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WHOSE EAST GERMAN ART IS THIS? THE POLITICS OF RECEPTION AFTER 1989

APRIL A. EISMAN



Abstract¹ | Beginning with an overview of painting in East Germany, this article examines the German-German Bilderstreit (image battle) of the long 1990s and two major art exhibitions in the new millennium, Kunst in der DDR (Art in the GDR, 2003) and Abschied von Ikarus (Farewell to Icarus, 2012-13). It ultimately argues that the history of East German art has been rewritten since unification in ways that reflect Western expectations and desires more than socialist realities, and shows how art historians, scholars of the German Democratic Republic (GDR, or East Germany), and those seeking alternatives to the neoliberal present can benefit from a less biased view.

Résumé¹ | Commencant par un résumé de la peinture en Allemagne de l'Est, cet essai examine la bataille de l'image allemande-allemande dans des longues années 1990 et deux grandes expositions d'art dans le nouveau millénaire, Kunst in der DDR (L'Art en la RDA, 2003) et Abschied von Ikarus (Adieu à Icarus. 2012-13). Il fait valoir en fin de compte que l'histoire de l'art est-allemand a été réécrit depuis l'unification d'une manière qui reflète les attentes et désirs occidentales plus des réalités socialistes, et montre comment les historiens de l'art, les chercheurs de la RDA, et ceux qui cherchent des alternatives au présent néolibéraux peuvent bénéficier d'une perspective moins préjugé.

East German studies today is thriving in English-language scholarship. From history to cultural studies and especially film, scholars have shown us the complexity of East German society, which was not just a top-down repressive system but also a place where culture played an important if contested role in the making of the socialist person.² This scholarship, which started primarily in the field of literature in the 1970s and 1980s, expanded into history, film, and material culture in the wake of the Cold War.³ But the visual fine arts—including painting, graphics, and sculpture as well as performance and installation art—have been almost completely overlooked.⁴ In English-language scholarship, for example, not a single monograph has been published on painting despite its centrality in the East German art world.⁵ In Germany, by comparison, the visual fine arts have been the focus of numerous studies and several large exhibitions. Much of the German scholarship written after unification, however, is permeated by lingering Cold War-era stereotypes and contemporary political agendas.⁶ A similar tendency can be seen in most areas of East German studies, but it has been challenged by scholars, often working outside of Germany, who take a more nuanced approach (Port 15). In art history, by comparison, such correctives are rare, so although one might assume that greater access to archival material after the fall of the Berlin Wall has led to a deeper understanding of the art scene and the mechanisms at work, the reality is that much of what is written today is

more biased than scholarship on either side of the Wall in the 1980s.⁷

In this article, I show how our current understanding of art created in the German Democratic Republic (GDR, or East Germany) is quite different from what it was thirty years ago and argue that it has been rewritten to fulfill Western expectations. Although some changes to the narrative have expanded our understanding, others have significantly distorted our view of East Germany, thus depriving us of an alternative perspective from which to understand the capitalist West. Such distortions also deny us a source for alternatives to the neoliberal present. I begin by looking briefly at the development of art in East Germany, focusing on painting, the most prestigious visual arts medium, in order to establish a baseline for understanding the history that has been subsequently rewritten. I then turn to the German-German *Bilderstreit* (image battle) of the long 1990s, a series of vehement debates in the German press about what role East German art and artists should play in the new Germany. These debates offer insight into the larger issues at stake and the actors involved, and thus allow us to better understand the more recent rewriting. I then argue that the *Bilderstreit* entered a new, quieter—and therefore more insidious—phase in the new millennium, a shift that began in 2003 with *Kunst in der DDR, eine Retrospektive* (Art in the GDR, a Retrospective), a blockbuster exhibition held at the Neue Nation-

algalerie in Berlin. This highly praised exhibition marks a high point in East German art's reception after 1989/90, but it also inadvertently opened the door to a significant rewriting of East German art that reached its culmination in the 2012 *Abschied von Ikarus* (Farewell to Icarus) exhibition in Weimar. I consider how both of these exhibitions presented East German art before explaining why the rewriting of this art matters for both art historians and scholars of the GDR.

Art in East Germany

In Anglophone scholarship, East German art is virtually unknown, the result in part of the Cold War era's polarization—and politicization—of the visual arts, which were divided roughly in two since the late 1940s: abstract vs. realist, good vs. bad, Art vs. non-Art. According to these binaries, East Germany did not create art, merely political propaganda and kitsch. It is a stereotype that, despite the passage of more than a quarter century since the end of the Cold War, remains largely unexamined and therefore dominant in the minds of most Anglophone academics who, if asked to describe “East German art,” would probably mention the term “Socialist Realism” and imagine paintings of Communist leaders or happy workers portrayed with an almost photographic realism. While such images were created throughout the forty-year history of the GDR, they reached their



Fig. 1 – Otto Nagel, *Junger Maurer von der Stalinallee*, 1953. Oil on canvas, 116 x 79.5 cm. Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

official apex in 1953 with works such as Otto Nagel's *Junger Maurer von der Stalinallee* (Young Bricklayer from Stalinallee, 1953) [Fig. 1].

In the wake of Stalin's death and the workers' revolt in June 1953, East German artistic policy loosened, and visual artists began to experiment openly with modernist styles in the vein of Pablo Picasso and Fernand Léger. In fact, there was a multi-issue discussion of Picasso as a possible role model for East German artists in these years in *Bildende Kunst*, the GDR's main art journal. Picasso seemed a particularly interesting figure because he combined a modernist aesthetic

with a political commitment to communism (Lüdecke). His influence can be seen in the flattened space and simplified forms visible in paintings by Willi Sitte [Fig. 2] and Harald Metzkes, among others.⁸

By the mid-1960s, artists in Leipzig—and, in particular, Bernhard Heisig, Wolfgang Mattheuer, and Werner Tübke, along with Willi Sitte from neighboring Halle—had developed a uniquely East German style of contemporary art that would come to represent the GDR in the more relaxed cultural atmosphere of the Honecker era in the 1970s and 1980s. Paintings such as Heisig's *Der Weihnachtstraum des unbelehrbaren Soldaten* (The Christmas Dream of the Un-teachable Soldier, 1964) [Fig. 6]—multivalent works that reflect a commitment to the modernist tradition—would



Fig. 2 – Willi Sitte, *Raub der Sabinerinnen*, 1953. Oil on hard fiber, 126.5 x 165 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Nationalgalerie. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

be exhibited in the West to great praise in the final decades of the Cold War era. Although this generation of artists in-

cludes East Germany's best-known artists today, they were not the only ones working in a modernist style but rather the first of several generations.

In the 1970s, their students emerged with works that looked not only at the Expressionist tradition but also at *Neue Sachlichkeit* and Surrealism. Arno Rink, for example, responded to the 1973 putsch in Chile with a Daliesque painting about the Spanish Civil War, *Spanien 1938* (Spain 1938) that was

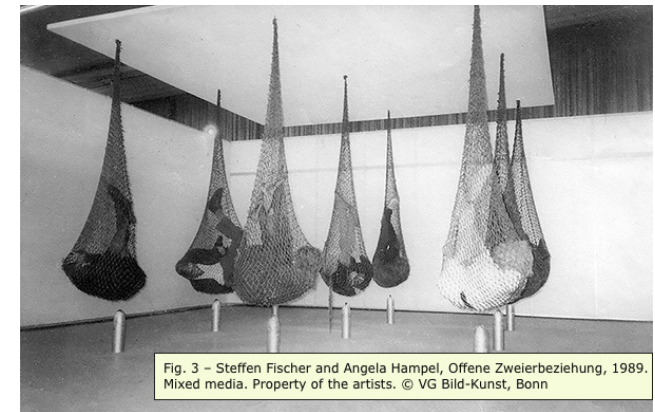


Fig. 3 – Steffen Fischer and Angela Hampel, *Offene Zweierbeziehung*, 1989. Mixed media. Property of the artists. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

exhibited to great praise at both the district and national levels (Feist 223). By the 1980s, a third generation of artists was creating large, Neoexpressionist canvases not unlike those of their *Neue Wilde* (new Fauves) counterparts in West Germany, and both installation and performance art were gaining in popularity and were even recognized by the official art world. Steffen Fischer and Angela Hampel's installation, *Offene Zweierbeziehung* (An Open Relationship, 1989) [Fig. 3], for example, was included in the District Art

Exhibition in Dresden in 1989. The work shows a number of men and women strung up individually in nets that hover above upright missiles, a reference to the difficulties of sexual entanglements.

As this brief overview reveals, art in East Germany was much more complex than is often assumed in the West. Rather than uniformly repressive, the East German system was marked by a series of freezes and thaws in artistic policy, but with an ever increasing openness to modern and contemporary art, such that by the late 1980s no style was completely taboo, not even performance and installation art.⁹

The Bilderstreit and the Staatskünstler Label

In sharp contrast to the lack of knowledge in the Anglophone West, the development of art in East Germany after 1953 is better recognized in both scholarship and museum exhibitions in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, or West Germany until 1990, unified Germany thereafter), albeit problematically so. Already in the late 1960s Eduard Beaucamp was writing about Heisig, Mattheuer, Sitte, and Tübke—the so-called “Leipzig School”—in the major daily newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. A few years later, in 1977, these same four artists were invited to exhibit works at the international art exhibition *documenta 6* in Kassel, West Germany. This event marks the emergence of contemporary East German art onto the Western art scene.¹⁰ In its wake these four artists would become virtually synonymous with East German art in the minds of many West German curators, and their work the most highly praised, collected,

and exhibited in the 1980s.¹¹ In the wake of 1989/90 they were also the artists most frequently at the center of controversy in the German press, which labeled them “*Staatskünstler*,” or State Artists. The controversy around artists such as Heisig, Mattheuer, Sitte, and Tübke was not new to the *Mauerfall* (fall of the Berlin Wall), but rather began already with their inclusion in *documenta 6* (Schirmer, *DDR und documenta*). Protestors delivered leaflets and conducted a sit-in; the artist Georg Baselitz pulled his work from the show. Yet these voices did not command the press’s attention the way they would in the wake of November 1989. In large part this was due to the leftist leanings of West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s. With the sudden collapse of the GDR, however, the authority that leftist intellectuals had enjoyed since Willy Brandt’s *Ostpolitik* (also known as *détente*) was undermined, and conservative voices came to the fore in a wave of victor’s glory.

The change in East German art’s reception after the *Mauerfall* occurred almost immediately. A major exhibition of Heisig’s work that had opened in West Berlin to positive reviews in October 1989 was being criticized by the end of November. What became known as the German-German *Bilderstreit* began a few years later when, in 1993, eighteen prominent West Germans—including the GDR emigrants Georg Baselitz and Gerhard Richter—left the visual arts department of the western Berlin Academy of Arts in protest against the en-bloc acceptance of colleagues from its eastern counterpart when the two academies were merged (Gillen). The following year the Neue Nationalgalerie in western Berlin became the center of controversy for an exhibition of postwar art from their permanent collection that placed

masterpieces from the East and West side by side. The right-of-center Christian Democratic Party (CDU) in Berlin ignited the debate, likening the museum to a *Parteischule* (school of the Communist Party) because of its inclusion of Heisig, Sitte, Tübke, and Mattheuer (Kahlcke). A third major confrontation took place in 1998 when Heisig was invited—as one of only two East German artists—to contribute work to the Reichstag building in Berlin. Heisig was attacked for being a teenage soldier in the Waffen SS and for being a *Staatskünstler*. In fact, the two were conflated by the politician Uwe Lehmann-Braun from the CDU, who stated that Heisig had “loyally served two dictatorships” (quoted in Hecht 3).

The height of the *Bilderstreit*, however, was reached the following year with the exhibition *Aufstieg und Fall der Moderne* (The Rise and Fall of Modernism) in Weimar. In this exhibition, the western German curator’s contempt for the East German works on display was obvious—the paintings were crowded together and hung up haphazardly against drop cloths in a space without climate control (Wolbert; Osmond). Moreover, a more carefully considered exhibition of Nazi works elsewhere in the building suggested not only a connection between the two regimes, but also that the Nazi works were more valuable. This was followed by one final clash over the planned 2001 exhibition of Willi Sitte’s work at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg for his 80th birthday (Grossmann). Ultimately, the furor in the press over Sitte’s connections to the East German state—his position as *Staatskünstler*—led to Sitte cancelling the show.

The various debates within the *Bilderstreit* fall into two main categories, both of which draw upon Cold War-era prejudices about East German art. The first dismissed East German art and artists as inferior to their western counterparts. This view was often accompanied by the term *Auftragskunst* (commissioned art) and by images like Heinrich Witz's *Der neue Anfang* (The New Beginning, 1959) [Fig. 4], which were



Fig. 4 – Heinrich Witz, *Der neue Anfang*, 1959. Oil, 95 x 120 cm. Kunstsammlung der Wismut GmbH Chemnitz.

readily accessible in the 1990s in exhibitions at history museums such as the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin (see Flacke). This focus on an assumed inferior quality can be seen in the controversy over the decision to unify the East and West German Academies of Art and in the *Aufstieg und Fall der Moderne* exhibition.

The second category of the *Bilderstreit* focused on dismissing East Germany's most important artists—those previously praised and collected in West Germany—based on their biographies and, in particular, their largely positive relationship to the state. In these cases, the art itself could not be dismissed as “bad art,” and thus the focus shifted to the person. Examples of this type of dismissal appear in the controversies around the exhibition of postwar art at the Neue Nationalgalerie, Heisig's commission for the Reichstag building, and Sitte's cancellation of his solo exhibition in Nuremberg. These artists were labeled *Staatskünstler*, meaning “state artist,” a term that requires unpacking in order to be able to understand the reception of East German art in Germany today.

On the surface of it, the term *Staatskünstler* is not a negative one. The history of art is filled with them, from the Romans to Jacques-Louis David, artists who fulfilled commissions for—and whose art came to represent—the state. From this perspective, Heisig, Mattheuer, Sitte, and Tübke—among many other East German artists—were indeed *Staatskünstler*. They fulfilled artistic commissions, and their work represented the GDR in major international exhibitions. Yet the term *Staatskünstler* in the context of East German art has a number of negative connotations that upon closer examination

do not apply, at least not to most of the artists so labeled. The example of Bernhard Heisig—who was not only one of East Germany's best-known and most successful artists but also a key figure in the *Bilderstreit*—should suffice to illustrate some of the problems with this label.

The first connotation of the term *Staatskünstler* is that these artists forfeited artistic integrity in exchange for fame and



Fig. 5 – Bernhard Heisig, *Zirkel junge Naturforscher*, 1952. Oil on Canvas, 120 x 190 cm. Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

power. In Heisig's case, however, it was just the opposite. He changed from an Adolf von Menzel-inspired realism in the 1950s, as evidenced in *Zirkel junger Naturforscher* (Circle of Young Natural Scientists, 1952) [Fig. 5], to one inspired by German modernists such as Lovis Corinth, Max Beckmann, and Otto Dix in the early to mid-1960s, as visible in *Der Weihnachtstraum des unbelehrbaren Soldaten* (The Christ-

mas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier, 1964) [Fig. 6]. That is, he changed from an artistic style that was acceptable to conservative political functionaries to one that was not.

This change in style led to a number of clashes with authorities in the latter half of the 1960s that have been largely overlooked or misinterpreted in German scholarship.¹² It was only with Erich Honecker's rise to power in 1971 that Heisig became a highly valued artist at the national level, the result of a change—and considerable relaxation in—cultural policy. One could even argue that Heisig had led the way through his repeated provocations in the 1960s to the modern style for which East German art became known in the Honecker era.

A second implication behind the term *Staatskünstler* is that these artists actively oppressed others. In Heisig's case, the implied accusation is that he, as professor at and rector of the Leipzig Academy (Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst Leipzig), prevented those with a more radical view of art in terms of stylistic innovation from becoming artists. Yet a closer examination of the record reveals that Heisig actually worked with younger artists to make the Leipzig Academy more modern. In the 1970s, he hired Hartwig Ebersbach to create and teach a multimedia class and ran interference with political functionaries in Berlin for years before the class was ultimately shut down (Lang, *Malerei und Grafik* 275; Grundmann and Michael 10-11,

43-46, 48). Similarly, as vice president of the national Union of Visual Artists (VBK), he helped negotiate a compromise for the controversial *Herbstsalon* (Fall Salon) in Leipzig in 1984, a so-called “underground” exhibition of young artists who were able to display works not considered acceptable by the government (Lang, *Malerei und Grafik* 210-11). All of



Fig. 6 – Bernhard Heisig, *Der Weihnachtstraum des unbelehrbaren Soldaten*, 1964. Oil. Destroyed through overpainting. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

these facts—and more—suggest that Heisig was open to the younger generation and worked to include them and their broadening interests in the system, even if he was not interested in creating such works himself. Indeed, Ebersbach de-

fended Heisig on just such terms during the debate around the inclusion of Heisig's work in the Reichstag in 1998.¹³

In the end, however, the truth of whether or not Heisig and the other so-called *Staatskünstler* had actually oppressed others—or sold out their artistic integrity—did not really matter to those making the accusations. What mattered was these artists' high-profile association with the GDR, the collapse of which in 1989/90 seemed to prove it had been an *Unrechtstaat* (illegitimate state). In the highly charged political atmosphere of the 1990s, the so-called *Staatskünstler* were seen by many (western) German conservatives as having helped legitimate the East German regime—and thus having contributed to its longevity—by the very fact that they had not left. This subtly poisonous accusation recalls the exiles vs. *Hierbleiber* (those remaining here) debates of the Third Reich, in which exiles were castigated for abandoning the German people in their time of greatest need, and *Hierbleiber* for tacitly lending their support to the regime by not leaving. Artists such as Heisig were thus castigated for being *Hierbleiber*, for staying in the GDR and attempting to change it from within rather than abandoning it.¹⁴

Not all of the criticism came from western Germans. There were, in fact, at least three distinct groups of eastern Germans in the art world whose condemnations of the so-called *Staatskünstler* were used to buoy conservative western Ger-

man criticisms. The first came from a younger generation of artists from the GDR, artists whose radicality in terms of formal innovation had caused conflict with the government, and for whom the *Mauerfall* had ended the GDR before such conflicts could be worked out or, in the case of those who had recently emigrated to the West, before they could dissociate themselves from their East German past.¹⁵ This group in particular—artists such as Lutz Dammbeck (b. 1948) and Han-Hendrick Grimmeling (b. 1947)—sees the so-called *Staatskünstler* as having sold out their artistic integrity and misused their power to oppress younger, more formally radical artists.¹⁶ Archival evidence and interviews, however, suggest that the issue at stake here is less one of aesthetic repression than a generational conflict.¹⁷ These younger artists were rebelling against the hegemony of the 1920s generation of artists—the so-called *Staatskünstler*—who were not only greatly praised in the GDR and internationally in the final decades of the Cold War but also largely controlled the art academies and institutions and, as such, dictated policy.

A second group of eastern German voices critical of the so-called *Staatskünstler* came from artists who had left the GDR and made international names for themselves as “German” artists. The most notable example is Georg Baselitz, who stated in a much-quoted 1990 interview in *Art* magazine: “There are no artists in the GDR, they all left [...] no artists, no painters. None of them ever painted a picture [...]. They are interpreters who fulfilled the program of the East German system [...] [they are] simply assholes” (quoted in Hecht and Welti 70). Both he and Gerhard Richter left the GDR as adults for the West, where they established international reputations. Until recently, their East German back-

grounds—including artistic training—have been glossed over.¹⁸ Yet this background presumably contributed to their positive reception, lending them an aura of Otherness that also seemed to confirm the presumed superiority of the West by their choice to emigrate there.

The third group of eastern German voices is comprised of artists, critics, and art historians from places other than Leipzig or Halle. These individuals have attempted to reconfigure—perhaps unconsciously—the history of East German art in recent years. In particular, they downplay the importance of the Leipzig School. This view was particularly apparent in the *Kunst in der DDR, Eine Retrospektive* exhibition where the Leipzig School had only one small, artificially lit room, while artists from Berlin enjoyed three of the five rooms open to natural lighting. For those unfamiliar with the history of East German art, the Leipzig School would have seemed no more important than Constructivism, which also had a small room in the exhibition.

When examined in context, the *Bilderstreit* reveals itself primarily as a battle for place within the new Germany and, for some, a battle over what role, if any, East German art and artists should play in helping to define Germany’s post-Wall cultural identity. In the new millennium, however, the vociferous battles over East German art diminished, in part, because of the passage of time.

The Quiet Rewriting of East German Art

The shift to a new, quieter phase in the reception of East German art began in 2003 when the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin held a major exhibition, *Kunst in der DDR, eine Retrospektive*. Not only did the exhibition avoid controversy in the press, it attracted large numbers of visitors and was ultimately named “Exhibition of the Year” by the International Art Critics Association (AICA). The exhibition benefited in part from fortuitous timing: the wildly successful film, *Goodbye Lenin*, released earlier that year, marked a high point in *Ostalgie* (nostalgia for the East). The exhibition also addressed a western audience with the intent of showing that East Germany did indeed have art of value. It was intended, at least in part, as a response to—and perhaps the final word on—the controversy sparked nearly ten years earlier when the *Neue Nationalgalerie* exhibited works from both East Germany and the West next to each other.¹⁹ Curated by two former East German curators, Roland März and Eugen Blume, *Kunst in der DDR* included 400 works of painting, drawing, sculpture, photography, and video by 130 artists. The intent was to show that the GDR had a “differentiated and rich variety of artistic voices, especially in the art centers of Berlin, Dresden, Halle and Leipzig,” regardless of the politics and limitations of the “closed society” (Blume and März 12).

The exhibition was arranged roughly chronologically. It began in the immediate postwar years with images of wartime destruction, artistic self-reflection in the context of rebuilding, and early artistic experimentation in the Eastern Zone. Paintings included Hans Grundig’s *Opfer des Faschismus*

(Victims of Fascism, 1946) [Fig. 7], Bernhard Kretzschmar's *Selbstbildnis* (Self Portrait, 1946), and Edmund Kesting's *Land im Versinken* (Sinking Country, 1949), respectively. It



Fig. 7 – Hans Grundig, *Opfer des Faschismus*, 1946. Oil on hard fiber, 110 x 200 cm. Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

then offered two rooms with paintings and sculpture from the 1950s such as Sitte's *Raub der Sabinerinnen* [Fig. 2] and Metzkes' *Abtransport der sechsarmigen Göttin* (Removing the Six-armed Goddess, 1956), works inspired by Picasso and other modernist artists.

The exhibition then shifted to a number of rooms dedicated to three of East Germany's main art centers—Dresden, East Berlin, and Leipzig—reflecting the importance of districts, or *Bezirke*, in the development of artistic styles. In 1952, the SED had divided East Germany into fourteen districts, each

of which had its own local branches of various national organizations, including the Union of Visual Artists (VBK).²⁰ These local branches interpreted rules passed down from

the national organization, dealt with local artistic issues such as commissions and exhibitions, and were the official advocates for their artists. They also organized the juried district art exhibitions held throughout the country every two to three years. These exhibitions enabled each district to display its art to the public and politicians alike, and it was largely from these exhibitions that works were chosen for the national art exhibition held in Dresden every four to five years. Dresden, East Berlin, and Leipzig each had an art school and a unique artistic profile. This emphasis on the regional defines much of East Germany's art, which—unlike the West's—did not develop in terms of movements or styles but rather in terms of regional tendencies. These tendencies were encouraged, in part, by regularly scheduled exhibitions and exchanges among artists at the local level, the unique

history of the region, and the specific emphasis of the art school, whether painting (Berlin and Dresden), printmaking (Leipzig), or industrial design (Halle).

For Dresden, the exhibition included images by artists who worked largely outside of official art circles in the 1960s and 1970s, including Peter Graf [Fig. 8], Strawalde (also known



Fig. 8 – Peter Graf, *Selbstbildnis mit Papagei*, 1971. Oil on hard fiber, diameter 41 cm. Galerie Neue Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

as Jürgen Böttcher), and Ralf Winkler (better known in the West as A.R. Penck). Dresden artists such as these tended to emphasize the painterly quality, if not coloration, associated with German Expressionism, which was founded in Dresden and remained an important inspiration for artists who lived there.

In the rooms devoted to Berlin, the selected artists tended to look to Paris for inspiration, generally adopting a quiet, poetic approach to art—from the “black melancholy” of the



Fig. 9 – Clemens Groszer, *Café Liolet*, 1986. Mixed collage on canvas, 140 x 120 cm. Brandenburgische Kunstsammlungen Cottbus, Museum für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Fotografie und Plakat. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

1950s as embodied by Ernst Schröder and Manfred Böttcher to the more colorful images of the 1960s by artists such as Harald Metzkes. In the 1970s and 1980s, a number of artists from a younger generation emerged who looked to *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) for inspiration, as can be seen in Clemens Groszer’s *Café Liolet* [Fig. 9], a clear reference to Otto Dix.

Leipzig, too, had a room, albeit smaller than those for Dresden and Berlin. Paintings from Leipzig tended to emphasize complex compositions and layers of meaning, inspired at least in part because it was a city of books and publishing: artists in Leipzig not only regularly illustrated books but also incorporated literary complexity into their work [Fig. 6]. The size of the room and number of paintings included for Leipzig, however, suggests a downplaying of the city’s importance to the history of East German art in comparison to Dresden and East Berlin. This is a revision that reveals the impact of the third group of critical voices about East German art’s reception: artists, critics, and art historians from places other than Leipzig or Halle—in this case, two curators from East Berlin. This desire to downplay Leipzig’s role stems in part from long-standing rivalries between various districts in East Germany. Whereas Leipzig emphasized highly intellectual content, energetic brushwork, and bold colors, Berlin focused on aesthetics: poetic voicings, subtle colors, and brushwork inspired by the work of French painters like Paul Cezanne (Blume and März 220-21). For some intellectuals in Berlin, the art created in Leipzig was too brash and received too much attention in the press, both before and after unification.²¹

In addition to rooms devoted to the individual art centers, there were also rooms that focused on particular styles or media. There was a small room devoted to Constructivism, a hallway to photography, and in the center, a large room to the brightly painted Neoexpressionist works created by

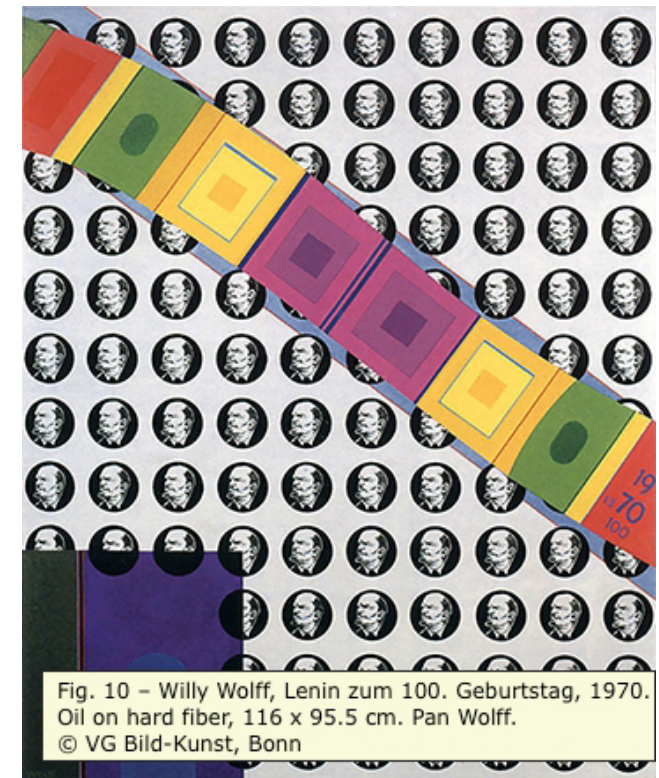


Fig. 10 – Willy Wolff, *Lenin zum 100. Geburtstag*, 1970. Oil on hard fiber, 116 x 95.5 cm. Pan Wolff. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

a younger generation of artists in the 1980s, including Trak Wendisch, Klaus Killisch, and Wolfgang Smy. There were also thematic rooms that included artists who did not fit

Abschied von Ikarus, 2012-13

within the other categories, such as Gerhard Altenbourg and Carlfriedrich Claus, two solitary figures in the GDR whose work emphasized drawing, and Willy Wolff [Fig. 10], one of the few artists in East Germany who engaged directly with Pop Art.

The exhibition *Kunst in der DDR* succeeded in its attempt to show that East Germany had art of value to Western tastes. Although this may seem obvious, it was an important fact to establish in Germany at this time. In the wake of the many exhibitions—usually in history museums—of lesser quality works, and the denigrations of the *Aufstieg und Fall der Moderne* exhibition four years earlier, the fact that East Germany had a flourishing contemporary art scene was not yet an obvious one. Yet in making this point, the curators were necessarily selective, downplaying Soviet-style Socialist Realist works in favor of those that looked to the modernist—particularly the German modernist traditions of Expressionism and *Neue Sachlichkeit* (Blume and März 12). The end result was a highly successful exhibition that helped change people's views of East German art. But the curators' emphasis on art *in* the GDR—as opposed to East German Art or Art of East Germany—had unintended consequences: it opened the door for future curators to include anything that was created on East German soil without regard for its importance within East German society and thus to create distorted accounts of art's role and reception (Blume and März 31). The evidence for this appears in the last major retrospective exhibition on East German art to be organized in Germany, one that took place nearly ten years later.

Abschied von Ikarus. Bildwelten in der DDR—neu gesehen (Farewell to Icarus. Imagery in the GDR—newly seen) was a major exhibition of East German art held in Weimar from

October 2012 until February 2013. It included approximately 279 works by 96 artists and was intended, in part, as a corrective to the controversial *Aufstieg und Fall der Moderne* exhibition held in Weimar thirteen years earlier. This time, however, the art was treated as art and exhibited in an art museum. The Neues Museum Weimar dedicated

all seventeen rooms of its impressive two-story building to the exhibition. The first floor focused primarily on the Ulbricht era and was arranged roughly chronologically. Af-

ter an introductory room of two paintings, the exhibition had a large room [Fig. 11] of well-known Socialist Realist works from the late 1940s and early 1950s. These included



Fig. 11 – Wall of Socialist Realism in Abschied von Ikarus, 2013

paintings such as Otto Nagel's *Junger Maurer von der Stalinallee* (Young Bricklayer on Stalin Boulevard, 1953) [Fig. 1], Kretschmar's *Die Volkslehrerin* (Teacher of the People,



Fig. 12 – Volker Stelzmann, *Junger Schweißer*, 1971. Mixed media on hard fiber, 121 x 76 cm. Kunsthalle Rostock. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

1953), and Mayer-Foreyt's *Ehrt die alten Meister* (Honor the Old Masters, 1952), works that were absent from the earlier blockbuster exhibition in Berlin. These paintings reflect the officially encouraged emphasis in the early 1950s on realism and optimism, on works that could help educate the people and offer models for behavior in the wake of the Third Reich.

These were followed by rooms on the lesser-known stories of the Bauhaus tradition at the Weimar Academy—the visual arts department of which was closed in 1951—and the modernist painters associated with the Galerie Hennig in Halle

in the 1950s. Sitte's *Volkmar im Faschingskostüm* (Volkmar in a Fasching Costume, 1954) and Joachim Heuer's *Tod mit Melone und Mütze* (Death with Melon and Hat, 1948-49) reveal the importance of early modernist movements for these artists. The next room focused on the Constructivist creations of the Dresden artist Hermann Glöckner. The focus was primarily on smaller works he had created, often from non-art materials such as medicine boxes or old broken glasses. Works such as these had been highlighted a few years earlier in a major exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum, *Art of Two Germanys / Cold War Cultures*. This small, solo space was followed by a large room of paintings focusing on East German workers created from the 1950s through the 1980s. These included Volker Stelzmann's famous *Junger Schweißer* (Young Welder, 1971) [Fig. 12] and the cartoon-like, lesser-known *Die Aura der Schmelzer* (The Aura of the Smelters, 1988) by Eberhard Heiland.

Whereas the exhibition's first floor offered a roughly chronological overview of art during the first two decades of the Cold War era, most of the works on the second floor dated from the Honecker period and were orga-

nized thematically. As on the first floor, these rooms offered a combination of well-known works and new discoveries, especially from the alternative scene. The Leipzig School was shown in a room titled, "The Apotheosis of Horror." It included work by Heisig, Mattheuer, Sitte, and Tübke, as well as by younger artists, including Hartwig Ebersbach and Hubertus Giebe. Many of these paintings focused on the Nazi past or the imperialist present. Ebersbach's polyptych, *Widmung an Chile* (Dedicated to Chile, 1974) [Fig. 13], for example, was a response to the 1973 putsch in Chile in which Augusto Pinochet, with CIA backing, violently overthrew



Fig. 13 – Hartwig Ebersbach, *Widmung an Chile*, 1974. Oil on hard fiber, 12 panels: 6 panels 200 x 60 cm, 6 panels 120 x 60 cm. Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

the democratically elected communist leader Salvador Allende and installed a military dictatorship that tortured tens

of thousands of people, several thousand of whom were “disappeared.”

Another room, titled “Melancholy Antiquity,” focused on the use of mythology in East German art. It included works by Heisig, Mattheuer, and Metzkes, among others. Mythology

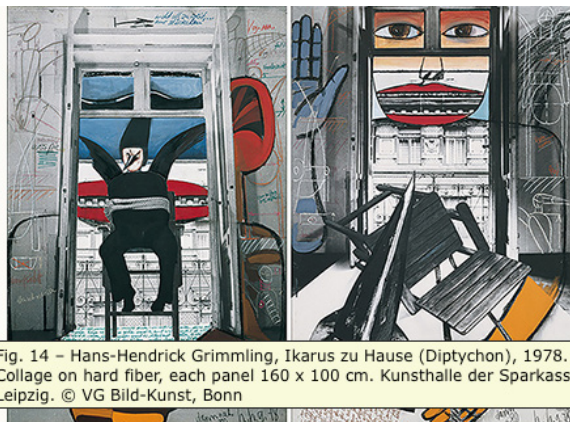


Fig. 14 – Hans-Hendrick Grimmling, *Ikarus zu Hause* (Diptychon), 1978. Collage on hard fiber, each panel 160 x 100 cm. Kunsthalle der Sparkasse Leipzig. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

was a major theme in the 1970s and 1980s, enabling artists to comment on current events through allegorical figures such as Sisyphus, Penthesilea, and especially Icarus, who appeared in more than sixty works in these years (Arlt 116). In Hans-Hendrick Grimmling’s diptych, *Ikarus zu Hause* (Icarus at Home, 1978) [Fig. 14], Icarus appears as a bird-like figure bound to a chair in the left-hand panel, whereas in the right-hand panel he is gone: only the upturned chair and bird mask remain, presumably having been swatted down by the hand of the giant face that hovers outside the window. It is a work that perhaps reflects the artist’s frustration at trying to make a name for himself as a young artist at the time.

A third room was devoted to women artists. Titled, “Old Adam, New Eve,” it contained work by a number of import-

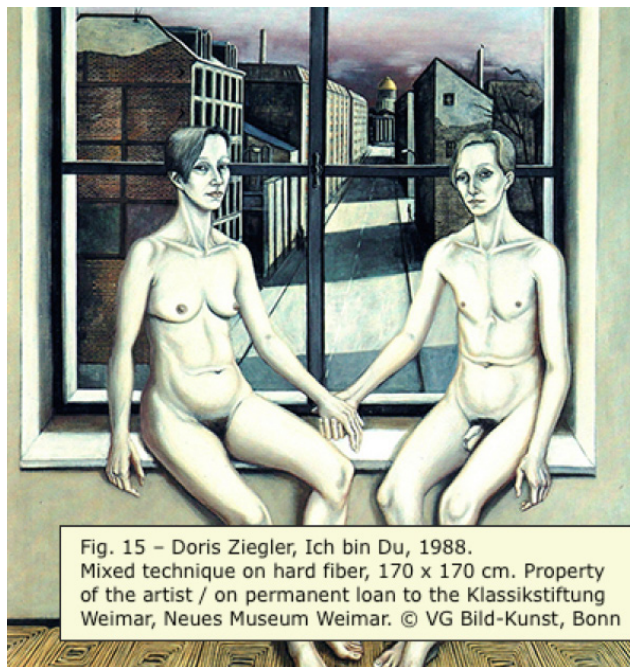


Fig. 15 – Doris Ziegler, *Ich bin Du*, 1988. Mixed technique on hard fiber, 170 x 170 cm. Property of the artist / on permanent loan to the Klassikstiftung Weimar, Neues Museum Weimar. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

ant painters, including Angela Hampel, Nuria Quevedo, and Doris Ziegler. Many of the paintings, such as Ziegler’s *Ich bin Du* (I am You, 1988) [Fig. 15] and Hampel’s *Angela und Angelus I-IV* (1986), were self-portraits. This exhibition marks the first time that so many important female painters were included in a major exhibition of East German art after unification. The room also included alternative artists such as Annemirl Bauer and Gabriele Stötzer, artists whose work was hardly recognized during the Cold War period.

A fourth room, “Outbreak and Disintegration: the 1980s” [Fig. 16], focused on large-scale works of painting and installation created in the final decade of the Cold War, including large, expressionist paintings by Wolfram Adalbert Scheffler [Fig. 16, left] and Cornelia Schleime [Fig. 16, middle].²² As in the room “Old Adam, New Eve,” some of these artists had been exhibited in major exhibitions in East Germany, while others had had a much smaller audience. The exhibition did not distinguish between those artists who were well known and those who were not.

Abschied von Ikarus successfully expanded the view of East German art to include artwork from both the canon and the alternative scene, two art worlds hitherto generally treated separately in exhibitions.²³ Indeed, the inclusion of Socialist Realist, modernist, and alternative art together in one space was the exhibition’s real achievement, offering a never-before-seen breadth of art created in East Germany. *Abschied von Ikarus* therefore contained great potential for offering insight into the complexity of artistic production in East Germany. In many ways the first floor fulfilled this promise in its chronological presentation of Soviet-inspired Socialist Realist works next to the Bauhaus-inspired art at the Weimar Academy and the modernist art and artists—some well-known in official circles, some not—around the Galerie Henning in Halle. These rooms added important new dimensions to the narrative around East German art, especially in the 1950s. The second floor, however, did not; organized thematically, it offered little guidance for how to understand the works in relation to the larger context in which they were created. Instead, the thematic groupings organized the material through a Western—often negative—

lens that ultimately distorted the material and impeded understanding. The rooms “Melancholy Antiquity” and “Outbreak and Disintegration: The 1980s,” for example, imposed

imperialist present, as intended by the artists. As such, the title of the room deflected attention away from the idea held by many East German artists—as well as politicians—of “art as a weapon” in the fight against war and fascism.²⁵

The exhibition—and especially the catalogue—privileged a Western perspective in a number of other ways as well, most notably in its underrepresentation of women artists. Although *Abschied von Ikarus* included more women painters from the 1970s and 1980s than many of its predecessor exhibitions in the West, the percentage of women was nonetheless far lower in comparison to the realities of the East German art world. Of ninety-six artists in the exhibition, only nine were women, a ratio of less than one in ten, which erroneously suggests that art is primarily a masculine endeavor. This small proportion stands in sharp contrast to the actual East German art world where, as of the 1980s, women comprised

percent of the artists included in that exhibition since the 1950s (Eisman, “Economic” 177). *Abschied von Ikarus*’s low percentage reflected Western expectations for women’s participation more than Eastern reality. Not only did *Abschied von Ikarus* include far fewer women, their art, with only a few exceptions, was confined to just one room—and not one of the larger ones—which effectively ghettoized them within the exhibition. While grouping women together is common in the West, it was virtually unheard of in the East. The suggestion was thus that women’s participation in the East German art world was as low as it was—and continues to be—in the West.²⁷

Another way the exhibition distorted East German art was through an overemphasis on the alternative scene. This appears noticeably in the designation of most of the corner rooms to alternative art and artists, including the Bauhaus in Weimar, Hermann Glöckner, Carlfriedrich Claus, Lutz Dammbeck, and Klaus Hähner-Springmühl.²⁸ No official artist received similar treatment. The exhibition thus obscured the difference between well-known works and those that had a limited audience within the GDR. Indeed, it often inverted the two. The result was an exhibition that showed that a lot of art had been created in East Germany and in a wide variety of styles and media, but offered little indication as to which works were important and to whom, be it the official art scene, artistic subgroups, or the curators who had put the exhibition together.²⁹

Another significant distortion was the negative tone of the exhibition, which appeared most prominently in its presentist insistence on the GDR’s failure and, with it, the loss of



Fig. 16 – “Outbreak and Disintegration,” room in *Abschied von Ikarus*, 2013

a negative framework on the works shown as evidenced by the terms melancholy and disintegration.²⁴ “The Apotheosis of Horror,” on the other hand, framed the works as a spectacle of violence rather than a critique of the Nazi past or

more than 33 percent of the artists in the national Union of Visual Artists and more than 20 percent of artists included in the national art exhibitions in Dresden (Zentrum 12; Müller, Appendix 1).²⁶ Indeed, women had been above 15

Fig. 17 – Bernhard Kretzschmar, *Blick auf Eisenhüttenstadt*, 1955. Oil on canvas, 105 x 160 cm. Museum Junge Kunst Frankfurt (Oder). © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

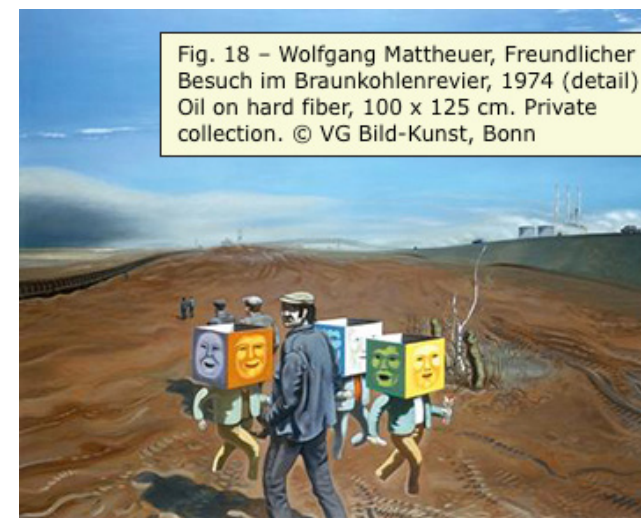


the utopia East Germany had promised, rather than scholarly engagement with the art and art system in which it was created. The exhibition's tendentious nature is evident from its title, "Farewell to Icarus," which refers to a mythological figure who came to symbolize the ideals of the GDR in many artists' work in the 1970s and 1980s; Icarus also symbolized the artists themselves and the struggles they faced in trying to realize these ideals. To say farewell to Icarus is thus to say goodbye not just to the GDR, but also to its art and artists as well as its hope for a better future. The emphasis on East Germany's failure also appeared in the first room of the ex-

hibition, which contained a wall text and two paintings, Bernhard Kretzschmar's *Blick auf Eisenhüttenstadt* (1955) [Fig. 17] and Wolfgang Mattheuer's *Freundlicher Besuch im Braunkohlenrevier* (Friendly Visit to the Lignite Region, 1974) [Fig. 18]. Kretzschmar's early painting captures a high point in East German construction: the completion of an entire city built from scratch, the smoke in the background a sign of productivity rather than pollution. Mattheuer's painting from nearly twenty years later, in comparison, depicts a landscape of dirt with a power plant in the distance ringed in clouds or smog. The suggestion is that the ideals of the earlier work have resulted in the seemingly destroyed landscape of the latter one. Similarly, both images show figures in the foreground. Yet whereas in Kretzschmar's paintings, the many tiny people are enjoying a beautiful day—there is a dog on a leash, a couple having a picnic, and many bikes—the latter shows a figure, perhaps heading off to work, while others, their heads concealed in boxes with smiling faces painted on the sides, head the other way. The juxtaposition of these two paintings thus not only suggests that the early hopes and dreams have resulted in environmental degrada-

tion but also the need for people in the GDR to mask their true thoughts and feelings. In other words, it suggests that the GDR was doomed to fail, and it is this idea of failure, coming as it does in the very first room, that sets the stage for the rest of the exhibition despite the fact that the artists themselves were unaware of this outcome and were not engaging with it in their work. To emphasize East Germany's failure thus not only misrepresents the artworks shown, it also subtly undermines their importance since it frames the works as the artistic creations of a failed state. Like the title of the exhibition, this emphasis on failure suggests that these works belong to the "dustbin of history," a common refrain in what historian Sandrine Kott and others have identified as a totalitarian approach to East German studies, an approach that was prevalent in Germany in the 1990s but has since been widely criticized (Cohen; Kott).³⁰

Fig. 18 – Wolfgang Mattheuer, *Freundlicher Besuch im Braunkohlenrevier*, 1974 (detail). Oil on hard fiber, 100 x 125 cm. Private collection. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn



The negative tone of the exhibition is most explicit, however, in the exhibition's catalogue. A quick glance at the articles' titles reveals words and phrases such as impossibility, fatigue, coercion, melancholy, a Pyrrhus victory, dictated standards, ugly, apotheosis of terror, apocalypse and redemption, demise and horror, resistant painting, and escape (Rehberg, et al. 4-5). East Germany is presented as a place whose reality was "infiltrated" by melancholy, which was perhaps a "premonition of the failure of the 'great Project'" (61). Elsewhere it is compared to George Orwell's dystopian novel, *1984* (51). Even when authors acknowledge that some people chose to live in the GDR, the examples suggest it was a bad choice: the journalist Rudolf Herrnstadt—who moved to the East and made his career in the SED but was later forced to resign and was essentially banned to a small town after a clash with Ulbricht—is compared to Helmut Kindler, a journalist who moved to the West and became one of West Germany's most successful publishers (51-52).

The negative tone also appears in the catalogue's emphasis on repression, which is particularly evident in how it portrays Hermann Glöckner, a Dresden artist who is best known today for his many Constructivist paintings and sculptures. The catalogue states that Glöckner first "broke through the cultural political ice" of the art world in 1984 at the age of 95 (160). In this year, he completed a major sculpture in Dresden and received the GDR's national Art Prize. According to the catalog, this marked the end of a "period of [...] official ignorance and humiliating limits" on the artist (160). Not only is the language loaded, but the information is false. Glöckner exhibited work in East and West Germany throughout the 1950s, created numerous works

of architectural art through the end of the 1960s, and had his breakthrough in 1969 when he was given a major solo exhibition at the Kupferstichkabinet in Dresden that included more than 150 works. Thereafter, he regularly exhibited work in local and national exhibitions in Dresden and was the focus of numerous articles, several catalogues, and a book. Indeed, the major sculpture mentioned in the catalogue was a multi-year commission given to him in the mid-1970s that cost upwards of 45,000 Marks to create and install (BfaK-D). Yet the *Abschied von Ikarus* exhibition and catalogue maintained the fiction that Glöckner was a repressed artist who received recognition in the GDR only a few years before his death. While Glöckner did not share the level of fame of the Leipzig School of artists, he was a well-known and well-respected artist in East Germany throughout the Honecker era.³¹ To suggest otherwise is to rewrite East German art along Western expectations of repression. Such rewriting not only distorts the realities of the East German art world, but also deprives artists of their agency and artworks of their meaning. The emphasis throughout the catalogue is thus more on judging East Germany than on understanding the art and the artistic context in which it was created. As historian Andrew Port has noted about some German scholarship on the GDR more generally, the catalogue is an example of "history as comfort food for those most interested in moralistic posturing" (Port 14). Rather than ask questions that further our understanding of East Germany, the catalogue falls back on banalities: the GDR as a repressive, totalitarian state, as a footnote of history.

When examined within the larger context of East German art's reception in the West, *Abschied von Ikarus* exemplifies

the second of what I have identified as four main approaches to East German art. The first, often found in English-language scholarship but also in the *Bilderstreit* of the long 1990s, is the idea that there was no art in East Germany or, at least, no art of value to the West, be it aesthetically (e.g. kitsch, *Auftragskunst*) or because of the artists' political beliefs (*Staatskünstler*). The second approach acknowledges that art was created in East Germany, but limits these works to so-called dissident or alternative artists or to those who were oppressed by the system. This can be seen in the *Abschied von Ikarus* exhibition in its overemphasis on the alternative scene, which was highlighted in the corner rooms, and in its rewriting of artists such as Hermann Glöckner. The third approach, which I have not engaged with in this article, acknowledges that even the so-called *Staatskünstler* created art but attempts to separate these artists from the East German state, most often by overemphasizing problems they may have had and ignoring or downplaying any positive connections. This approach can be seen, for example, in the 2005 exhibition, *Bernhard Heisig: Wut der Bilder* (see Eisman, "Denying Difference"). The fourth level is the one I am advocating for here: an engagement with East German art on its own terms. This approach sets aside moral judgments in an attempt to understand the art created—and the artists who created it—in relationship to the East German context in which it was produced. I am arguing, in essence, that art history follow the lead of East German studies more generally and move away from a totalitarian model of engagement in favor of a more nuanced approach (Kott; Port).

Abschied von Ikarus was the last major retrospective exhibition of East German art to take place in Germany. Its size

and claim to be the final word in the *Bilderstreit* will presumably make it the last for many years to come.³² Problematic as it was, it marks the current state of East German art's reception in Germany today and shows how the *Bilderstreit* is over not because it has been successfully resolved but rather because time has made East German art less of a threat to the now not-so-newly unified nation. Even an exhibition in a major art museum is not going to lead to a rewriting of the postwar German canon more than twenty years after unification. Similarly, the negative aspects of the exhibition were more subtle than in the 1990s and, more importantly, were most evident in the catalogue, a massive tome that overwhelms with its size and thus ensures that few of the exhibition visitors will do more than flip through it. As for East German scholars who might voice criticisms, they have largely disappeared in the new millennium, be it from exhaustion, resignation, or death.³³

Conclusion

For art historians, East Germany offers an unparalleled opportunity to study the impact of politics on art. Until 1945, what would become East Germany and West Germany was the same country with the same (art) history. How art developed thereafter is directly related to the super power in charge and, more specifically, the capitalist or communist ideology applied. Having developed largely outside of a market system, East Germany offers art historians an "alternative modernism," one in which artists did not need to reject the threat of commodity culture as so many artists in the West did. Indeed, a rejection of the commodification of art

is partly what spurred the development of conceptual and performance art in the West. As such, East Germany offers an alternative perspective from which to view the development of Western art. In fact, East German art reveals the neoliberal underpinnings of postwar Western art with the latter's emphasis on the individual, the postmodern play of the signifier, and diversity at the cost of challenging inequality (Michaels). One might even argue that East German art's focus on the people and on challenging inequality is an old-school correlative to the activist Social Practice artists who have emerged in recent years—artists whose desire for social engagement has been theorized most famously by the French curator and art critic Nicolas Borriaud in his 1998 book, *Relational Aesthetics*.

A nuanced view of East German art can also offer new insights for German Studies scholars. First, art was an important part of East German culture. Like writers, visual artists were expected to play a major role in helping to form the new socialist identity. Initially this meant creating heroic images of workers and communist leaders as alternative role models to help educate the German people after twelve years of Nazi propaganda. Later it meant creating complex works that engaged the audience in discussions with artists and each other about a variety of issues. Like literature, art became an alternative public sphere (Bathrick). As part of the intellectual elite who helped to create the very fabric of the society in which they lived, artists shared many of the same social responsibilities as writers and filmmakers, both of whom are better known in Anglophone scholarship. East German art is thus not only important in its own right but also in terms of comparisons with these other fields. Like lit-

erature, art offered opportunities for discussion through its subject matter, but unlike writers, artists needed some level of official recognition for their work to be seen. Large paintings could not be surreptitiously shared or smuggled across the border (Pachnicke and Merkert 7-8). But like writers, artists could work alone and create whatever they wanted, something those in the film industry could not do owing to the greater number of people involved and the larger monetary investment. In addition to differentiating the conditions of creativity among the cultural elites, it would also be valuable to compare the freezes and thaws in cultural policy: did they happen at the same time and to the same extent across the various fields? Anecdotal evidence suggests not. So what can this tell us?

A study of the visual arts is also important because of the crossover that existed between fields. Visual artists were deeply engaged with the literature of their country, and texts by authors from Brecht to Christa Wolf were frequently referred to if not illustrated outright in their work. Indeed, the Leipzig Academy was known for its literary approach to painting, an approach encouraged by the city's many publishers and book fairs, and many of the artists who studied or taught there also created literary prints throughout their careers. Artists and writers also knew each other and some were friends. Christa Wolf's circle, for example, included both Nuria Quevedo and Angela Hampel, both of whom created numerous works inspired by her novels. Indeed, there is a tremendous amount to be learned about the literature of East Germany as seen through the eyes of East German artists, and presumably that influence moved in both directions. Moreover, artists and writers also some-

times worked together on projects. In 1975, for example, the Mitteldeutscher Verlag in Halle published a nearly 300-page oversize book titled *Chile: Gesang und Bericht* (Chile: Song and Report). It was created through a joint effort of writers and artists—including Volker Braun and Anna Seghers as well as Heisig, Sitte, and Tübke—in response to the 1973 putsch in Chile. There was also crossover between the visual arts and film. The filmmaker Jürgen Böttcher, for example, worked early on as a painter in Dresden under the name Strawalde. There were also many artists who engaged with the Super-8 film medium in the 1980s. To what extent were these latter artists informed by or perhaps even informing DEFA filmmakers?

Such comparisons across media cannot take place in a context in which East German art is presumed to be little more than political propaganda or kitsch. Yet this is the view that continues to dominate Anglophone scholarship, one that was evident in the Los Angeles County Museum's 2009 exhibition, *Art of Two Germanys / Cold War Cultures*, the first—and to date only—major American exhibition of postwar German art to include East German works.³⁴ Rather than show the diversity of what existed, however, the exhibition continued Cold War stereotypes: East German art was Soviet-inspired Socialist Realism, modern artists were repressed, and the only good art was that created by so-called dissidents or expats. The Leipzig School—indeed, the great variety of artistic styles evident throughout East Germany after the 1950s—was almost entirely absent from the exhibition, as was any discussion of the *Bilderstreit* (Eisman, “Review” 628-30). Significantly, one of the curators was from western Germany, which perhaps explains why this exhibition

so closely reflected the western rewriting of East German art that was attempted in Germany in the 1990s. Whereas Germany contained sixteen million people who knew better, some of whom spoke out, the United States did not. Significantly, the LACMA exhibition then traveled to two locations in Germany as *Kunst und Kalter Krieg* (Art and Cold War), where it was praised as an American view on the topic of postwar German art (Poschardt).

Since 1990, East German art has been rewritten to fulfill Western expectations. This rewriting not only negatively affects our understanding of East Germany, but it also deprives us of a perspective from which to better understand the world in which we live today and the choices made in the West after 1945—whether about art, women's rights, or democracy more generally. Understanding East Germany on its own terms offers an unparalleled opportunity to understand how politics affects art—by comparing it to West Germany—and a valuable resource from which to search for alternatives to the neoliberal present in which we find ourselves as well as a cautionary tale for how a good idea can fail. East Germany's value in this regard has only increased in recent years as an entire generation of adults—all born after the end of the Cold War—shows that it is no longer willing to accept the decades-long taboo against socialism nor the claim that neoliberal capitalism is our only option.

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Image Notes

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Fig. 1 – Otto Nagel, *Junger Maurer von der Stalinalle*, 1953. Oil on canvas, 116 x 79.5 cm. Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin.

Fig. 2 – Willi Sitte, *Raub der Sabinerinnen*, 1953. Oil on hard fiber, 126.5 x 165 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Nationalgalerie.

Fig. 3 – Steffen Fischer and Angela Hampel, *Offene Zweierbeziehung*, 1989. Mixed media. Property of the artists.

Fig. 4 – Heinrich Witz, *Der neue Anfang*, 1959. Oil, 95 x 120 cm. Kunstsammlung der Wismut GmbH Chemnitz.

Fig. 5 – Bernhard Heisig, *Zirkel junge Naturforscher*, 1952. Oil on Canvas. 120 x 190 cm. Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig.

Fig. 6 – Bernhard Heisig, *Der Weihnachtstraum des unbelehrbaren Soldaten*, 1964. Oil. Destroyed through overpainting.

Fig. 7 – Hans Grundig, *Opfer des Faschismus*, 1946. Oil on hard fiber, 110 x 200 cm. Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig.

Fig. 8 – Peter Graf, *Selbstbildnis mit Papagei*, 1971. Oil on hard fiber, diameter 41 cm. Galerie Neue Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden.

Fig. 9 – Clemens Groszer, *Café Liolet*, 1986. Mixed collage on canvas, 140 x 120 cm. Brandenburgische Kunstsammlungen Cottbus, Museum für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Fotografie und Plakat.

Fig. 10 – Willy Wolff, *Lenin zum 100. Geburtstag*, 1970. Oil on hard fiber, 116 x 95.5 cm. Pan Wolff.

Fig. 11 – Wall of Socialist Realism in *Abschied von Ikarus*.

Fig. 12 – Volker Stelzmann, *Junger Schweißer*, 1971. Mixed media on hard fiber, 121 x 76 cm. Kunsthalle Rostock.

Fig. 13 – Hartwig Ebersbach, *Widmung an Chile*, 1974. Oil on hard fiber, 12 panels: 6 panels 200 x 60 cm, 6 panels 120 x 60 cm. Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen.

Fig. 14 – Hans-Hendrick Grimmling, *Ikarus zu Hause (Diptychon)*, 1978. Collage on hard fiber, each panel 160 x 100 cm. Kunsthalle der Sparkasse Leipzig.

Fig. 15 – Doris Ziegler, *Ich bin Du*, 1988. Mixed technique on hard fiber, 170 x 170 cm. Property of the artist / on permanent loan to the Klassikstiftung Weimar, Neues Museum Weimar.

Fig. 16 (cover image) – “Outbreak and Disintegration,” room in *Abschied von Ikarus*.

Fig. 17 – Bernhard Kretzschmar, *Blick auf Eisenhüttenstadt*, 1955. Oil on canvas, 105 x 160 cm. Museum Junge Kunst Frankfurt (Oder).

Fig. 18 – Wolfgang Matheuer, *Freundlicher Besuch im Braunkohlenrevier*, 1974. Oil on hard fiber, 100 x 125 cm. Private collection.

Endnotes

1 This article started as a conference paper about the *Bilderstreit* at a German Studies Association panel in 2005; it was expanded for a conference at Northwestern University in 2009 and again for a conference at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2016. I would like to thank Grant Arndt, Katrin Bahr, Stephen Brockmann, Michael Dreyer, Candice Hamelin, Paula Hanssen, Seth Howes, June Hwang, Franziska Lys, Gisela Schirmer, Marc Silberman, and two anonymous readers for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this manuscript.

2 For a recent example of this in literature, see Brockmann.

3 Recent examples include Rubin; Creech; and Jampol.

4 Although the New Leipzig School has connections to East Germany, most notably through Neo Rauch, it is a post-unification phenomenon. In Germany, the connections between the New Leipzig School and the “old” Leipzig School are well known; in England and the United States, where there is little knowledge of the “old” Leipzig School or modern art in East Germany more generally, the New Leipzig School is often presented in triumphalist terms

that assumes these artists had little contact with modern art before 1989/90. For more on this, see Eisman, "Painting."

5 One of the difficulties in recognizing the absence of painting from current scholarship is the tendency to use "art" as a general term for the arts. A recent example is Jampol's tome, *Beyond the Wall, Art and Artifacts from the GDR*. Although a welcome addition to East German studies, it focuses on design and everyday life in the GDR. Of its 900 pages only 13 focus on art, and all of them focus on so-called dissident artists ("Dissident Art" 244-45). Moreover, none of the works shown are paintings, which was East Germany's most important visual arts medium. Although the book is limited to the Wende Museum collection, one has to wonder why "art" was included in the title. Even Kelly and Wlodarski's edited volume, *Art Outside the Lines: New Perspectives on GDR Art Culture*, which contains the largest number of texts on art to date in an English-language book, dedicates more than half of its chapters to film, literature, and especially music.

6 For a recent discussion of some of the problems with scholarship on East Germany, see Port. There are many examples of good scholarship on East German art in German, most frequently as monographs. See Damus; Goeschen; Lang, *Malerei und Grafik*; and Schirmer, *DDR und documenta*. Unfortunately, these works are often less known by non-specialists and those working outside of Germany than texts written for major exhibition catalogues. By their very nature, major exhibition catalogues on this topic are problematic: they are often written by non-specialists under time constraints and the exhibitions themselves, which require significant external funding, generally do not assume a critical stance toward western assumptions. On the political limitations of con-

temporary art exhibitions, see Stallabrass; on Western assumptions toward East Germany, see Parkes; and Ahbe.

7 For a case study of German scholarship before and after unification, see Eisman, "Denying Difference." The reasons for art's elision in comparison to other media are multiple. For one, the visual arts were a weapon in Cold War politics. Abstraction, particularly Abstract Expressionism, were exported as evidence of the United States' new cultural power and as a visual correlative to democratic freedom. See Barnhisel; Hermand; Guilbaut; and Saunders. Another reason that the visual arts, particularly painting, has been overlooked in the West is the difficulty in seeing originals. Whereas literature, music, and film can cross borders relatively easily, paintings cannot. Even today, the expense of shipping and insurance prevents any but the largest of institutions in the U.S. from mounting an exhibition of East German art. A third factor in why art has been overlooked in comparison to literature, film, and material culture is institutional. In the 1970s and 1980s, German departments in the United States focused on literature. Bertolt Brecht and his legacy in East Germany was an important area of study; another, inspired by the increasing importance of feminism in academia, was of East German authors such as Christa Wolf (see Silberman). Serious studies of East German film, in comparison, first emerged in the 1990s, encouraged by Barton Byg, who founded the DEFA Film Library in Amherst, Massachusetts. This institution has been instrumental in making these films available to English-speaking audiences through subtitles and in bringing scholars together in summer workshops and regular panels at the annual conferences of the German Studies Association. Similarly, the recent interest in East German material culture has been encouraged by Justinian Jampol's Wende Museum, founded near Los Angeles, California, in 2002.

8 Some of these artists were engaging with Picasso's work well before the cultural relaxation of the mid-1950s, which then enabled them to do so openly. Sitté's experiments with Picasso's style, for example, can be seen already in work from 1950 (see Schirmer, *Willi Sitté*).

9 Freezes and thaws in the visual arts were often related to political events. The formalism debates (1948-51) marked a freeze in the face of increasing Cold War tensions. The workers' uprising in 1953, in comparison, resulted in a thaw as East German authorities attempted to gain support from artist intellectuals. The building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 similarly resulted in a thaw after the freeze that followed the Hungarian uprising in 1956. When Erich Honecker came to power in 1971, a lasting thaw set in for those artists who were committed to socialism and worked in a traditional medium like painting. For overviews of East German art history, see Damus; Lang, *Malerei und Grafik*.

10 Individual artists had had exhibitions in West Germany before 1977, but *documenta 6* marked the emergence of "East German Art" as its own category.

11 Major West German exhibitions of East German art include *Zeitvergleich: Malerei und Grafik aus der DDR* (Hamburg 1982); *Durchblick*, Ludwig-Institut für Kunst der DDR (Oberhausen 1984); *DDR heute, Malerei / Graphik / Plastik* (Worpswede 1984); and *Menschenbilder, Kunst aus der DDR* (Bonn 1986).

12 For more information about these clashes, see Eisman, "In the Crucible."

13 Hartwig Ebersbach, *Letter to the Press* (11 February 1998). “es geht gar nicht um eine inhaltliche Auseinandersetzung mit Werk und Leben, sondern es werde lediglich ein Klischee bedient: Heisig, das ist der DDR.”

14 Similar accusations arose in the literary controversy around Christa Wolf. It should be noted, however, that not everyone who remained in East Germany believed in the system or was trying to change it.

15 Many of these artists and cultural figures were born in the late 1940s and early 1950s and thus belong to what Mary Fulbrook calls the First FDJ Generation. This generation played a disproportionate role in bringing about the end of the GDR, but they were also the greatest losers after unification: too young to retire, they often faced unemployment and other hardships such as the loss of affordable childcare. The “State Artists,” in comparison, were able to retire and faced fewer challenges (Fulbrook 213-14).

16 Dambeck’s tendentious movie, *Dürers Erbe*, castigates Leipzig School artists such as Heisig, Tübke, and Mattheuer for their connection to the East German government, but his story ends around 1961, i.e., before these artists developed the modern styles for which they are known and before their confrontations with the government began.

17 Discussion between Hans Hendrick-Grimmling and the author, 2005.

18 Recent examples of texts engaging with these artists’ West German past include Lang, “Expressionism”; Nugent.

19 Discussion between Roland März and the author, summer 2003. The western works were not limited to West Germany.

20 The fourteen districts were Cottbus, Dresden, Erfurt, Frankfurt (Oder), Gera, Halle, Karl Marx Stadt, Leipzig, Magdeburg, Neubrandenburg, Potsdam, Rostock, Schwerin, and Suhl. (East) Berlin later became a fifteenth district.

21 This motivation became clear to me after several discussions with Roland März and others in 2003, when I worked as a volunteer (*Praktikantin*) on the *Kunst in der DDR* exhibition held that year at the Neue Nationalgalerie.

22 The second floor had a total of ten rooms. In addition to the four already mentioned were: Technocratic Utopia, Everyday Struggles (“Mühen der Ebene”), Children of the Night, and three corner rooms that each focused on an individual artist (Carlfriedrich Claus, Lutz Dambeck, and Klaus Hähner-Springmühl).

23 For an example of a major exhibition on the alternative scene, see Kaiser and Petzold.

24 This negative framing can also be seen in the title of another room, “Everyday Struggles” (“Mühen der Ebene”), which focused on images of work and everyday life. The title refers to a 1949 poem by Bertolt Brecht, “Wahrnehmung” (Observation), that speaks of the “everyday struggles” of the postwar period after the “mountainous struggles” (“Mühen der Gebirge”) against the Third Reich. In the context of the poem, everyday struggles are preferable; for those unfamiliar with the poem, however, the title suggests a negative interpretation of the everyday. Moreover, one has to wonder

why the curators did not use “Mountainous Struggles” as a title instead of “Apotheosis of Horror” for the neighboring room.

25 In East Germany, works such as those shown in the “Apotheosis of Horror” room were often shown with titles such as “Art as a Weapon” (1960), “Art in the Fight against Fascism (1975), “The Horrors of War” (1983), “Artists against Fascism and War” (1985), or “Antifascist Art in the GDR” (1988).

26 According to the Zentrum für Kulturforschung in Bonn, women were approximately 36 percent of the VBK membership in 1989/90 (12). According to Müller, women were 28 percent of the VBK membership in 1983 (Appendix 1, Table 4).

27 See East London Fawcett’s (ELF) *Art Audit, 2012-13* and *Brainstormers*, Accessed 6 September 2016.

28 Although one might be tempted to read the corner rooms as a reference to the margins of official East German art history, in the exhibition space, these rooms functioned to highlight the artists chosen.

29 This blurring of boundaries can be seen in the 2016 exhibition, *Gegenstimmen: Kunst in der DDR, 1976-1989*, at the Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin, which included artwork shown at the prestigious “Art Exhibitions of the GDR” next to work by artists who had received little or no recognition in the GDR; it did not distinguish between them. Indeed, the curator suggested at a symposium in September 2016 that all the artists included were part of a largely overlooked alternative scene that needed its due.

30 This idea of the “dustbin of art history” fits with a larger discussion within East German studies about whether the GDR was a mere “footnote of world history,” as Stefan Heym stated after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Port).

31 For the 100th anniversary of Glöckner’s birth in January 1989, two years after he died, there were two exhibitions in his honour: *Hermann Glöckner zum 100. Geburtstag* in Dresden and Halle and *Homage à Hermann Glöckner* at the Galerie am Sachsenplatz in Leipzig. The latter included work by more than 70 East German artists.

32 There have been many more exhibitions of East German art than those discussed in this paper, which focuses only on major retrospective exhibitions with a resonance that extends beyond Germany. Many of the most illuminating exhibitions on East German art, in comparison, take place in smaller settings or less prominent locations and therefore do not reach an international audience. The Museum Junge Kunst in Frankfurt/Oder and the Kunst Museum Dieselkraftwerk in Cottbus (both located in eastern Germany) both regularly organize meaningful exhibitions on East German art. It will be interesting to see what, if any, impact the Museum Barberini in Potsdam—which opened in January 2017 with works from Hasso Plattner’s collection—will have on scholarship about East German art. It organized a symposium in April 2017 in preparation for an exhibition on East German art scheduled to open in

Fall 2017, *Hinter der Maske: Künstler in der DDR*. Significantly, the museum is the result of a private initiative, a western German businessman not unlike Peter Ludwig, whose own important collection of East German art is now on long-term loan at the Museum of Art in Leipzig.

33 A quick look at the authors included in an extensive book about the *Bilderstreit* published in Germany in 2013 is revealing in terms of who writes about East German art today. Of the sixteen authors who contributed texts to the volume edited by Karl-Siegbert Rehberg and Paul Kaiser, only five were from East Germany, and two of these were just teenagers when the Wall fell. The majority of the texts—eleven of sixteen—were written by people who lived in the West (all but one from West Germany), the youngest of whom was approximately 34 when the Wall fell. This is a striking imbalance that favors a western perspective. It should also be pointed out that of the sixteen authors, only four are women.

34 There have been a handful of exhibitions in the United States such as *Twelve Artists of the GDR* at the Busch Reisinger Museum in 1989 and *New Territory, Art from East Germany* at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in 1990. Although important, these exhibitions were small and directed at a specialist audience. Moreover, framed solely in terms of East German art, they did not directly challenge the dominant narrative of postwar German art as a solely West German production.