

# East German Art and Cultural Politics: An Introduction

*Kawade*

By April A. Eisman

***On October 7, 1949, the Soviet Zone of Occupation in post-war Germany became the German Democratic Republic (GDR, or East Germany). From the beginning, art played an important role in East Germany, where it was viewed as a vital element in the development of the 'all-around socialist personality.' Artists were expected to create art that addressed the people, while the people were expected to be interested in art and to explore their creative side. The form that this art was to take, however, was a source of frequent debate over the forty-year history of the GDR, and especially in the first two decades of the country's existence. Although many communist artists had embraced modernism during the Weimar Republic and were persecuted by the Nazis for both their political and aesthetic beliefs, the East German leadership often had difficulty accepting modernist styles in these early years, in part because of the Soviet Union's emphasis on a conservative style of socialist realism. Seeing similarities between the Soviets' artistic style—one marked by optimism, monumentalism and a straightforward realism—and that of the Nazis, many East German artists, on the other hand, challenged its suitability for the GDR. The result was a cultural policy marked by freezes and thaws depending on whose views—politicians' or artists'—had the upper hand.***

The history of East German art begins before the founding of the German Democratic Republic in 1949 with early postwar paintings by artists such as Wilhelm Lachnit (1899-1962) and Hans Grundig (1902-1958). These early works tended to emphasize the hardships of postwar life and, especially, the suffering of communists at the hands of the Nazis. In 1945, for example, Lachnit, who lost most of his oeuvre in the bombing of Dresden, created a small painting titled, *Der Tod von Dresden* (*Death in Dresden*, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Galerie Neue Meister), which became a key work in the canon of pre-East German art, where it functioned as a reminder of the destruction the Germans had brought upon themselves. It shows a woman and child amidst the glowing-red wreckage of the city, head in hands, she slumps over her little boy, who leans against her and looks out at us forlornly. Behind them, a skeleton under a yellow blanket mimics her pose, as if death itself is overwhelmed by the loss of life. A year later, Grundig created a similar work of loss that acquired an even higher place in the Eastern canon, *Victims of Fascism* (1946, *Opfer des Faschismus*, Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig). This painting depicts two prisoners laid to rest in the assembly grounds of Sachsenhausen concentration camp. The red blanket around one, and the red triangle on the other, identify them as communist prisoners. The shape of the painting—long and narrow, like a predella panel on a triptych, which usually depicts Christ laid out after his Crucifixion—suggests that they, like Christ, suffered and died for the sins of the people and would rise again. The implication is that the victims of Nazism, especially anti-fascist communists, had earned the right to rule in the wake of the Third Reich.

Both Lachnit and Grundig went on to become important figures in the East German art world, playing key roles in early postwar Dresden. In East Germany, only four cities had a major art academy: Berlin, Dresden, Leipzig and Halle.<sup>1</sup> Each school was assigned a different pedagogical emphasis based on its history. Halle focused on applied art, as a result of its location near Dessau, a former home of the Bauhaus. Leipzig, a traditional center for bookmaking, focused on graphic arts. The art academies in Berlin and Dresden both focused on painting. Nicknamed the "Florence on the Elbe," Dresden had been a center for painting since the 18<sup>th</sup> century—with artists ranging from Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938) and Otto Dix (1891-1969), to Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840)—and had outstanding art collections dating from the renaissance to the 20th cen-

<sup>1</sup> A fifth major art academy in Weimar closed in 1951.

ture. Grundig was the first postwar director of the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts, where until 1954 Lachnit was an important teacher, including of Jürgen Böttcher (b. 1931), who paints under the pseudonym Strawalde.

To become a professional artist in East Germany after the mid-1950s generally required studying at one of the four art academies. The course of study lasted five years and emphasized concrete skills, such as drawing, perspective and color theory; students also had to take courses in art history and Marxism-Leninism. Upon fulfilling the requirements for graduation, which included putting on a small exhibition of recent work and writing a thesis, most students joined the Association of Visual Artists (the VBK). This allowed them to be practicing artists in East Germany, where some worked as freelance artists and others became teachers. The low cost of living generally meant that they could survive on the creation of art alone. Membership in the VBK provided artists with social benefits including a pension, as well as access to art materials and commissions.

In addition to the national branch, located in Berlin, the VBK also had local branches in each of the fourteen districts (*Bezirke*) of East Germany. These local branches disseminated national policies and managed local matters, such as commissions and the regional art exhibitions that took place every two to three years. The history of the district and the personalities of those involved resulted in significant differences in how cultural policies were carried out in each region as well as the development of local styles. There was also competition between the regions with regard to national recognition, as some of the works shown at the regional art exhibitions were chosen for the national art exhibition, which took place in Dresden every four to five years. Each chapter of the VBK kept track of how many of its artists were represented. Every four to five years, the VBK also sponsored a conference that brought together artists, art critics and historians, and cultural functionaries from across the country to give papers and discuss cultural policies for the arts.

East German cultural policies pertaining to art were marked by alternating periods of tolerance and repression, often related to political events of one kind or another. In the immediate wake of the Second World War, the artistic atmosphere throughout Germany was marked by an openness to modern art not seen since the Weimar period. At the *Allgemeine Deutsche Kunstausstellung* (General German Art Exhibition) held in 1946—the first of ten major exhibitions of contemporary art held in Dresden—modernist works that would have been pilloried by the Nazis as “degenerate” were the norm, including work by Kirchner and Dix, as well as Max Beckmann (1884-1950), George Grosz (1893-1959), Paul Klee (1879-1940) and Oskar Kokoschka (1886-1980). Lachnit and Grundig also exhibited work in this exhibition.

It was first with the increasing hostilities of the Cold War period that modern art’s role in the East began to be questioned. In October 1948, in the midst of the Berlin Blockade and less than a year before Germany was officially divided into two countries, two articles in *bildende kunst*—East(ern) Germany’s professional art journal—marked the first phase of the “formalism debates.”<sup>2</sup> These articles took opposite stances on the role that art should play in society. In “Art and Politics” (*Kunst und Politik*), Karl Hofer called for artistic freedom, arguing that it is up to the artist to decide on style and content, including whether or not to be political. In “Politics and Art” (*Politik und Kunst*), Oskar Nerlinger argued that no art could be free from politics, even that which claimed to be, and therefore all art, as a public medium, should be accessible to the people. The latter view won out with political leaders; in their view, a realist style was a prerequisite for fulfilling this purpose.

The second phase of the formalism debates took place when N. Orlow published the article “Directions and Misdirections of Modern Art” (*Wege und Irrwege der modernen Kunst*) in the *Tägliche Rundschau* on January 20, 1951. In it, he called for optimism in art, stating that pessimistic works like those by Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) reflected an earlier moment in time, one that predated the victory of communism, and

<sup>2</sup> This journal began as *bildende kunst* and would later become *Bildende Kunst*.

were thus not suitable for East Germany. These two phases of the formalism debate essentially set the stage for official insistence on a conservative form of Socialist Realism, based on Soviet models, that emphasized realism, figuration and optimism, as well as monumentality and heroicism.

Although art of this kind was made throughout the nearly forty-year history of the GDR—and is what most Anglo-Americans associate with socialist realism—it reached its official apex in 1953, at the Third German Art Exhibition in Dresden. In the wake of Stalin's death in March of that year and the Workers' Uprising three months later, East German cultural policy loosened somewhat, in the first of several thaws. Artists began to experiment with modern art, inspired by Italian realists, such as Renato Guttuso (1911-1987), and Mexican muralists, such as Diego Rivera (1886-1957) and David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974). In the mid-1950s, *Bildende Kunst* even ran a series of articles about Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) as a possible role model for East German artists, due to his combination of a modernist aesthetic with communist politics.

It was in these more relaxed years of the "New Course" in the mid-1950s that Jürgen Böttcher, who had graduated from the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts in 1953, started working as a freelance artist in Dresden. That winter, he taught a painting and drawing class at the local adult education center (*Volkshochschule*), becoming friends with several of his students, including Peter Graf (b. 1937), Peter Herrmann (b. 1937), Peter Makolies (b. 1936) and Ralf Winkler (b. 1939, who later became famous in the West as A. R. Penck). Although better known today as a filmmaker than painter, Böttcher set the standard for his students in those years, and together they studied old masters like Giotto and Rembrandt, as well as modern artists like Picasso, whose influence can be seen in several of Böttcher's paintings from this period. In *Mutter mit Kind* (*Mother with Child* 1956, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Galerie Neue Meister), for example, Böttcher—who had begun studying film in Potsdam-Babelsberg the previous year—painted a black woman in a white dress, seated on a wooden chair in a room decorated only by a table, a small painting and a door. The woman wears a white hat and red high-heeled shoes and holds a little girl, presumably her daughter, who wears a yellow dress in a similar style. The colors throughout are muted earth tones; the forms are simplified, with dark outlines emphasizing their flatness; and the thick brushwork of the painting sits on top of the canvas in large, but controlled strokes. Although figurative, this painting rejects the monumentalism and near-photographic realism that had been promoted at the Third German Art Exhibition just a few years earlier.

In the same year, Nikita Khrushchev, the leader of the Soviet Union, delivered his famous speech acknowledging Stalin's crimes at the 20th Party Conference of the USSR. This speech forced a reassessment of the Stalin cult, which had persisted since his death three years earlier. The revisionist discussions that ensued expressed an increasing desire for "Socialism with a human face," one that took a "third path" between Stalinist communism and western capitalism. With the Hungarian Revolution in October and November 1956, such discussions came to an abrupt end, as Khrushchev sent in Soviet tanks to quell the protesters. This crackdown in the political realm was accompanied by a new freeze in the visual arts in East Germany. Modern art, including Expressionism, was rejected. Editor-in-chief Herbert Sandberg, who had allowed the articles about Picasso to be published in *Bildende Kunst*, was removed from his position. Over the next couple of years, art publications and official proclamations emphasized the importance of the Soviet Union and socialist life as models for art. In 1959, another new policy for the arts was implemented. Known as the *Bitterfelder Weg* (Bitterfeld Way), it encouraged artists and writers to go into the factories, where they were expected to get to know the workers, who were to be both the audience for and the focus of their work. Workers, on the other hand, were to learn how to create art themselves, as this was seen as an important element of the well-rounded socialist personality.

In 1959, Heinrich Witz (1924-1997) created a painting titled, *Der neue Anfang* (*The New Beginning*, Art Collection of the Wismut GmbH, on permanent loan to the Haus der Geschichte in Bonn ) in response to the Bitterfeld Way, a painting that seems to demonstrate his interest in and understanding of the workers. It depicts two brigade leaders in suits shaking hands over a table at a festive social gathering. Well-dressed men and women look on from their seats, while champagne bottles and glasses wait for the toast to come. It is an image that stresses worker collegiality, which was promoted in East Germany as a positive alternative to the individualism pursued in the West, as well as the fruits of collaboration. Highly praised by politicians, Witz received a number of prizes in 1960 for this painting, including the City Prize of Leipzig, although he would later be publicly criticized by a number of artists for the poor quality of the work's painterly execution.

Not all attempts to realize the Bitterfeld Way were greeted as positively by politicians (or as negatively by artists). In the same year that Witz created *Der neue Anfang*, Harald Metzkes (b. 1929), an important artist from East Berlin—and one who studied with Lachnit in Dresden around the same time as Böttcher—created a painting titled, *Polytechnischer Unterricht* (1959, lit. Polytechnic Instruction, Galerie Junge Kunst, Frankfurt/Oder). It shows four students working together amidst industrial equipment on a project involving a variety of tools. Although it, too, emphasizes collegiality and, in this case, men and women working together on a project requiring both manual and intellectual skill, it was heavily criticized for its modern style, which is evident in its compressed depiction of space, simplified forms and visible brushwork.

It was in this era, in August 1961, that construction began on the Berlin Wall. Although viewed in the West with almost universal horror and disdain as the symbol of a dictatorship gone too far, the Wall had a more complicated reception in East Germany. Some artists and intellectuals saw it as a necessary evil—the only way to keep East German workers from going to the West, where the pay and material benefits were better—and hoped that the authorities would relax once the threat of the West had been removed. These artists began taking more risks with their work and advocating for an art based on German, rather than Soviet precedents. The result was a multi-year period of confrontation between visual artists and politicians over who had the right to determine artistic policy in East Germany. Such confrontations were not new, as evidenced by the Formalism Debate. What was new was the confidence artists exhibited in claiming the right, as part of the intellectual elite, to determine artistic policy, in large part the result of the “breathing space” they hoped the Wall had opened up.

This newfound confidence also coincided with the emergence of a younger, more experimental generation of artists onto the East German art scene in the early 1960s. Members of this new generation of artists—most of whom were born in the 1920s—appeared in a controversial exhibition that opened at the Academy of Arts in East Berlin in September 1961, “Junge Künstler / Malerei” (lit. Young Artists / Painting). Organized by the internationally renowned communist sculptor Fritz Cremer (1906-1993), it showed work by seventy-two painters, including academy-trained artists as well as people working outside the official sphere, such as Böttcher and his circle of friends from Dresden. This exhibition marked what Cremer believed to be a new direction in East German art. The East German government, by contrast, criticized the works shown as dilettantish, primitive and formalist, but were unable to close the exhibition down because of Cremer's position in East Germany and the support of other influential cultural figures, such as Hanns Eisler and Anna Seghers.

Böttcher graduated from film school in the same year as this controversial exhibition took place. His debut as a professional documentary filmmaker titled *Drei von vielen* (*Three of Many*), focused on three of his students and friends from Dresden—Peter Graf, Peter Herrmann and Peter Makolies—all of whom had shown work at the “Young Artists / Painting” exhibition, but supported themselves by means of other jobs. Although



Böttcher intended the film—which was, in fact, an eloquent example of the premises of the Bitterfeld Way—as a truthful look at life and art in East Germany, it was dismissed by the censors as “not positive enough” and was forbidden from being shown in public.

Another confrontation between artists and authorities took place in April 1964, when a number of speakers criticized official policy at the Fourth Congress of the VBK. Cremer was the most damning in his speech; he castigated recent East German cultural policies for their condescending stance toward artists and the public, and argued instead for an intellectual art for an intellectual audience. He was joined in his criticism by the Leipzig artist Bernhard Heisig (1925-2011) and by the Rostock art historian Hermann Raum (b. 1924), who argued for the importance of a greater openness to modernism by pointing out similarities between Soviet-style Socialist Realism and the realism that had been promoted by the Nazis. All three were greeted with applause by their colleagues in the audience; while both Heisig and Raum later had to give official self-criticisms to save their careers, Cremer was spared this indignity, perhaps due to his international reputation.

A year later, this controversy was followed by another, over the work shown at the Seventh Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig in 1965. The artists in this exhibition—including Heisig, Werner Tübke (1929-2004) and Wolfgang Mattheuer (1927-2004)—showed complex, modern paintings that were neither optimistic nor straightforward. While such works would later earn these artists international attention, in 1965 the style and “pessimism” they displayed were viewed as a threat by the authorities, who published condemnations of the exhibition in the press and many official behind-the-scenes reports. The infamous Eleventh Plenum of the SED Central Committee, which inaugurated a period of extremely repressive cultural policy, took place within a few weeks after the exhibition closed.

It was not until Erich Honecker replaced Walter Ulbricht as head of the SED in 1971 that the glimmer of another thaw in cultural policy appeared. In a December speech to the SED Central Committee, Honecker stated: “When one starts from the firm position of Socialism, there can be ... no taboos in the realm of art and literature. This concerns the question of content, as well as style.” This speech marked the beginnings of an era of “breadth and variety,” in which controversial artists like those shown at the Seventh Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig were able to continue creating work in the style for which they had been criticized just a few years earlier. These artists, including Heisig, Tübke and Mattheuer, who were part of the first generation of artists trained in the GDR, quickly gained recognition for such work both within East Germany and in the capitalist West, where they began showing at major international exhibitions, such as Documenta 6 in 1977, as well as the Venice Biennale in 1982, 1984 and 1988. By the 1980s, these artists had become virtually synonymous with contemporary East German art in the West.

Exhibitions of East German art in the West were organized by the *Staatliche Kunsthandel* (lit. State Art Trade), which had been established in 1974. It was also in charge of sales. Artists received 15% of the money paid for works sold in the West, a portion of which was in West Marks; the VBK received 15%, which was earmarked for a fund to help support visits to the West by artists and art historians; and the rest went to the state. The *Staatliche Kunsthandel* also had galleries for contemporary art within East Germany. It began with three such galleries in 1974, expanding to twenty-nine by 1985 and forty by 1989. These gallery spaces were important venues for East German artists, especially those outside the artistic mainstream. By 1985, these galleries had shown work by more than 780 artists and produced more than 1,100 catalogs and brochures. In comparison to works sold in the West, artists received 70-80% of the price of the works sold in the GDR.

Although he never became part of the artistic mainstream, in the final two decades of the Cold

War, artists like Hermann Glöckner (1889-1987), an abstract artist who had developed his constructivist style in the 1930s, began to receive recognition in East Germany. After years of working in artistic obscurity in his Dresden studio, Glöckner created a large steel sculpture for a public square in 1975; in 1977, he had an exhibition at the National Gallery in East Berlin; and in 1984, he received the National Prize of East Germany. It was also in 1984 that Böttcher created his documentary, *Kurzer Besuch bei Hermann Glöckner* (*Hermann Glöckner: A Brief Visit*).

During the Honecker era, two new generations of artists emerged onto the East German art scene, each more experimental than the previous. The first of these appeared in the early 1970s. These artists, born in the 1940s, were the second generation trained in the GDR and tended to draw from the expressionist and *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) traditions of early 20th-century German painting. Largely figurative in style, their work frequently focused on the everyday, including the problems that people faced in real-existing Socialism. Hans Hendrik Grimmling (b. 1947), for example, created a self-portrait in 1978 titled, *Ich in Leipzig* (lit. Me in Leipzig) that shows him wrapped in a white blanket, seemingly confined as if in a cocoon from which his bearded head emerges. Such an image can be interpreted as a response to the frustration Grimmling felt at not being able to play a more active role in the East German art world. Like many in his generation, he faced a system in which upward mobility was largely blocked by the first generation of artists trained in the GDR, those who had filled the many vacancies that existed in the early postwar years, but had not yet reached retirement age.

By the 1980s, a third generation emerged, some of whom turned to installation and performance art. Many of these artists, too, felt unable to break into the mainstream art world occupied by older, established artists, a fact further exacerbated by the transgressive nature of their art, which did not fit within the official, bureaucratic understanding of what art should be. Unable to pursue their artistic interests through official circles, some of these artists created their own informal art circles; but these were viewed with suspicion by the authorities, which then further limited these artists' ability to enter the mainstream. Some, such as Cornelia Schleime (b. 1953), also created underground films as a logical extension of their performance and installation art. Frustrated with limits she faced in East Germany, however, Schleime ultimately left for West Germany in 1984. It was only in the final months of the Cold War that performance and installation art began to gain official acceptance, albeit tentative, as suggested by the publication of a handful of articles in *Bildende Kunst*.

The end of East Germany took place with the unification treaty of October 3, 1990. The 1990s marked a period of confrontation over what role art and artists from the GDR should play in the newly unified Germany. Artists like Glöckner and Schleime, who had not been closely associated with the East German government, received increasing attention in western Germany. Artists who had represented the East German state, on the other hand, became the center of a *Bilderstreit* (lit. image battle) that lasted into the new millennium and centered on what role, if any, these "*Staatskünstler*" (lit. state artists), should be allowed to play in the new Germany. As a result, the artists who had been the most successful in East Germany were largely overlooked at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's blockbuster exhibition in 2009, *Art of Two Germanys / Cold War Cultures*, which placed greater emphasis on Glöckner and the performance artists of the 1980s than on the GDR's Leipzig School. This exhibition nevertheless marked the first major engagement with East German art in the United States, where only a handful of publications have appeared on the topic to date, and promised to be the beginning of a sustained attempt to understand the breadth and variety of artists in the GDR and the challenges they faced there.

**April A. Eisman** is an Assistant Professor of Art History at Iowa State University, where she teaches courses on modern and contemporary art and theory. She holds an MA from the Courtauld Institute of Art and a PhD from the University of Pittsburgh. Her research focuses on art and theory after 1945 with a particular emphasis on East Germany and on post-colonial and –socialist theory. She recently completed a book manuscript titled Bernhard Heisig and the Fight for Modern Art in Communist East Germany. Currently, she is working on her second book project East German Women Artists: Angela Hampel & the Contradictions of "Equality" in a Communist State. She is a founder of the Transatlantic Institute for the Study of East German Art.

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