the heir to humanism, the spirit and culture, with truth and morality on its side.

The demise of the GDR was seen by many artists and intellectuals as the end of a humanistic culture, and even now they still set the values of culture and the spirit against the liberalism and pluralism of western civilization. The parliamentary system set up by the western allies in the FRG was seen in the GDR, as it was in the Weimar Republic by intellectuals of both right and left, as a kind of 'dictatorship of the monopolies' (Party program of the SED). Conversely, the anti-communist state doctrine of the FRG confirmed

the image of the GDR as the enemy and suggested to the West Germans a continuity of fight against 'Bolshevism' that transcended the defeat of 1945. On 4 November 1989 the artists demonstrated together with the 'people' on the Alexanderplatz in East Berlin, but a few days later the appeal 'For our country', initiated by the writers Stefan Heym and Christa Wolf, revealed the profound alienation between the privileged intellectual caste and 'their people' in the GDR. They warned the population against the snares of western capitalism and demanded instead renunciation and asceticism on a 'third way' that lay between the realities of socialism and capitalism. Others suddenly showed themselves to be insecure, precipitately left the party, handed back their national prizes (nhard Heisig and Werner Tübke for example). But not only the critical but loyal painters of the older generation, who for years struggled in productive friction with the 'social commissioner' and were rewarded with national prizes and offices, but also the artists of the alternative scene, faced a crisis of identity after *Die Wende*.

For the former, the project of socialism had failed; for the time being they deplored the loss of 'utopia', as it made any artistic work futile. The latter were deprived of the familiar opponent, the repressive tolerance of the anti-fascist cultural dictatorship, from which they sought and found refuge in the warmth of their local *bohème*. The comprehensive welfare afforded by the party precluded any real opposition from artists and intellectuals. The *Verband Bildender Künstler* (VBK-DDR) functioned as a unitary Artist's Association with compulsory membership like a medieval guild, guaranteeing job security to its 6.000 members (including craftsmen, restorers, designers etc.). Through a strict quota of students admitted to art colleges, and with the help of the state-run art trade, which monopolized the sale of art at home and abroad, the association imposed a discipline on artists through the award of scholarships, travel permits, taxes and access to artist's materials. When the regime fell in early 1990, the association collapsed; so did a whole infrastructure of about 39 state-run commercial galleries and many local city-run galleries. Art was no longer purchased or commissioned by the SED, the block parties, the mass organizations – like the Free German Trade Union Organization or the Free German Youth – and industrial combines. At the same time, studio rents rose steeply, since studios were now commercial premises and no longer subject to rent control. Faced with demotion from the status of privileged state-subsidized artists to that of taxidrivers, artists feared the 'intellectual colonization' of their territory by West German galleries with their market-wise western artists. The 'capitalist'

takeover of the market was often felt to devalue their own art. But such fears proved groundless. Not only West German galleries but many committed and highly professional gallery owners, some from the former state art trade organization, have opened up in East Berlin, Leipzig, Dresden, Chemnitz, Halle and other towns, representing their own artists at international art fairs.

The Dispute between the Painters Who Left and Who Stayed in the GDR

Despite this growing normality, a bitter and seemingly endless painter's dispute has erupted regarding the worth or worthlessness of art from the former GDR. On the one side are those artists who, out of necessity or choice, moved to the West from the early fifties onwards; on the other there are those who chose not to leave because of many different reasons. One reason might have been the warmth of the GDR nest.

We can identify three early distinct debates. The first opened in the early summer of 1990 when Peter Ludwig, an important collector and chocolate manufacturer, marked his 65th birthday by an effective media attack on the 'ban on GDR art' imposed by Siegfried Gohr, the director of the Museum Ludwig in Cologne.² The 'debate' between the collector of 'his' museum and the director ended with the fact that the director left the museum.

The second began with the amalgamation of the two Berlin art academies in February 1993. This led to the resignation of eighteen notable artists from the arts section of the West Berlin Academy, among them many former citizens of the GDR who left the country like Georg Baselitz, Gotthard Graubner and Gerhard Richter. They were protesting not just against the political complicity of the colleagues who were accepted *en bloc* from the East Berlin Academy of Arts, not just against their subservience to the state, but against the fact that they painted the wrong kind of pictures. In an access of nostalgia, yesterday's *avant-garde* felt obliged to defend 'their' Academy as a citadel of freedom and modernism. 'It is as though the bitter forty-year feud between the abstract and the representational, was still going on.'³

By playing off the ideologized aesthetic notions of abstraction and realism, the successful *avant-gardistes* of the West Berlin Academy showed themselves to be still obsessed by the cultural battles of the Cold War. By the early 1960s at the latest this antagonism had become obsolete, thanks to New Figuration and Pop Art. Once again artists nostalgically recalled the good old days of 1955 when the West Berlin Academy was founded for political reasons, as

a bulwark of autonomous art and 'freedom' went on the offensive against its East German counterpart, significantly named the 'German Academy of Arts', founded in 1950.

The third debate arose in the spring of 1994 with the rehangings of GDR works in the National Gallery after the eastern and western stocks had been amalgamated. Some artists, who saw themselves at a disadvantage in the West German art market because their work had not been promoted by the state or exported to the West, protested strenuously against the alleged dominance of established GDR artists and complained that the choice of works endorsed the artistic policy of the eastern leadership, producing a dreary sense of *déjà-vu*.

In the center of all these disputes is the so-called 'gang of four', consisting of Bernhard Heisig, Wolfgang Mattheuer, Werner Tübke (all from Leipzig), and Willi Sitte (from Halle), the long-serving president of the Artist's Association. It was their involvement in *documenta 6* at Kassel in 1977 that first brought GDR art to international notice. They were the tip of an iceberg, hitherto unknown in the West, which had grown almost unnoticed in a sea of trivial propagandist art inspired by the doctrine of Socialist Realism, which meant nothing more than the priority of politics over art. During the Honecker-era, Willi Sitte, Bernhard Heisig and Werner Tübke – after initial difficulties with the anti-formalism-campaign of the 1950s and the disputes of the 1960s – had become members of the *nomenklatura* (members of the party elite). Hence their reforming activity in painting and artistic policy is now held against them, as it indicates at least tacit acquiescence in the increasingly offensive cultural policy of the GDR in the seventies, as part of a new round of competition between the two political systems in the Cold War. They are blamed by the dissident artists for collaborating with a regime that is now branded as criminal after the Fall of the Wall. Their assumption of political responsibility for the young art scene and their students and the relative autonomy of the Artist's Association in the 1970s and 80s carried a high price – voluntary self-restraint, which left its mark in the painting too.

Yet it must also be recognized that in the GDR there was a fundamental qualitative change from the naturalistically, academic late Stalinist painting of the 1950s to an art that revealed and exposed existing contradictions. From 1971 onwards, with the start of the Honecker-era, Expressionism, Surrealism, New Objectivity and Verism were more and more officially accepted on the basis of the 'firm positions of socialism'. While the so-called problem pictures of the 'Leipzig School' thematized social conflicts in 'actually

existing socialism, they also neutralized them by a process of encoding and mystification. Obviously this art could no longer hold up the creeping collapse of a rigidified system. Today these pictures may be interpreted as seismographic charts of the tremors that were revealed when the system noiselessly imploded in 1989.

The 'neutral' West German defenders of this loyal but critical art, promoted in the West by the GDR art trade, complained about the widespread inability of the West to read and understand GDR art. Given the decades of mutual ignorance, this was not surprising. After the Berlin Wall was built in 1961 it was thirteen years before the Hamburger Kunstverein, acting in the name of the German Communist Party, was able to mount the first official exhibition of GDR art in the FRG with 'official' East German artists like Willi Sitte and Wolfgang Mattheuer (Hamburger Kunstverein 1975 and 1976). Soon such exhibitions became a normal practice in the 1980s (for example *Zeitvergleich* in Hamburg 1983, Bernhard Heisig in 1989 in the prestigious Martin Gropius Bau in West Berlin) under the auspices of the *Neue Ostpolitik* (New Policy towards East Germany). The western public believed in a general new tendency of liberation and emancipation which became visible first in the new content and form of the artworks from the GDR, especially among the artists of the 'Leipzig School' like Bernhard Heisig, Volker Stelzmann, Ulrich Hachulla, Wolfgang Peuker, Sighard Gille and others. The pictures of the East German artists became windows affording a view of what was going on under the surface of GDR society. They took the more or less enigmatic images to be clues to social and political conflicts and upheavals.

'There Are No Artists in the GDR: They've All Left'

At the center of the ongoing debate about the evaluation of art in the GDR are such contrasting notions as art and morality, collaboration and resistance, truth and falsehood. One is reminded of the post-1945 debate between the writers Walter von Molo and Frank Thies, who chose 'inner emigration', and Thomas Mann, who went into exile and 'betrayed' his people and country by committing himself to western democracy and adopting American citizenship. On 28 September 1945 Mann responded to Walter von Molo's appeal to him to return to Germany at once: 'In my eyes,' he declared, 'books that could be printed at all in Germany between 1933 and 1945 are less than worthless, not fit to be picked up. A smell of blood and disgrace attaches to them. They should all be pulped.'⁴

Forty-five years on, the émigré artist Georg Baselitz, faced with the question, 'Are then Bernhard Heisig and Wolfgang Mattheuer not artists?', replied, 'They are not artists, not painters. Neither has ever painted a picture [...] They are interpreters who carried out a government programme in the GDR. The artists degenerated into ideological propagandists. They played themselves at the service of the "good cause". On their calculated path, supposedly the historically correct path, they have betrayed imagination, love, madness.'⁵

In the second struggle between the 'inner emigrants' and the exiles, the exiles took the initiative in the polemics: the stay-at-homes were on the defensive. The claim to morality as the motive behind their art laid it open to attack on moral grounds, as their pictorial rhetoric was often informed by formulas of political compromise. Baselitz with his statement that 'there are no artists in the GDR: they've all left'⁶, revives the dogma of the Cold War that art is inconceivable without freedom and a refusal to compromise. This dogma was the base for the concept of the exhibition *60 Jahre, 60 Werke. Kunst aus der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1949-2009*, 2009 in the Martin Gropius Bau. This exhibition, organized by sixteen (!) curators from West Germany, among them the former director of the Museum Ludwig Cologne, Siegfried Gohr, the art critic, Peter Iden (*Frankfurter Rundschau*) and Walter Smerling, director of the museum Küppersmühle in Duisburg, claimed to show only art created under the paragraph 5 (3) of the *Grundgesetz* (Basic Law), which guarantees the freedom of the arts and sciences in the FRG. All art works produced in the GDR were regarded under these circumstances as propaganda works, not as art works. The promotion of the exhibition was given to the *Bild Zeitung*, the infamous yellow press of Germany and opened by the chancellor, Angela Merkel, who was born in East Germany. But Georg Baselitz' clean-break argument is also an attack on 'inner emigration' in the GDR and the belief of these inner emigrants that one was always 'inwardly opposed to the régime'⁷.

The only artist from the former GDR who was incorporated into this western propaganda show of the Cold War was the famous dissident Ralf Winkler alias A.R. Penck who adopted this pseudonym after the name of a researcher into the ice age as a protective measure on the occasion of his first exhibition in the West in Cologne in 1968. After unsuccessful attempts to gain admittance to studies at the Dresden College of Art and acceptance by the all-powerful Artists Association he left Dresden and the GDR in 1980. His painting *The Crossing* (1963) (image 1) became an icon for the



Image 1: A.R. Penck, *The Crossing*, 1963, Museum Ludwig. Foto: E. Gillen.

balancing of an individual over an abyss on a burning rope. This image is a metaphor for the situation of all artists who tried to keep to their autonomy in the GDR. In fact A.R-Penck lost his anxieties about the state, the party, the functioneers and the secret police and therefore he became the paragon for all his colleagues who tried to work and live on their own.

'Ideological Aesthetic' or 'Aesthetic of Responsibility'

In both the Third Reich and the GDR there was a persistently cultivated illusion that one could lead a double life, between controlled public life and protected privacy. The concepts of art in Germany after the fall of the Wall could not be more incompatible. It is a question of the artist's concern, the content or message of work. In terms of an 'ideological aesthetic', the quality and significance of the work of art was defined in the GDR according to the attitude it evinced. How clearly did it demonstrate rejection, critical affirmation, honest commitment to socialism, or collaboration with a regime that is suddenly, with hindsight, perceived as merely criminal? This aesthetic defined the 'moral identity' of the artist's personality in positive or negative terms.

According to the Western 'aesthetic of responsibility', however, the artist is responsible only for the artefact he has created. Its theme is not truth, or

even agreement with reality. The morality of the work of art resides in its aesthetic. In the West, there is a conviction that art comes from art. In the East, however, the cultivation of the cultural heritage often amounts to helping oneself from the fund of art history. In the West the value of any work derives from its relation to other works, not from its relation to extra-artistic reality, not from its truth, not from any meaning. What remains is the constant turning of their cultural soil.

The state-supporting and the not state-supporting artists in the former



Ralf Kerbach, *The Twin*, 1984. Foto: E. Gillen.

GDR were more linked together than the parties to the dispute arguing about collaboration and resistance are prepared to admit. Common to both is a tendency to Protestant pictorial sermonizing, Protestant fundamentalism, moral rigour and self-righteousness. The problem of all artists who worked in the former GDR lies in the fact that a pluralist society like the new Federal Republic has no need of either state artists or dissidents. Both attitudes, and the blurred areas in between, become pointless without the authoritarian socialist state that creates them. The polemical bitterness of the debate suggests an attempt to catch up on radical opposition, to work off the disappointments and the rejection

suffered at the hands of Father State and Mother Party. At one time the implacable critics of today all hoped to gain something from this anti-fascist, anti-capitalist state – and rightly, according to their lights. But from today's viewpoint everyone who wanted to achieve something in the GDR is a suspect.

Pictures from both the West and the East have more in common than we were prepared to admit during the Cold War, when the fronts were clearly drawn. We can recognize the mental and intellectual affinity, the shared history, and the traces it has left in our minds, in the way we see things. Research still has to discover what parallels there are, hitherto unnoticed, despite the mutual blocking off of the two states, in the artistic development they underwent.

In 1984, two years after moving from Dresden to West Berlin, Ralf Kerbach painted a symbolic picture of the divided nation. His painting, called *Twin* (image 2), shows the hostile brothers back to back, their heads, the seats of memory, have coalesced, so that they cannot turn to face one another. In spite of the division, the ideological polarization, there is a shared art of recall, which has come to grips with the phenomenology of what has been repressed in Germany.

In the meantime there is no GDR art in existence any more. It has dissolved with the system, the milieu, the ethos that conditioned it. But art from Saxony and Thuringia, from Berlin and the north, will go on.

Notes

1. Uwe Johnson: "Versuch eine Mentalität zu erklären. Über eine Art DDR-Bürger in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland," in: *Vergebliche Verabredung* (Leipzig 1992), 23f. This statement was written shortly after Johnson moved to West Berlin in 1959.
2. He was one of the curators of the later exhibition "60 Years, 60 Works," (2009), who excluded all artists from the GDR.
3. Helmut Börsch-Supan, "Besinnung auf Qualität," *Der Tagesspiegel* 8.3 (1992).
4. Thomas Mann, "Offener Brief für Deutschland," in *Vaterland, Muttersprache. Deutsche Schriftsteller und ihr Staat von 1945 bis heute*, (Berlin: K. Wagenbach Verlag, 1979), 48.
5. Georg Baselitz, "Ein Meister, der Talent verschmäht," Interview von Axel Hecht und Alfred Welti mit Georg Baselitz, *art 6* (1990), 70.
6. Ibidem.
7. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. Ein Bericht von der Banalität des Bösen* (Munich, 1964), 163. Trans. and ed. John L. H. Keep (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2001), 10.