

# **Art from the GDR: Brand Ambassador of Socialism at First, then Suddenly a Wreckage of History... East German Art Exhibitions in the USA between 1989 and 1991<sup>1</sup>**

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## **ABSTRACTS**

Die bildende Kunst spielt heute in der Außendarstellung von Unternehmen (Werbung), Kommunen (Standortmarketing) und Nationen (Nation Branding) eine wichtige Rolle. Bereits im Kalten Krieg wurde dieses Verfahren erprobt. So versuchte die DDR seit den 1970er Jahren systematisch den Werbeeffect der Kunst zu nutzen und sich als Kulturnation zu präsentieren. Folglich intensivierte sie den Kulturaustausch mit den westlichen Ländern. In den 1980er Jahren wurde es möglich, dass Kunst aus der DDR sogar in repräsentativen Museen in Großbritannien, Frankreich und den USA gezeigt werden konnte. Doch gerade in der erfolgreichsten Phase ihrer Auswärtigen Kulturpolitik brach die DDR zusammen. Ihre Kunst und Künstler, die noch im Herbst/Winter 1989/90 im Ausland tourten, blieben wie Wrackteile der Geschichte zurück: Sie standen nun plötzlich für sich selbst – der Staat, das System, das sie repräsentieren sollten, gab es nicht mehr. Der Beitrag untersucht drei Wanderausstellungen mit ostdeutscher Kunst, die in der Wendezeit 1989–1991 durch die USA tourten und richtet den Blick auf die nunmehr völlig veränderten Arbeitsbedingungen ostdeutscher Künstler und Künstlerinnen.

Today, the visual arts play an important role in the presentation of companies (advertising), municipalities (location marketing), and nations (nation branding). Since its foundation, the GDR tried to improve its international reputation with the help of visual arts. Nevertheless, it was not

1 The English translation was provided by Franziska Reif.

until its recognition by the Western countries that the cultural exchange with the USA, Great Britain, and other Western European countries could develop without obstacles. At the same time, the dogma of Socialist Realism dissolved during the 1970s and a wider stylistic range in art was tolerated in the GDR. In the 1980s, it became possible for art from the GDR to be shown even in representative museums in Great Britain, France, and the USA. However, it was in the most successful period of its foreign cultural policy that the GDR collapsed. Its art and artists were touring abroad still in the fall and winter of 1989/90, and they were left behind like wreckage and shipwreck victims of history: suddenly, they now were on their own; the state and the system they were supposed to represent did no longer exist. The article examines three traveling exhibitions of East German art that toured the United States between 1989 and 1991 and focuses on the then completely changed working conditions of East German artists.

Since its foundation, the GDR tried to improve its international reputation with the help of visual arts. Nevertheless, it was not until its recognition by the Western countries that the cultural exchange with the USA, Great Britain and other Western European countries could develop without obstacles. At the same time, the dogma of Socialist Realism dissolved during the 1970s and a wider stylistic range in art was tolerated in the GDR. In the 1980s, it became possible for art from the GDR to be shown even in representative museums in Great Britain, France and the USA. However, it was in the most successful period of its foreign cultural policy that the GDR collapsed. Its art and artists were touring abroad still in the fall and winter of 1989/90, and they were left behind like wreckage and shipwreck victims of history: suddenly, they now were on their own; the state and the system they were supposed to represent did no longer exist. For instance, in 1989, this was the case with the traveling exhibition “Twelve Artists from the GDR”. While the party dictatorship and its official culture disappeared, the social relevance of the opposition underground art scene vanished, too. In two further exhibitions in 1990, “New Territory” and “Change of Gait”, young American and Canadian curators attempted to introduce this artistic bohemia to the American public before it disappeared. The change of 1989/90, yearned for by many artists in Central Europe, ended the communist dictatorship and also resulted in the worldwide establishment of capitalism. On the one hand, arts and artists were liberated from socialist ideology and from state restrictions; on the other hand, they were mercilessly subjected to the market logic. “The new society”, wrote East German curator Christoph Tannert, “was based on growing competition and pressure to perform, isolation and distance”.<sup>2</sup> The art theorist Boris Groys went even further and diagnosed the disappearance of culture. From a historico-philosophical viewpoint, money had triumphed over the word in 1989, both in East and West: “Communism was rooted in the word. It was a post-Christian attempt to create a world beyond the commodity. The victory of money also meant the end of culture.”<sup>3</sup> On the new market, some Eastern European artists were able to profit from their historical

2 Exhibition catalogue “Point of no return”, Museum of Fine Arts Leipzig 2019, p. 64.

3 Boris Groys in an interview in: *Lettre international* (winter 2015), p. 40.

exotic status for some time, but many could not cope with the new rules of procedure. This experience had already been made by migrants who had come to the West before 1989. The *Art Magazin* reported on some artists in the spring of 1988 who had moved to the West from the GDR, where they plunged into a creative (as well as financial) crisis. This was even accompanied by acts of destruction: when Rainer-Tobias Ebert moved into a new apartment in Hamburg in 1986, he laid his large-format paintings created in the GDR on the floor and trampled on them: “It took me half an hour. My girlfriend was crying, but I felt liberated from a trauma.” His colleague Dieter Weidenbach, however, destroyed his latest production in an act of disorientation. Having painted fifteen pictures during the first weeks of his new life in West Berlin, the fifty paintings arrived that had been forwarded to him from the GDR. Confronted with this “heritage”, Weidenbach repainted his West production with black paint.<sup>4</sup> Cornelia Schleime had already left the GDR in 1984 and experienced the fall of the Berlin Wall as a DAAD scholarship holder at the MoMA PS1 in New York. She remembered the East German artists who now were euphoric to enter the Western art market, too:

*They didn't realize what a hard time we had after leaving the country: arriving in the West with nothing, often without pictures; my whole early work was gone. These were the losses to be compensated. Furthermore, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the West was completely overwhelmed by this flood of GDR painters, which is one reason why they could hardly gain a foothold. Artists who now moved to the West and thought they would be welcomed with open arms were terribly disillusioned. The West, however, was irritated and found GDR painting too ponderous, with its gloominess, with its world of metaphors full of falling or tumbling figures and Sisyphuses directed into the past. With conceptual art, the West was on a different track.<sup>5</sup>*

Schleime pointed out that some East German artists interpreted the rejection by the Western art market in a culturally pessimistic way. They disqualified the West as “only modern and not at all inward, not existential and only market-oriented”. For Schleime, this position was very questionable: “It also contains self-deception.”<sup>6</sup>

The experiences made by the artists in the West who had left the country were soon shared by those remaining in the GDR. Leading artists close to the state, such as Willi Sitte or Bernhard Heisig, partly had to undergo lean periods but were able to rely on proven networks and sponsors and, in some cases, even came back into official favour after a few years: Heisig was allowed to participate in the artistic furnishings of the Reichstag building in 1994, Sitte got his own museum in Merseburg in 2006, which was inaugurated by the prominent art lover and former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder.<sup>7</sup> The rapid political changes of 1989/90 made the social reference system of

4 Art 3 (1988), p. 93f.

5 Interview in *Politik & Kultur* 9 (2020), p. 33.

6 Ibid.

7 *Der Spiegel*, 1 March 2006.

the East German underground art scene unnecessary; its subversive visual language, its formal and political defiance was left without a counterpart. For a while it could attract the interest of curators and art theorists, but less so of art dealers, since performance, video art and installations dominated in the underground and easily marketable flatware formed the exception. Artists of the middle generation were in the most unfavourable situation, i.e., those who neither had been particularly close to the state or the party nor decidedly opposition, and who were also too old to quickly adapt to the new Western conditions. Many of them will have given up or become hobby artists. It is undoubtedly a desideratum for research in aesthetics and art history to write about this lost East German generation of artists.

### 1. East German Artists in the USA before the Fall of the Berlin Wall

Only after diplomatic relations between the GDR and the USA had been established a more intensive cultural exchange between the two countries became possible. In the 1980s, the Getty Foundation and the National Gallery opened their scholarship programs also to socialist countries. This made it possible for some GDR art scholars to travel to the USA for working visits.<sup>8</sup> It was generally desirable for East German artists to show their works in Western countries and to accompany their exhibitions personally. In doing so they could establish contact with Western colleagues, dealers, and collectors and, if they sold a piece, they could receive coveted foreign currency. Moreover, the international reception of their work was more satisfying than prominence just limited to the GDR. It had to be accepted that they unwillingly became representatives of the GDR, as Karla Woisnitzza reported: “Actually, it may have been considered a representation of the GDR. Leaving the country or cancelling foreign exhibitions would have been the consequence. Given the few offers to be allowed and to be enabled to exhibit abroad and given the underrepresentation of female artists in general, cancellations would have been self-damaging.”<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, those artists quickly attracted the Ministry of State Security’s attention who, on their own initiative, established personal contact with American institutions, diplomats, or private persons. For instance, an art student was under secret service observance in the spring of 1986 who wanted to initiate an exhibition on American photography as part of the exhibition program of the Berlin Academy of Arts and who had got in touch with the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas.<sup>10</sup> In the second half of the 1980s, some East German artists had their first solo appearances in the USA. The gallery owner Eva-Maria Worthman from Chicago, for example, had attempted to familiarize the American public with Bernhard Heisig with two solo exhibitions: “The historical connotations were not understood. Sales, however, were sparse.

8 Author’s conversation with Peter H. Feist, one of the scholarship holders, on 18 December 2007 in Berlin.

9 Karla Woisnitzza via email to the author, 16 October 2019.

10 Archive of the BStU (Federal Commission for the Records of the Ministry for State Security of the Former GDR). MfS HA XX file “Fritz”, vol. 7, sheet 144.

Bernhard Heisig seemed to be an enigma to the American Art collection public. However, several hundred people visited his show.”<sup>11</sup> Shortly afterwards, the painter Gerd Sonntag from Berlin surprisingly got the opportunity to have a solo exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum. The Czech-American curator Charlotta Kotik had already become acquainted with his works during a visit to East Berlin in the fall of 1985. At that time, she was head of the Contemporary Art department at the Brooklyn Museum. Years later, Sonntag could arrange an exhibition with the left-oriented Castillo Cultural Center (CCC) in Greenwich Village, NYC; the Ministry of Culture in East Berlin approved that the paintings were exported to the USA. However, this exhibition had to be cancelled because the CCC was unable to provide Sonntag with adequate space.<sup>12</sup> As the works were already in New York now, Kotik took the opportunity to spontaneously realize her long-term plan in October 1989 to have a Gerd Sonntag exhibition at the Brooklyn Art Museum. The exhibition took place in a room on the fourth floor adjacent to the Rodin Hall,<sup>13</sup> the *New York Times* and the art magazine *Art in America* reported on it. The well-known critic David Galloway was not so much interested in East German trend artists marketed with that “curious mix of idealism and commercial self-interest” in exhibitions such as “Zeitvergleich”. But with lesser-known artists like Sonntag, the renowned art critic discovered “aggressive styles – a kind of brut expressionism” and was amazed at a “near-obsessive attitude toward art-making”.<sup>14</sup> The well-connected curator put Sonntag in touch with museum directors, collectors and dealers. Among others, he met the artist Nan Goldin and the well-known photographer Ellen Auerbach:

*In the USA I could observe that art is perceived as a phenomenon at best only touched upon by political events. In the eyes of each of those individuals also the artist from East Berlin appeared as sophisticated European.*<sup>15</sup>

The photographer Thomas Florschütz, who is widely known today, also made his exhibition debut in the USA before the fall of the Berlin Wall. In 1987, he was awarded the 1st prize for Young European Photographers for his body image tableaus in the West. He was refused a travel permit by the GDR. After all, 24 hours before the award ceremony in Frankfurt, he was finally given a passport. Many artists and politicians had campaigned for this. Florschütz returned to the GDR, but only for a few weeks. Even before the fall of the Berlin Wall he could exhibit in Houston and at the MoMA, among other places. At the official level, efforts were also being made still in 1989 to intensify the cultural exchange between the USA and the GDR. Wolfgang Polak was director of the ZfK, the “Centre for Art Exhibitions in the GDR”. The centre organized numerous guest performances of East German artists abroad. At the invitation of the American

11 E.-M. Wortman, Laudation B. Heisig, in: *Gesten in dieser Zeit. Bernhard Heisig zum 80. Geburtstag*, Leipzig 2005, p. 239.

12 *New York Times*, 31 October 1989.

13 Gerd Sonntag via email to the author, 21 September 2019.

14 *Art in America*, Global Issue 7/1989, p. 59f.

15 Gerd Sonntag via email to the author, 21 September 2019.

embassy, he went on a fact-finding trip to the USA still in fall 1989 in order to establish further contact with museums and curators. But his trip was too late. When he returned in December, the GDR already began to dissolve and shortly afterwards the Centre for Art Exhibitions also became history.<sup>16</sup>

## 2. “Twelve Artists from the GDR”

The traveling exhibition “Twelve Artists from the GDR” was shown in the university museums of Harvard, California, and Michigan and in the museum of Albuquerque from September 1989 onwards. It was the first and last representative exhibition of contemporary art from the GDR in the United States. Peter Nisbet, curator of the Busch-Reisinger Museum in Harvard, had prepared the show for years: “The idea for the show originated with the Busch-Reisinger Museum. We found out that two independent art historians (Peter Selz and Dore Ashton) were also exploring the idea of an exhibition, and we joined forces.”<sup>17</sup> Nisbet looked for sponsors and travelled to the GDR to meet artists and to see the tenth Art Exhibition of the GDR in Dresden. Eventually he, Dore Ashton, and Peter Selz had selected seventy works. Funds had been provided by the National Endowment for the Arts and the European Friends of the Busch-Reisinger Museum. On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the GDR’s founding, Nisbet wrote in a benevolent and diplomatic manner about the modernity and the important international role of the GDR in the exhibition catalogue. He declared: “Our project has evoked some surprise, some skepticism and above all much curiosity among our American colleagues.”<sup>18</sup> The catalogue emphasized that the current diversity in contemporary GDR art was the result of a long struggle against the centralizing directives by the state and the party.<sup>19</sup> For Nisbet, the influence of Expressionism on young East German art was unmistakable, too, an influence that also inspired contemporary painters in the West as Neo-Expressionism. Although the participating artist Sighard Gille had not helped to set up the exhibition, he travelled to the USA in the same year in order, among other things, to see the exhibition there. Gille noted that the East German leadership could indirectly benefit from an appreciation of East German artists: “Recognition in the West had repercussions in the GDR, mostly positive, since this state craved for acceptance and recognition.”<sup>20</sup> At the exhibition opening in Harvard on 16 September 1989, the emerging crisis of the GDR was not a topic of discussion yet. However, in the course of the exhibition tour, political events overshadowed the reception of art, as Nisbet set out:

16 Wolfgang Polak, director of the ZfK (Centre for Art Exhibitions) between 1981 and 1989, in a conversation with the author on 13 March 2007.

17 Peter Nisbet via email to the author, 29 January 2007.

18 P. Nisbet (ed.), *Twelve Artists from the German Democratic Republic*. Gerhard Altenbourg, Carlfriedrich Claus, Sighard Gille, Bernhard Heisig, Walter Libuda, Michael Morgner, Theodor Rosenhauer, Willi Sitte, Wolfgang Smy, Heinrich Tessmer, Max Uhlig, Thomas Ziegler, Cambridge, MA, 1989, p. 11.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

20 Sighard Gille via email to the author, 24. September 2019.

“I do think that our exhibition benefited from the attention to the politics but perhaps also the political developments distracted attention from the art.”<sup>21</sup> The exhibition was shown at the University of California, Los Angeles, in December and at the University of Michigan in February 1990. At these places the exhibition was accompanied by an art historical symposium and a colloquium with the East German artist Max Uhlig. Among American visitors the question arose more and more frequently as to whether the exhibition was already a product of the radical political changes in East Germany, as, in fact, it had been conceived well in advance of 1989. At the vernissage at the Albuquerque Museum in April 1990, West German representatives answered the question if they were responsible for the exhibition: “Not yet!”<sup>22</sup> The titles of the speeches complementing the exhibition referred to the political situation: German scholar Thomas C. Fox (editor of the *GDR Bulletin*) spoke about “Art and politics in East Germany” on 8 April 1990 and Charles McClellan (history professor at the University of New Mexico) about “Art in an artificial nation” on 6 May 1990. Four months later the “artificial nation” was history. Thus, although the exhibition was able to raise the profile of East German art in the USA, in the sense of a “reception of the exotic”, it could no longer fulfil its political purpose, i.e., to flank the GDR’s political and economic rapprochement with the USA on a cultural level.

### 3. “New Territory”

With the rapid political change, the social reference system of an oppositional or sub-cultural East German art scene also disappeared. In two exhibitions in 1990, young American and Canadian curators attempted to introduce this art scene to the American public. The Boston student Karen Kimmel had seen “Twelve Artists from the German Democratic Republic” and intended to organize something similar in Boston. Kimmel was assistant to the director of the Gallery Grossman School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Leila Alfitano. They had the impression that it was their last opportunity now to present unadulterated, specific “art from the GDR” before it disappeared with the state.<sup>23</sup> The exhibition was organized by the exhibition office of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston and took place at the Grossman Gallery in fall 1990. Afterwards it was shown at the Art Gallery of the University of Maryland and at the Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art at Wichita State University. The artists Angela Hampel, Johannes Heisig, Claus Bach, Micha Brendel, Tobias Ellmann, Jürgen Wenzel, Werner Liebmann, Else Gabriel, Via Lewandowsky, Karla Woisnitza, and Doris Ziegler participated in the exhibition. Both in the exhibition catalogue and in reviews, East German art was interpreted in an expressionist perspective.<sup>24</sup> Andrea Lamberti’s review, says, for example:

21 Nisbet via email to the author, 29. January 2007.

22 Conversation between the author and Gabriele Wittrin, then ZfK staff member, Berlin 25 January 2007.

23 L. Amalfitano (ed.), catalogue new territory, Boston 1990, p. 4.

24 For example, in Donald Kuspit’s catalogue contribution “East German Art: The Dernier Cri of Expressionism”, in: *ibid.*, p. 27ff.

*East German Artists explore the psyche not politics [...] the same angst present in the work like the German expressionists [...] the reaction to recent developments in Germany is not directly addressed in the exhibit.*<sup>25</sup>

Else Gabriel and Ulf Wrede were contacted by Kimmel in early 1990 and travelled to N.Y. in October. Kimmel had been successful in attracting sponsors for the project, with the result that the artists could be accommodated in a five-star hotel or on the family's splendid estate. Gabriel and Wrede recalled that the opening day in Boston was well attended, the audience was polite and open-minded, and there was no sign of the artists' "exotic status". One artist, though, had mistaken the casual small talk of American visitors for acute buying interest and had felt absolutely confident that he faced a collector.<sup>26</sup> Doris Ziegler remembered:

*We were passed around the audience at the vernissage and at a private party following and we were constantly questioned about the events of the fall of the Berlin Wall etc. From my point of view, the stylistically very different works were friendly received but not discussed particularly. I could understand that the artefacts were simply door openers to this situation that was exotic for everyone involved; the Americans and their everyday culture were a new experience for me as well.*<sup>27</sup>

Micha Brendel remembered that

*during the tour's first stop in Boston, some artists were very generously invited for three weeks. Discussion rounds were held, among others around the fact that the exhibition does not represent 'the' GDR art but, in contrast, that there is a considerable difference in attitude and formal language between artists who had conformed to the state and those who had rejected it. These were ferocious debates then. It is doubtful whether this was comprehensible for the American public. In the aftermath, I am convinced that we were indeed perceived as exotics of a small, vanishing country from Europe that received its importance from the melting Iron Curtain. All the activities and performances arranged by galleries in N.Y., for example, that I started independently were without resonance. Of course, you don't want to admit this for the time being and you think and hope that it is about your own art. But there are always the questions to what extent art should constitute an expression of its time or to what extent it is instrumentalized.*

This was Brendel's first encounter with the USA: "I was considered an oppositional artist and was not even permitted a day trip to West Berlin. I had illegal contacts only within Europe."<sup>28</sup>

25 The Tech 110 (2 November 1990) 47, p. 9.

26 Conversation between the author, Else Gabriel, and Ulf Wrede, Berlin 9 October 2019.

27 Doris Ziegler, via email to the author, 12 October 2019.

28 Micha Brendel, via email to the author, 23 October 2019.



#### 4. "Change of Gait"

Luise von Flotow, then a doctoral student at the University of Michigan, organized the traveling exhibition "Change of gait" in 1990, which was shown at the following places: University of Michigan, Rackham Center Gallery, Ann Arbor; The Michigan Gallery, Detroit; Art Cite Gallery Windsor, Canada; Workscene Gallery, Toronto; Concourse Gallery, Columbus; Goethe Institute, Chicago, and Goethe House in NYC. It had been conceived as an exhibition decidedly "underground" already in the summer of 1989: "The political changes that occurred over the next year have turned this exhibition into a retrospective of the young art of the 1980s in the GDR. By a curious quirk of fate, the avant-garde of GDR society has become a historical phenomenon before the West even became aware of its existence. Since the opening of the Wall, and the mass of new possibilities available to young artists, the tightly-woven subculture has weakened and diversified. The work that was produced by this subculture from the late 1970s through the 1980s, during a period of increasing civil disobedience and disregard for the SED-state, can now best be viewed as the result of a historical moment, a response to a specific socio-political situation. The show thus constitutes a retrospective of the creative work produced in the GDR during the 1980s by artists, writers, filmmakers, and musicians. It consists of 55 works of art on paper by 13 different artists, 35 documentary photographs, audio-cassettes of rock music and poetry readings, films and videocassettes of performance art and theater, and a display of samizdat books." Von Flotow summarized the reactions:

*After three openings in three very different settings, I have found a tremendous interest in this work from the GDR. People have been fascinated by the importance that art was accorded by the socialist state; we have often found it hard to explain why artwork that does not seem particularly offensive by North American standards should have been subject to censorship. Audiences have also been very responsive to the lectures by Tannert, Schefke, and myself which always accompanied the openings, and which are necessary for the contextualization of the work. We have found that despite the extensive coverage of the events in the GDR in 1989–90, North Americans have little understanding of what it meant to be a creative artist or an oppositional figure in the GDR. The show made this understanding more possible.*

Christoph Tannert played a substantial role in the show. Moreover, he had organized a large exhibition of 200 East German artists at La Villette in Paris in January 1990 and now he gave talks at the travelling exhibition "Change of Gait". The (former) opposition journalist and environmental activist Siegfried Schefke also had a speech during the exhibition tour in the USA.<sup>29</sup> Luise von Flotow remembers:

*I was in East Berlin in the summer of 1989, as well as several times in 1988 and 1987. I had good friends at the environmental library and in peace and human rights circles, and I also met Christoph Tannert somehow during that time. Tannert and I discussed and planned the exhibition 'Change of Gait' together in the summer of 1989; I was the contact for Canada and the USA and Tannert was the curator. Sometime in early fall (before the fall of the Berlin wall) the artists' works arrived at my student's office at the University of Michigan. Everything smelled like oil paint! I asked the German consulate in Detroit for money to prepare the exhibition and I met a very friendly/helpful consul. He probably was a kind of connoisseur. Anyway, this consulate funded quite a lot: \$10,000. Later, the Goethe Institute took over and continued the project – to Chicago, Boston and New York.<sup>30</sup>*

There was not much media coverage; at least some small articles appeared in the local press. "In Ann Arbor, where it started, there were mainly academics and students", writes von Flotow.

*There were exhibitions in galleries in Windsor/Detroit, buses went back and forth, across the border, and stopped at the various exhibition sites. So mainly artists from the surrounding area came or those involved with the galleries. In Toronto, the exhibition was also held at a gallery on Spadina Avenue. The visitors were people from the 'inner city'; either artists who had their studios in the same building or ladies supporting art and its entourage. In Columbus, Ohio, the exhibition at the University of Ohio ran with speeches and lectures in a large hall and was accompanied by photo exhibitions.<sup>31</sup>*

There were some reports in the regional press: "The artists were introduced and discussed as representatives of those who could not exhibit in the GDR." People were astonished, von Flotow says, that there had been such harsh measures in the GDR against art that seemed relatively harmless to North Americans:<sup>32</sup> "As illegal art it seems very conservative to these western eyes", wrote one reviewer, concluding: "and as the state that declared it illegal no longer exists it seems almost a non-issue." Therefore, the exhibition was rather of historical value, the journalist found, who also reacted confused about the commercial environment in which the former underground art was presented now.<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

It cannot be answered definitely to what extent the three exhibitions between 1989 and 1991 described above could introduce East German art to the USA and could significantly promote the careers of individual artists. Apparently, they could reach only a small

30 Luise von Flotow via email to the author, 29 January 2020.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 The Park Press (Chicago), November/December 1991.

public, in terms of numbers, and a few specialist circles. Certainly, some impulses for art theory research at American universities were possible, contributing to the fact that, temporarily, the cultural history of the GDR became almost a fashionable academic topic at US universities in the years after 2000. For most of the artists involved, the US guest performance remained a unique and exotic adventure. None of them was “discovered” in America and subsequently became a star. In this respect, the three exhibitions remained rather an isolated historical event and did not mark the beginning of a continuous American reception of East German art.

Sixteen years later, however, a further appearance of East German art created a larger stir; it was essentially initiated by the art market. The American collector couple Rubell played an important role in this development. In 2003 they bought a complete exhibition of Leipzig paintings from the Leipzig Museum of Fine Arts and brought it to the USA (“sieben mal malerei” (seven times painting) with Tim Eitel, Matthias Weischer, Tilo Baumgärtel, David Schnell, Christoph Ruckhäberle, Martin Kobe, and Peter Busch). Now the painters of the New Leipzig School created art “made in East Germany” known to a larger American public. In autumn 2007, the Metropolitan Museum in New York showed a solo exhibition of Neo Rauch – an honour given to only a few living artists. His confusing picture puzzles with figures performing Sisyphean tasks against nostalgic backgrounds reminiscent of failed utopias, curator Gary Tinterow wrote enthusiastically, were fascinating and would easily fit into a futuristic Eastern Bloc propaganda film from the 1960s.<sup>34</sup> The renowned critic Roberta Smith recognized in Rauch’s pictorial world a metaphor for the stage-like and ambiguous character of Real Socialist life. She wrote in the *New York Times*:

*His paintings resemble disjunctive avant-garde theater stage sets from an earlier time. [...] The action is left to stereotypically heroic, hard-working men and women who build walls and water ditches, open stores, discuss physics [...] or play ice hockey [...] The figures often seem unanchored, as if taken from an illustrated how-to manual [...].*<sup>35</sup>

Norman Rosenthal, though, internationally active British curator, rather saw Rauch’s pictorial world as a contemporary document representing the transitional period after the Cold War: With his art, Neo Rauch would exemplarily represent this peculiar post-modern period of history.<sup>36</sup> Glenn Lowry, director of the MoMA, went on a shopping tour in Germany in January 2008: in addition to works by Beuys, Kippenberger, or Gursky he also acquired paintings by Neo Rauch for the prestigious museum’s collection. At Art Basel 2009, Hollywood star Brad Pitt bought Rauch’s painting “Etappe” for one million dollars, sending the signal that the artist is in vogue.<sup>37</sup> While, immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the enigmatic East German painting rich in history met with

34 Quoted in German in: Neo Rauch. Para (catalogue), Cologne 2007, p. 11f.

35 *New York Times*, 26 April 2002.

36 Quoted in German in: Neo Rauch. Para (catalogue), Cologne 2007, p. 85.

37 *Tagesspiegel*, 13 June 2009.

indifference in West Germany and was merely made known to an academic public as an exotic footnote in the USA, it was now in demand in the anglophone world: “New German painting is a kind of memory practise”, judged the British art magazine *Artreview*<sup>38</sup>, for example. In fact, it is striking that, regardless of the wave of the New Leipzig School in the 1990s, precisely those German artists were successful in the USA who either came from the GDR and thus had authentic experiences with dictatorship (Gerhard Richter, Georg Baselitz, Penck) or who pointedly dealt with German topics steeped in history (Anselm Kiefer, Jonathan Meese). With regard to the internationally popular German metal band one could also speak of the “Rammstein effect”: the totalitarian past provides an exciting background to life and work, it is reflected in the aesthetics of music and art. Rammstein, Anselm Kiefer, and Neo Rauch work the same field. German history, especially the tragic and toxic history, serves art as an endless resource. The three East German exhibitions of the period of the political change in 1989/90 were highly topical and yet too early. They lacked the commercial effectiveness only marketing and sponsoring can allow for and that thus opens the door to a larger audience. It is paradoxical: only when the art market digested history and makes it visible as consumable products it can achieve a larger social resonance.