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Quest for identity

German Fine Arts in the Cold War Period

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to focus on the ideas that should have been transferred with the help of visual arts in the period after the World War II. Germany was a central geographical point of political, social and cultural discourse in the Cold War. Divided and influenced by the Allies German government was forced to work fast on new concepts of its own identity in all areas. For the arts the late 1940s was a time of permanent discussions on which art is the right one to represent the spirit of the "Stunde Null" and to represent the free art of the new Western Germany. The first Federal Chancellor Konrad Adenauer strengthened the West integration and at the same time politicians engaged in the cultural sector of the Soviet occupation zone established Socialist Realism there. Out of this early discussions after the World War II grew the new ideas of how Western and Eastern art should be like. The Cold war was even in the arts and very often Germany was the place, where the fights were staged. It was an ideological fight between abstract and figurative, humanistic and elitist, communist and capitalist, and finally West and East. These concepts were that strong that part of their heritage is palpable until today in the world of arts.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union the ideas of Globalization grew steadily, in politics and equally in the art scene. But until now the East-West-Gap in the Arts exists: The examination of famous German artists in comparison to the ones from Eastern Europe will make it obvious.

Keywords: Abstract Art, GDR and Soviet Union, German Painting, American Abstract Expressionism, Art Market

It is the year 1945 – the so called „Stunde Null“ (Hour Zero) in Europe and particularly in Germany. The country is divided by the Allies and experiences the Denazification: This paper focusses on the visual arts as part of the cultural sector in Germany as a means of self-identification. The first years after the end of World War II were dominated by rehabilitation of "degenerated art" and "degenerated artists". This term was applied to all art which did not fit into the propagandistic pattern of the "Drittes Reich". It is remarkable that the first post-war exhibition of this art was shown in 1946 in Dresden, in the Soviet occupation zone. It was called the "Erste Allgemeine Deutsche Kunstausstellung" (First German General Art Exhibition) combining 250 painters, sculptors and graphic artists whose works gave an overview of diverse artistic expressions having their roots before 1933. As the name implies, this show was the first and likewise the last united German exhibition of art until 1990. The initiative came from the Soviet Military Administration in Germany, following the slogan "Renewal of German Culture", the cultural officer Major Alexander Dymshitz tried to reorganize the cultural life with the help of artists formerly known as "degenerated" like Hans Grundig and Karl Hofer.¹ The exhibition combined "Brücke"-expressionists Otto Müller and Max Pechstein, artists from the "Bauhaus" like Lyonel Feininger, Paul Klee, Oskar Schlemmer and others. A highlight of the exhibition was a triptych by Otto Dix "The War" (1929-1932) showing the war terror in its radical and frightening form of "Neue Sachlichkeit" (New Objectivity). The section of abstract art involved different positions: Willi Baumeister, Ernst Wilhelm Nay, Fritz Winter and Karl Otto Götz.² The sculptural section's focal point were works by famous German sculptors with a strong humanistic approach: Ernst Barlach, Wilhelm Lehmbruck, Käthe Kollwitz and others. The heterogeneous exhibition was visited by 74.000 people, an enormous number for that time. Although there was a colloquy in the educational framework programme of the exhibition it did not leave a deep impact on later developments of the German cultural situation. Not to forget that this exhibition was by far not a single event in this period. In 1945 17 public and 6 private exhibitions were organized in the area "Groß-Berlin" (Greater Berlin), in 1946 already 28 public and 33 private exhibitions took place.³

Shortly thereafter some crucial cultural events in West and East Germany started the Cold War in the Arts. In Western Europe of the early 1950s abstract art called "Informel" or "Tachisme", gained more and more influence: For art groups like "CoBrA", "ZEN 49", "Quadriga", "Gruppe 53" this new way of painting was not just a stylistic but a moral new beginning. The "Stunde Null" dominated over the visual art, but although most of

these artists liked to see themselves at a total zero point their art was a continuation of artistic achievement of early expressionism and of single positions from Russian avant-garde like Wassily Kandinsky.

Germany 1950: The legendary “Darmstädter Gespräch” is held in connection with the exhibition “Image of Man in our Times”. The dispute between the reactionary art historian Hans Sedlmayr and the abstract painter Willi Baumeister dominated this conference. Sedlmayr's book “Art in Crisis: The Lost Center” (Verlust der Mitte, 1948) depicted art of the 19th and 20th century as a symbol and symptom of its time. Hence modern art was ill, starting with Francisco de Goya who was breaking violently the image of man in his works. For Sedlmayr abstract art and Surrealism were symptoms of the disorientated artist of the new age.

“It [painting] is threatened by abstraction which in the last resort seemed likely to turn it into a mere empty pattern – though that, unless appearances are deceptive, has remained nothing more than an episode. [...] it [sculpture] cannot dehumanize itself in the same way as the new painting without giving itself up.”⁴

He saw the need of a stronger recourse to Christian traditions and the renaissance of the human image in the art works. On the other side was Willi Baumeister, one of the convinced abstract artists, who suffered an exhibition prohibition from 1933 until 1945. He was one of the most influential German artists of the post-war period and in Darmstadt he was loudly representing and defending abstract art. For Baumeister the end of the war was the beginning of the zenith in his artistic career: His works were exhibited at the Venice Biennial (1948, 1952), at the São Paulo Biennial (1951) where he won a prize for his painting “Cosmic Gesture” (1950) and until his death in 1955 his works were shown in numerous exhibitions in Europe and the US. Hans Sedlmayr and Willi Baumeister were the strongest antipodes during the colloquy in Darmstadt. In between these fronts was the philosopher Theodor W. Adorno, who was bringing up the idea of a compromise for the discussed positions. It was not the main point for Adorno to discuss whether figurative or abstract art was the right one but how the idea of the artist suits his formal expression. As a musicologist he used examples from this sphere which fit perfectly to the visual art, too.⁵ This discussion shows how emotional and rough the question of visual art and its future has been at that time. Nothing less than which art the post war society needs was the main object here. It is this metanoic situation which the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk generalizes in his “Theory of the Post-War Times”. Sloterdijk argues that after a big crisis the group of cultural losers has to think over all of its cultural achievements, which were manifested before the crisis: They have to think over and relearn. Sloterdijk describes it as “metanoia” meaning “the secular relearning in the service of increased suitability for civilization”. The self-esteem of the winning cultural groups, Sloterdijk argues, will in opposite increase and strengthen their cultural traditions. This has been observed after the war in the art scenes in Paris, New York and in a very special way in Moscow. Whereas the loser culture turns either back towards traditions, which were destroyed before the beginning of the crisis, or develops a new cultural language orientating towards the winners.⁶ Sloterdijk was criticized for the simplicity and generalization of the post-war times, but in this special case it is possible to follow his considerations, at least because he probably developed this theory observing the two post-war periods in Germany in 20th century.

This metanoic cultural change was exactly what happened in Western Germany in the 1950s: Firstly actions were motivated by a glance back on the art which was avant-gardistic before 1933 and secondly there was a strong orientation towards the Western winner countries. It was as strong as the political direction of Konrad Adenauer, who was endeavouring to ensure the connection to the West, the cultural scene of the Federal Republic glanced towards Paris and its avant-garde positions. France became the first focal point of orientation. The arguments for abstract art were dominated by the horrors of the past war. Adorno once wrote in “Cultural Critique and Society” that “Writing a poem after Auschwitz is barbarian.”⁷ Although it was thought only in context of poetry, one can apply this often quoted message to the visual arts and say that for most of the painters and sculptors after Auschwitz it was barbarian to paint figurative. Why? There have been various arguments for abstraction: First of all it was a total contrast to the art of the Nazis and other totalitarian regimes. Abstract art seemed to be the perfect illustration of the “Stunde Null” after the war, it was dealing with the horrors of the past and present in a simple, general and philosophic way. Abstract art even seemed to overcome national features. Hence the biggest misbelief about this art was that it was not possible to exploit abstract art ideologically and politically.

With these arguments the Western art scene deducted itself from the East. Particularly in Germany it has been a demarcation from the Soviet occupation zone. In this part of Germany the “Formalism Dispute” (Formalismusstreit) was aroused since 1948 and in the 1950s Socialist Realism was already the only tolerated artistic expression. The dispute was initiated 1951 by the article “Ways and Aberrations of Modern Art” written by a N. Orlow, supposable a pseudonym of Wladimir S. Semyonov, and published in the high-circulated “Tägliche Rundschau”. The author criticized all anti-democratic directions like Modernism, subjectivism and formalism. The latter became a propagandistic slogan to name elitist art which has alienated itself from the people and humanistic ideas.⁸ This article and with it the whole debate were caused by the Soviet administration only. With these actions it managed to affiliate quickly the cultural field of the new member of the Eastern bloc. Socialist realism was manifested in East Germany for four decades but already in the late 1960s, very ambitious ways of individualization of single artists like Willi Sitte were established.

At this point it was clear that the Cold War of the arts was in full progress. The USA started an offensive towards Europe. The book by Serge Guilbaut „How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art” (1983) describes the early Cold War period in the arts. Peter Weibel writes that the goal for New York was to canonize and monopolize modern art.⁹ They did it in two steps: First presenting degenerated art from Germany and second claiming that only the West can offer the medium of art as an expression of freedom and individuality.¹⁰ The word West surely meant USA and the biggest success in this period for American art in Europe was an exhibition in the city of Kassel, located very closely to the iron curtain.

Documenta 2, 1959: The first documenta in 1955 is the most famous project of rehabilitation of “degenerated art”. With 130 thousand visitors it gained twice as much public as the “Erste Allgemeine Deutsche Kunstausstellung” in Dresden. Ten years after the end of the war Germany was still trying to catch up the connection to the international realm of art. International meant in this case primarily European and as well American. So four years later after the first show, American art was dominating the exhibition space of the Fridericianum in Kassel. What has happened? The second documenta was planned to be a presentation of art after 1945. Werner Haftmann, also an advocate of modern abstract positions, was in charge for the choice of art works. He had this position in the first exhibition, too. But the novelty was that Porter A. McCray became the commissioner for American art. Hendrik Buendge writes in his essay “Documenta as a Catalyst for Art and Society” about this situation:

“At the first documenta only three artists from the USA were represented; by the second the number had already grown to twenty-six. The large format works of American artists, like Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman or Mark Rothko, befittingly caused chaos upon their arrival in Kassel, influencing the original plan for hanging the works, as the scale of the paintings had not been taken into account in advance.”¹¹

The enormous paintings of the American Abstract Expressionists clearly took the space and attention of the visitors. It was a triumphal march of these artists in Germany, even though the exhibited works did not only get positive critique.¹² In addition to the Americans there were many European positions of abstract art from the older and the young generation: Karel Appel, Hans Arp, Jean Dubuffet, Robert Delanay, Max Ernst, Juan Gris, Karl Otto Götz, Wassily Kandinsky, Joan Miró, Ernst Wilhelm Nay and many others. With the documenta 2 abstract art as a universal language was manifested and this title of the book by Leopold Zahn and Georg Poensgen “Abstrakte Kunst, eine Weltsprache” (1958) became the new slogan in the Western art world. Buendge writes in his essay about the dual situation between “institutional” and “commercial” categories during this show. “The presence of American works in European exhibitions, in particular Abstract Expressionism, was a determining factor in rising prices for these works simultaneous to documenta 2. The influence of dealers, whose loans of artworks was essential to documenta 2, cannot be underestimated. At that time, as Zwirner remembers, ‘With every loan that we wanted, we got two or three others we did not want. So it happened that Art Informel was totally overrepresented in 1959, but in the end Haftmann fit it nicely into his plan [...]’”¹³

Buendge mentions another anecdote in connection with the American presentation at the documenta 2: The owners of the London gallery Marlborough Fine Art visited the exhibition and asked Zwirner a simple question: “What will make it, what won’t?”¹⁴ Zwirner answered them in all conscience and he was right - shortly thereafter the shift of the art market de facto was sealed. The centre of attention went to New York.¹⁵ And New York was to stay source of inspiration for decades, one think of Minimal, Concept or Appropriation art, all were

born or became leading positions there. Several studies in the last years verified the suspicions that the rise of American culture in Europe was to a great extent planned accurately by various national offices of the American government.¹⁶ Considering this as a background, it is interesting that regarding visual art the Eastern bloc was very cautious. Many musicians and dancers from Soviet Union were touring through Germany but it is obvious that representation of art was not possible at that time. With growing interest in abstraction and West orientation, Realism became almost a banned way of artistic expression. Figurative art in form of realism was representative for totalitarian regimes and unfree art in contrast to the abstract art in the mind of Western society. On the other hand, Russian Avant-garde experienced a renaissance in Germany in the same year as the documenta 2 took place. In 1959 the first exhibition with the very programmatic title “The Contribution of Russians to Modern Art” was shown in Frankfurt am Main. This was the starting point for the rediscovery of Russian progressive art of the first third of the 20th century. Rapidly it was incorporated in an idealistic way by the Western art history and was marked as the “Other” of the Soviet Union.¹⁷ The Russian avant-gardists were seen here as the martyrs of the October Revolution, their contribution and high hierarchical positions in the first years of the Soviet Union were mainly ignored by the art historians. Surprisingly for quite a long period many American artists did not make any remarks to the similarities of their art concepts and the concepts of the Russian avant-garde. Until the rise of the so-called “nonconformists” or “art dissidents” in the 1970s, the avant-gardists were the only Soviet artists who were appreciated at the Western art market. Peter Weibel writes that in contrast to the unfree realistic art, modern art in the West “was protected by an ideological bubble, defending it from any criticism.”¹⁸ He says that only “with effects of globalization and the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall marking the end of the Cold War, also a critique of modern art from a perspective beyond Euro-America seems possible.”¹⁹ This theory is only partly true and it is important to turn to that question later. Now it is important to fill the gap of the Cold war art.

BRD and GDR in the 1960s and 1970s: Like it was mentioned before, abstract art dominated the art scene in the BRD, but in this period there were new artistic powers rising and new positions were born. The post-war generation was not that receptive to the supremacy of the abstract art. Artists like Gerhard Richter, Georg Baselitz, Sigmar Polke (all three immigrated from the GDR), Jörg Immendorff and Markus Lüpertz wanted to provoke, to shake up the sleepy and wealthy society of West Germany. They wanted to transport contents which were not transportable through abstraction, at least not at that time. And they were very successful, they founded the generation of the “Neo-expressionist” German painting which until today is the greatest trademark of German art.²⁰ These painters tried to give Germany a new identity, the feeling that abstract art lost its political and idealistic brisance arouse and it was obviously time for a change. National questions had to be asked in the art works, these young artists did not want to establish a universal language anymore. Anselm Kiefer also has been one of the painters of this new generation: although his works are much more abstract, he emphasized the need for new handling of the past. Of course there were many other positions and tendencies at that time, but it is striking that the works of Richter, Baselitz, Polke and Immendorff are so impressive and expensive today. They fulfil a stereotype of typical German art. How did this stereotype emerge? The origin was the art of “Neue Sachlichkeit” which has been a German achievement after the First World War. Artists like Otto Dix or George Grosz were legendary innovators of German painting in the 20th century. They established what Werner Spies calls “The iconographical Imperative of the Germans” and with that they manifested the predominance of social and political topics in German art.²¹ Of course they were not the first ones to discover such topics in painting, but with their “bad” and satiric painting they raised a corner stone of artistic style which is today characterized as typically German. The Generation of young painters in the 1960s made recourse to this heritage and emancipated itself from Paris and New York. They pointed to painful topics of German post-war society, especially to the division of Germany. Immendorff even searched for a connection to the GDR, which he found in A. R. Penck, a dissident East German artist. They painted together against the status quo and the boarder of BRD and GDR. In the same period a new school of painting emerged in Leipzig, the “Leipziger Schule” (Leipzig School) which is today seen as another typical German phenomenon. In Leipzig it was Bernard Heise, Wolfgang Mattheuer and Werner Tübke who have shaped this term. They found new ways to likewise broach the issue of social and political problems. Painting figurative but not in the standard of Socialist realism they even encounter interest in West Germany, although until today they have not been considered without prejudices. The German art of the 1960s and 1970s has got the strongest attitude towards a quest for own identity, these concern of course other positions of today famous German artists as Joseph Beuys, Wolf Vostell or Nam June Paik. The mentioned painters raised new generations: In the case of “Leipziger Schule” it once again made German painting world-

famous. Works by Neo Rauch, Tim Eitel and others were skilfully promoted by Gerd Harry Lybke in the USA and shaped the term of “Neue Leipziger Schule” (New Leipzig School).

The marketing is a very crucial factor if we talk about famous art which formulates the identity of a group and an image of national culture today. “Neue Leipziger Schule” is a very good example, likewise “Young British Artists” (YBA) promoted by Charles Saatchi. A remarkable moment is that these artists never formed a group; these titles were given by the press to individual artists which were just promoted at the same time and had similar ways of artistic expressions. In the 1990s the marketing strategies of galerists were obviously improved and one of the most important markets was still in the USA. Michael Werner, the galerist of Baselitz, Penck and Polke, was more successful in selling his artists since he cooperated with Mary Boone from New York. This short excursus touches an object which is very important but would go beyond the scope of this paper. So now I am turning back to Peter Weibels “Globalization: The End of Modern Art?”.

The author is surely right that with the globalization we have overcome some standards of Modern art and today the keyword is “contemporary”.²² For Weibel the contemporary artist is everywhere and is working with all media, from painting to computer. He summarizes:

“Modernism and modern art were part of a European expansion, part of the expansive universal ideology, part of historical capitalism’s ideology of progress. Eurocentric culture as a part of the capitalist world system, beginning in Europe around 1500, is increasingly called into question by colonized countries. Contemporary art in the global age explores the possibilities of a progressive transformation of capitalist world system culture and the difficulties and contradictions that result from it, as well as the possibilities for developing an understanding of other cultures and their equality.”^{23,24}

I argue that such affirmative theories about contemporary art in the global age ignore the topic of national or cultural tendencies. It is true that in the new art sphere we have a better access to all media and with it to an international network, but at the same time the boundaries between cultures are clearly visible and perceptible. The art market is a crucial apparatus where trends are born over and over. These trends are usually called “boom”: In the last decades we experience the Asian- or Chinese-boom, the Indian-boom and an Arabic-boom. We have not overcome a Euro-American cultural monopoly, neither with the emerging international biennales nor with the documenta system. The picture of the other still exists maybe in a more political correct way, but it is still there. We don’t have to reach far towards exotic Asian or African countries to prove that. “Eastern Europe does not exist” was the statement by the curators Christine Macel and Joanna Mytkowska during the exhibition of art from Eastern Europe in Centre national d’art et culture Georges Pompidou in Paris in 2010. The title of the exhibition was “Promises of the Past: A discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe.” Surely former Eastern Europe does not exist anymore, but the people and the artist do and the myth of East European art still wanders like a ghost through the art world. Most of the artists do not paint socialist realism anymore (some of them still do) but they are strongly influenced by their past. Maybe in a few decades when the globalization process reached its goal and all separative factors and all historical traumata of the 20th century are forgotten, we can speak about art world without boundaries. At the moment it is still quite far away.

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¹ Cf. Eberhard Roters/ Bernhard Schulz (ed.), Stationen der Moderne. Die bedeutenden Kunstausstellungen des 20. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland, Verlag Nicolai Berlin 1988, p. 354-355.

² Cf. *ibid.* p. 356-357.

³ Cf. *ibid.* p. 355.

⁴ Hans Sedlmayr, Verlust der Mitte. Die bildende Kunst des 19. Und 20. Jahrhunderts als Sympton und Symbol der Zeit, Salzburg 1965 (8. Auflage), p. 137-138.

⁵ Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, in:

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- ⁶ Cf. Peter Sloterdijk, *Theorie der Nachkriegszeiten. Bemerkungen zu den deutsch-französischen Beziehungen seit 1945* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2008).
- ⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*. in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, fasc. 10.1: *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I, Prismen. Ohne Leitbild* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977).
- ⁸ Cf. N. Orlow, *Wege und Irrwege der modernen Kunst*, in: Elimar Schubbe (ed.), *Dokumente zur Kunst-, Literatur- und Kulturpolitik der SED* (Stuttgart: Seewald Verlag, 1984) 159-170.
- ⁹ Cf. Peter Weibel on: <http://blog.zkm.de/en/editorial/globalization-the-end-modern-art/> (accessed 11th February 2013).
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Hendrik Buendge, *Die Documenta als Katalysator für Kunst und Gesellschaft. Eins, zwei, drei, vier, viele...- die Documenta lernt das Zählen*, in Johan Holten (ed.), *BILDERBEDARF. Braucht Gesellschaft Kunst?* (Köln: Verlag Walther König 2012) 38.
- ¹² Cf. Manfred Schneckenburger (Hrsg.), *documenta – Idee und Institution: Tendenzen, Konzepte, Materialien* (München: Bruckmann 1983).
- ¹³ Hendrik Buendge, *Die Documenta als Katalysator für Kunst und Gesellschaft. Eins, zwei, drei, vier, viele...- die Documenta lernt das Zählen*, in Johan Holten (ed.), *BILDERBEDARF. Braucht Gesellschaft Kunst?* (Köln: Verlag Walther König 2012) 48.
- ¹⁴ Ibid. 48-50.
- ¹⁵ Cf. ibid. 50.
- ¹⁶ Cf. Francis Stonor Saunders, *Wer die Zeche zahlt. Der CIA und die Kultur im Kalten Krieg* (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 2001); Sigrid Ruby, *Have we an American Art?, Präsentation und Rezeption amerikanischer Malerei im Westdeutschland und Westeuropa der Nachkriegszeit* (Weimar: VDG 1999).
- ¹⁷ I refer to the concept of the „Other“ in: Boris Groys´ *Die Erfindung Russlands* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1995).
- ¹⁸ Peter Weibel on: <http://blog.zkm.de/en/editorial/globalization-the-end-modern-art/> (accessed 11th February 2013).
- ¹⁹ Cf: ibid.
- ²⁰ The focus here is especially on the art market, so that other important positions like conceptualists and others are not mentioned.
- ²¹ Cf. Werner Spies, *Der ikonografische Imperativ der Deutschen. Von George Grosz bis Anselm Kiefer*, (Berlin: University Press, 2009).
- ²² Cf. Peter Weibel on: <http://blog.zkm.de/en/editorial/globalization-the-end-modern-art/> (accessed 11th February 2013).
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Ibid.