

Democratic Humanism in German Painting, 1945-1949: Cultural Division and Public Reception

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This article evaluates the impact of a humanist culture within early post-war Germany through artists' responses and the roles played by specialist art periodicals and their critics in the ensuing cultural debates. German art's rehabilitation in the early 1950s was shaped by the immediate post-war phase which helped build the foundations of cultural and economic renewal. Visual artists' efforts to salvage a humanist tradition from the moral and physical wreckage of Nazism reveal tensions between those seeking to maintain continuities with Germany's past cultural traditions, and those viewing 1945 as a decisive break with history, a chance for a new beginning. Debates over form and content in painting, whether to remould art along socialist lines, or to restore its more liberal and elitist principles, reflected art's growing politicisation and commercialisation. However, a humanist turn in art managed to bridge this divide and provide a new opportunity for art to reclaim a central role in German culture.

Manifestos for Art

The focus is on two central themes of a complex story of competing ideologies played out in Germany's two most significant fine art periodicals of the time, *Bildende Kunst* (hereafter *BK*), established within Berlin's Soviet Zone, and *Das Kunstwerk* (hereafter *KW*), founded in Stuttgart. The first theme addresses the notion of cultural division whose defining characteristics are conceptualised as proletarian and Christian humanism, rubrics that were adopted by *BK* and *KW* respectively. The periodicals' differences became symbolised by long-running, hotly-contested debates over the relative merits and limitations of the visual language of abstraction versus those of representation. The second theme deals with art's wider critical reception in the public sphere and helps to put the debates in context. These periodicals animate the interactions between artists, writer- contributors and their readerships, and wider debates over the role of a humanist-led art in Germany's reconstruction. While many of the most striking polemics are located in the historiography, which is only briefly

referred to here, much of the literature falls short of providing a clear picture of the confusion and disparate nature of early post-war art. Period exhibition catalogues corroborate the evidence of artists' preoccupation with diverse humanist philosophies, uncovering important contributions by painters, many of whom have rarely, if at all, been exhibited or discussed outside Germany.

Painting in particular, mirrored what to most Germans must have seemed an alien post-war landscape. Artists such as Ernst Fritsch, Lea and Hans Grundig, Oskar Nerlinger and Horst Stempel memorialised the human costs of war. Others, such as Wilhelm Lachnit and Max Lingner withdrew into private worlds that quietly speak of mass suffering whilst thematising anti-fascist protest. Humanist art allegorised too the emptiness of human existence, removing the human form from its subject, suggesting an escape from individual grief into a shared sense of collective loss. Many artists who had remained in Germany lost their entire former output and their livelihoods. Immediate prospects were unpromising with materials scarce and survival largely predicated on finding outlets for their work.

However, the greatest challenge for artists was to find new subjects that would fuel and validate their creative aspirations. Some wanted to distance themselves from the traumas of the past in order to experiment with new visual narratives that resonated with the present post-war realities whilst anticipating a better future. Many artists developed new subjects motivated by the exigencies of needing to sell their work to live. Others, encouraged by the return of the exiled artists together with the rehabilitation of the formerly proscribed modernist art, developed varieties of visual syntax that tried to build on the great achievements in Western art since the Renaissance. Some such as Willi Baumeister, Werner Gilles and Ernst Wilhelm Nay even drew inspiration from pre-Renaissance Primitive Art with sporadic references to ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern myths. What linked most artists' motivations was the 'search for origins, for beginnings uncontaminated by Nazi ideology from which 'emerges an ahistorical, nature-bound image of the world.'¹

Editorials in the art magazines performed a vital function for artists as a conduit to the public, the museums and collectors - a powerful instrument in making and breaking reputations. Favourable coverage, even in 1946, helped promote artists' careers. Germany's later economic regeneration seemed a long way off, and temptations existed for some artists to begin to identify with the editorial line of a particular magazine. Conversely, other painters prized their own artistic integrity and

independence, fiercely pursuing their particular vision regardless of the risks of becoming critically marginalised. Art was at the mercy of not just existing socio-economic conditions but of the political and cultural schisms that were rapidly opening in contrasting ways between Eastern and Western Zones.

Cultural Division

It is hard to speak of German art *per se* in a country that above all post-1945, from Allied Occupation policy-making perspectives, was expected to renounce any nationalist overtones. Martin Damus suggests one can only speak of art in the Federal Republic, not art of the *BRD*.² The same held true in the embryonic German Democratic Republic. The Western Zones witnessed trends in painting privileging certain stylistic continuities with the past, whilst in the Soviet Zone, Communist Party and Soviet officials initially encouraged artists' more overt antifascist messages, then presided over their progressive mutation into forms and subjects that anticipated the harmonisation of art as an integral plank of Communist cultural policy. As the "re-educating" influences of the Western Allies began to impact on western German culture, paralleling the contrasting ideological pronouncements of their Soviet counterparts, so art became more Janus-faced in the Occupiers' divergent ambitions of cautious liberalisation for the former and rapid de-individualisation for the latter. This was polarised further by artists' and cultural commentators' advocacy of what constituted "good art." It was as if each side of the ideological divide dreamed of fashioning a template for a new Germanic art. This was problematic within two such fragmenting societies, exacerbated by a pervasive sense of a cultural vacuum. Even by 1951, Jaspers observed:

Since our age has not yet discovered a style for itself or become fully aware of what it really wants, the utilitarianism of purpose is dominant [...] in the flux of events, the world has completely lost the faculty of creative repose. There no longer prevails a feeling that the mind is the world of a community which could be reflected in art.³

This cultural crisis was reflected in debates about form and content only relevant if art made 'transcendence' tangible in a secular form that 'arouses contemporary faith.' He observed that in previous ages - we might interpret this as pre-1933 - the arts in their wider sense had been so enmeshed in the fibres of human existence, that man's transcendence had been perceptible through art.

This question of transcendence exercised many artists – how to devise a language uncorrupted by Nazi ideology? Christianity became one such vehicle, as did humanism. Neither *Bildende Kunst* nor *Das Kunstwerk*, however, ever convincingly addressed the challenge for art to find for itself, as Jaspers put it, ‘the intrinsic value which could permeate the essence of man.’ Early issues offered polemics crystallising around theoretical questions, such as the ‘freedom of art’ (*Freiheit der Kunst*), ‘aesthetic appeal’ (*Schönheit*), realism versus non-representation, form and content. These arguments gradually merged into one decisive issue, an ideological schism that challenged the entire purpose of early post-war German art. From Soviet perspectives, artistic freedom was synonymous with bourgeois elitism contradicting socialist principles of ‘the unity of art with the people’ (*Einheit von Kunst und Volk*), ironically echoing the prescriptive art of the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* era. From Western vantage points, art should remain free from ideological constraint. The editorials, reviews and articles show why these conflicting struggles dominated cultural discourse.

***Bildende Kunst* and Proletarian Humanism**

With its first issue in January 1947, it was clear that *Bildende Kunst* was aligning itself as the mouthpiece of Soviet cultural ideology. It reported the Artists’ Congress accompanying the Dresden exhibition (*Allgemeine Deutsche Kunstausstellung*) of October 1946 with a call from the Soviet Military Administration in Germany for artists to lead the way toward a better democratic future by fashioning works that in the interests of democracy would embody the ideal of humanism, or portray a love of mankind, and depict beauty. Its pages were used to articulate wider fears of a pervasive ‘cultural despair’ (*Kulturpessimismus*), and the need to evolve a more ‘fanatically’ optimistic outlook.⁴ Other officials within the communist hierarchy acknowledged the development of humanist thought from the Renaissance, hoping for its continuum alongside an emerging Soviet model of socialist humanism. In this rubric, the impetus for a democratic socialist humanism and its parallel acculturation within German society sprang from a popular will to change the world; socialist humanism would lead to the harmonisation of the private sphere with the public at large, although the means to achieving such an aim were never clearly delineated. What wasn’t elucidated either was any clear vision of a humanist context for art and how this might translate into artists’ daily practice. How could painters plying their trade in the Eastern Zone reconcile a desire for free self-expression with a political

climate whose cultural *apparatchiks* opportunistically saw the need for art's subjugation to political ends by making it much more populist in content? Its Chief Cultural Officer viewed the Dresden show as 'revealing the gulf between a true realism with its distinctive psychological characteristics, and pure formalist abstraction, impoverished for ideas and with no future.' In his view, 'the snobbish criteria of aesthetic sophistication,' were incompatible with forging a unity between art and people.⁵

But for the many artists the Soviets hoped to "re-educate" in their new Utopia, this was a double-bind – creativity became stifled and created divisions between artistic factions interpreting the humanist ethos in very different ways. Complex aesthetic criteria within a much changed political, social and religious landscape weighed on artists' minds pulling them in opposing directions. Surrealist painter, Heinz Trökes, a *KW* contributor, questioned Dresden's claims to be stylistically inclusive, noting that though living artists were favoured, its remit was hardly comprehensive.⁶ While the *Dresdner Kunstausstellung* was one of the first large-scale attempts to foster a more democratic pluralism, a place where surrealism could hang next to new social realism, this revolutionary turn proved both illusory and short-lived. Artists thereafter increasingly sought to consolidate their own creative and ideological manifestos.

The second *Deutsche Allgemeine Kunstausstellung* in August 1949 offered a snapshot of how diversely the humanist blueprint had been interpreted and appropriated throughout Germany. The selection of 375 artists was again fairly evenly split between Soviet and Western Zones. *Ministerpräsident* Seydewitz declared the choice constituted 'no Saxony or Eastern Zone concern [...] but a collective German exhibition'. This sop nevertheless irritated *Bildende Kunst's* critic who commented on the 'flood' of Western art on public view emblematic of 'the decline of a dying societal order.'⁷ The irony was that the very critics castigating bourgeois art then celebrated the numbers of works sold. In a further irony, the 1949 edition showed much of the art classed by the Nazis as degenerate in the infamous pre-war exhibition endured further rejection through failing to fit the communist blueprint for a 'genuine humanist art' (*echte Volkskunst*).⁸ Humanist painting was advocated so long as it did not lapse into 'the sentimental concepts of more decadent times.' Artists falling into this trap were dubbed 'painters of ugliness.'⁹ For the Soviets, a return to realism and naturalism was increasingly seen as typifying the correct developmental paths for the

development of Soviet art. The experimental nature of abstract art was dismissed, as it supposedly suppressed the concrete forms that would enable the viewer to understand art's wider spiritual message. Abstract art privileged subjectivity over objectivity. Its detractors critiqued notions of an 'abstract aesthetic' (*abstrakte Schönheit*) as too academic. According to these principles, the essence of creative art was analogous with artists learning to differentiate between 'genuine art and Pseudo-art, between progressive art, consonant with a higher cultural development, and regressive art.' Art had to avoid taking the wrong path into 'hopeless individualism.'¹⁰ Artists were encouraged to accept that if they chose to produce "genuine art", they would defeat kitsch, especially formalist art emphasising colour, and thereby attain a form of 'joyfully attained humanism.'¹¹

Bildende Kunst consistently referred to human subjects as "proletarian", particularly if the artist's background was demonstrably anti-fascist. Otto Nagel typified the elder statesman of German art who had resisted and survived Nazism. As his subjects and style had remained conventionally realist, he was likely to receive more favourable coverage. His work fitted the blueprint of a humanism championing humankind's emancipation through work, and *Mensch und Arbeit* was suitably appropriated as its slogan. The catalogue introduction to Nagel's 1954 East Berlin exhibition characterised him as a 'painter of proletarian humanism.'¹² *Mensch und Arbeit* was considered such a perfect union of art with good citizenship as to warrant a major exhibition in Berlin in 1949. From submissions exceeding 2,000, it privileged painting that showed people at work, on the land, laying railway track, house building, or in factories. Thirteen specially commissioned 'wall pieces' (*Wandbilder*) were shown, ten coming from voluntary artist collectives. These caused a sensation, proof positive on a monumental scale to critics and public of the long hoped-for democratisation of art. Art had been removed from the salons and museums and been placed in the workplace. One critic described these socially-engaged *Wandbilder* as 'the recovery of the working people.'¹³ One notable collaborative piece was Rene Graetz, Arno Mohr and Horst Stempel's 'Hennigsdorf Metalworks.' This is not the Stempel of the iconic 1946 *Nacht über Deutschland*, but as pointed out earlier, once painters felt sure they would not lose exposure despite working within prescribed themes, they were keen to contribute to this early form of public art. Thus, in the eastern half of Germany, painterly individuality became sacrificed for the common good, the *Einheit von Kunst und Volk* mentioned above. Yet this climate did not stifle

artistic output, for commissions gave opportunities to more artists, not yet a feature of a recovering art economy in the Western Zones.

Das Kunstwerk, Christian Humanism and Non-Objective Art

As a return towards new forms of social realism gathered pace in the East, a reappraisal was underway in the West, in particular, of the moral benefits to society of invoking Germany's strong religious traditions in painting. Prominent intellectuals in 1946 and 1947, such as Adenauer, promoted antisocialism – not just in opposition to Communism but to the influence of '*christlichen Sozialisten*' within communist ideology. The Western Allies were united in suspicion of all ideologies that tried to establish a Third Way concept as 'unchristian, uneuropean or unwestern' (*unchristlich, uneuropäisch oder unabendländisch*), synonyms for Allied efforts to usher in a more aggressive *Ostpolitik*. At the start of the Nuremberg Trials, there were calls for a Christian humanism that would re-ground the German people in the traditions of Western Christian culture and antiquity.¹⁴ *Das Kunstwerk* was notable not only for its outward-looking view of art as a heritage to which German artists had greatly contributed, but also for its emphasis on supporting German art's continuities within its wider cultural history. *KW* editorials argued that works of art were Man's enduring legacy in contrast to ephemeral Man whose life was predetermined, his fall a tragedy. By placing Man metaphorically at the centre of his own destruction, emphasising the indomitable human spirit in communion with God, humanity could redeem its past 'spiritual waywardness', and thus reinvent itself.¹⁵

This new path offered too a partial explanation to the German catastrophe as a religious degeneration (*Abfall von Gott*). This discourse of a cultural *Abfall* quickly metamorphosed into a widely accepted advocacy of a 'return to God, seen in a large number of religious magazines of this period.¹⁶ Werner Scholz, was described in 1948 as 'an ecstatic man who prays, a saint and priest,' drew much of his inspiration from the Christian gospel as a sign of Man's potential for spiritual self-renewal. Landscape too was invoked as a metaphor for 'sacred and down-to-earth nature,'¹⁷ language, while not invoking a belief in a particular god, nevertheless optimistically suggesting a new spiritual dawn for humanist art. Many works were commissioned for churches. Charles Crodel, another "degenerate" artist sacked by the Nazis from his Halle teaching post and his works simultaneously destroyed, was appointed in 1948 by Karl Hofer, an influential artist and co-editor of *BK*, to teach at Berlin's *Hochschule für*

Bildende Künste, remaining until 1951 before taking up an academic post in Munich. A mosaic triptych made in 1948 for a Berlin chapel is one of his 400 pieces in over 50 German churches. Placing ordinary people in everyday situations, often incorporating Biblical narrative, myth, animals and plants, and situating his work in religious contexts using forms like the triptych, his humanist ethic amalgamated within a Christian context Hermand's three ideological variants on 'religious-coloured humanism' - the 'half-religious', the idealistic traditions of a 'Goethean humanism' (*goethezeitlichen Humanismus*) and a form of 'new' existentialism.¹⁸ Note that this combining of self- sacrifice to God, a return to 'beauty and harmony' (*Schönheit und Harmonie*) and nature could sit quite comfortably within the 'joyfully attained humanism' quoted earlier, where the artist puts his/her gifts in service of the public good. In that sense proletarian humanism and Christian humanism could co-exist.

Das Kunstwerk's first issue in January 1946 shows galleries in Augsburg, Konstanz and Dresden had started to show abstract and surrealist painting. Its bi-monthly editions highlighted many exhibitions taking place throughout Germany, featuring formerly exiled German artists working in various modernist traditions. One such exhibition in Hamburg and Hannover showcased 'The Pathfinders' (*Die Wegbereiter*), the soubriquet given to the first 'revolutionaries', (Klee, Feininger, Schlemmer, Kirchner, Barlach, Beckmann and Lehmbrock). Others featured the so-called inner-emigrants, such as Baumeister, Nay, Fritz Winter, or Georg Meistermann, described by devotee Heinrich Böll as 'the painter for the Catholics, the Catholic for the intellectuals'¹⁹. *Das Kunstwerk's* 1947-1948 exhibition diaries show these artists featured along with major survey shows of great Western and Eastern art from cultures outside Germany. The idea was to celebrate the enduring and universal strengths of the German Renaissance heritage - Grünewald, Baldung, Dürer - and to persuade its readership that although old Germany had died in the bunker with Hitler, its cultural roots were somehow intact and could be replenished. So Burkhardt was juxtaposed with Raphael, Cranach with Picasso. For a moment, *BK* reflected this early trend with colour reproductions of Cézanne, Bonnard and Matisse alongside Modersohn-Becker, Heckel and Liebermann, before showcasing new realist artists more tailored to its politics and growing popular hostility to modernist painting.

Painting's critical language needed a makeover in new distinctive forms, for the art and the language used in discussing it had become disconnected. Conflicts between image and rhetoric and debates over abstraction and representation were

more constructively addressed by artists who attempted to create meaning against a routine cacophony of predominantly less objective criticism by non-practitioners. In a 1948 review of Baumeister's *Das Unbekannte in der Kunst* (The Unfamiliar in Art), one sympathiser observed 'abstract artists are in the especially difficult position of having to justify and defend their works as painters theoretically.' Much abstract art was seen as documenting a seemingly hopeless time, testament, 'to the great confusion of our century.'²⁰ Many found non-objective art not only harder to decode with its apparent lack of accessible narrative content, but viewed its restoration as an unwanted return to Germany's discredited political past or a manifestation of bourgeois liberalism that might pose future dangers within Germany. From the perspective of developing cultural politics in the East, its 'enthusiasm for experimentation' (*Experimentierlust*) was subversive and dangerous. Dismissive barbs from *BK*'s critics in 1948 and 1949 were broad in their attacks, for example, 'abstract art is the death of bourgeois humanism', or invective directed at the 'charlatans' (*Kunstcharlatanen*) of 'sham art', 'a pale imitation of yesterday's art fashion, and a Biedermeier ideal.' Abstraction was practised by 'half artists' – 'the conceited air-bubbles of smug hot-air merchants who are rapidly losing their appeal.'²¹ Actually, the reverse was the case as by 1948, abstract art was steadily regaining its international standing and popularity.

Baumeister saw art was an irrational expressive device that could not be rationalised. His late paintings were described as 'a unity between man and cosmos' - devoid of a human subject but of human construction.²² Heinz Trökes thought surrealist painting embodied many competing emotions that had dominated since 1945. One *Kunstwerk* critic summarised his work as 'the connection between the supra- and the subconscious [...] metamorphosed forms, associative effect.'²³ Effect translated as the importance of memory as a form of cathartic experience. Trökes and younger avant-garde magic realists such as Hans Thiemann and Mac Zimmermann were one step ahead of a collective public mood still numbed into silence over the national catastrophe; they deliberately used pictorial language invoking memory as part of the cure for German art, offering an imaginary space for its viewing public to engage with imagery nobody could yet acknowledge openly.

Immediately after 1945, painting documented shared anger, suffering and compassion. Artists either looked to revive former inspiration or to develop a new syntax and vocabulary to help restore art's credibility and generate a new humanist

revival. Karl Hofer in many ways personified the artist's need to look back as well as forward – an allegorical painter of man's inhumanity to man, but one believing in mankind's future redemption. He and Stempel produced works entitled 'The Blind'. Hofer's interpretation expressed Germany's double bind; the myopia that had led it down the Fascist path to self-destruction, and the early post-war allegory of a crippled and split Germany arriving at a fork in the road, unsure which path to take.

Public Reception and Wider Critical Forums

The respective ideological and creative arguments of both magazines as well as the exhibitions they promoted symbolised the political and cultural tensions of the Cold War. If *BK* sought to utilise the propaganda function of its editorials to elicit support from its readership, *KW* found alternative ways to engage its audiences. It achieved this through more inclusive features and documentation of exhibitions and by concentrating on the wider debates between artists, critics and art historians at the various art congresses that debated present and future prospects for art, discussed later in this section. The section shows that art's appropriation for political ends by the Soviets had little influence on narrowing the wider agenda for liberalising art in western Germany, of which the humanist revival was a catalyst.

Published popular reactions show that the German public were far from apathetic towards art, with plentiful opportunities to see exhibitions all over Germany. Exhibition selectors and art journals went to some lengths to gauge public responses with *BK* keen to elicit reactions from young people²⁴ in questionnaires (*Fragebogen*) at the museum or gallery. Alternatively, the public could air their views through a letters forum in the periodicals, to which the editors occasionally responded. *KW*, by not having a readers' letters page, risked accusations of Western elitism. In the context of debates on whether art still had a role post-war society, *KW* and *BK* needed to be seen to justify their existences with the social climate still dominated by Germans' need to secure basic human requirements such as housing or food before attending to their own spiritual replenishment. Thus the periodicals were encouraged by so many choosing to become artists or to continue their careers.²⁵

The 1946 *Allgemeine Deutsche Kunstausstellung* questionnaire asked visitors whether they liked the exhibition, which pictures they preferred and those they disliked. Not all the 74,000 visitors 'exercised their democratic right to voice their opinions', but of those who did respond, 65.7 percent 'rejected the exhibition and

were particularly against the Expressionist and abstract art.²⁶ With no sample size given, this figure must be treated with scepticism. Certainly the varied reactions to exhibitions from the letters published do not support this statistic. No data was provided for the 1949 *Zweite Allgemeine Deutsche Ausstellung*. Although there are indications that visitor numbers were high, because of many notable absentees (e.g. Kokoschka, Nolde, Beckmann, Baumeister), *KW* concluded the selection of artists could not be termed objective.²⁷

The *Mensch und Arbeit* exhibition, where there was no *Fragebogen*, drew 12,000 visitors, ‘mostly younger people and workplace delegations’, who came out of a ‘new-found love for art’. Sales of works totalled DM 75,000 and around 60 percent of the total exhibits were sold.²⁸ This is notable because for all the criticism of bourgeois commercial values in western Germany, it was considered strategically important in the Soviet Zone to show that the new communist model of “democratised” humanist art was being supported by a high proportion of younger visitors - in effect a vote of confidence for their cultural policies. Youth’s impressionability to fine art was even contrasted with the false consciousness of adulthood by one writer.²⁹ In the West, there were comments about how German youth were having the chance to see and compare some of the great European twentieth century artists for the first time, thereby putting German artists favourably in their wider historical context.³⁰ Visitor numbers suggest the beginnings of a popular reengagement with visual culture, although still small by comparison with the estimated 100,000 visitors, mainly workers and white-collar employees, drawn to one of the Berlin department store exhibitions (*Warenhausausstellung*) in 1926.³¹ This suggests that despite the efforts of *BK* contributors to engineer a socialised art to create a new self-awareness,³² German painting still had some way to travel to restore its former mass popularity in the public’s mind. The *Fragebogen* was dropped after 1946 in favour of a more direct public forum where the public could air their views - the Letters Page.

BK introduced such a formula, ‘The Public gives its opinion’ (*Das Publikum sagt seine Meinung*) in February 1947, and invited comments about the periodical. This first issue featured one lengthy letter questioning the justification for a new art magazine in view of Germany’s complicity in ‘the torture and murder of countless millions of Jews [...] and the decimation of the innocent Russian people, the continent

systematically plundered and laid waste.’ *BK* ought to be ‘disturbed by these thoughts’ and the legacy of misery and deprivation for so many in Germany:

A suspicious, disenfranchised and decaying society, full of anxiety about life, without self-confidence or any burden of guilt, stumbling blindly with calls in the background for a democracy, socialism, antimilitarism and humanism that it does not understand.

Self-styled as ‘adequately’ culturally literate, he considered Käthe Kollwitz one of the few artists to respond to these issues in her work, and questioned art’s capacity to heal society’s ills.³³ *BK* responded by labelling ‘Herr Franz’ as a ‘run-of-the mill person’ (*Dutzendmensch*) and saying that his outspoken comments reflected his ‘spiritual need.’ They denied that art had lost its fundamental principles of ‘truth, justice, love of humanity and tolerance’, arguing that bourgeois culture’s relationship to art signified its ‘flight from the realities of the economic and political struggle for existence into Sleeping Beauty’s castle.’³⁴ From the outset, *BK* realised its priorities should be targeted equally towards re-educating its readership and its mission to inculcate their vision of *Einheit von Kunst und Volk* amongst artists.

Letters in July 1947 reveal many unresolved tensions about art’s place in society with this public recognition of an art and time out of tune with itself echoed in various letters thereafter. One saw the dissonance of the majority of the pictures illustrated as at odds with the population’s aesthetic sensibilities. Another wrote that all paintings had ‘gone against good taste, if not against humanity too.’ An anonymous correspondent described some painters as ‘idiots’ with artistic pretensions tantamount to ‘degrading a Beethoven Symphony to Swing Music’, quite an insult as the vilification of Swing, jazz and ‘black music’ (*Negermusik*) was a throwback to the supposedly corrupt days of ‘degenerate music’ (*Entartete Musik*). Two women suggested *BK* change its name to ‘The Art Trash Periodical’ (*Kunstschund Zeitschrift*) while a more critically engaged Berliner called for a departure from Naturalism, favouring instead new ways to reconnect with the strong German roots in landscape.³⁵ These responses document *BK*’s readers’ growing adverse reaction towards modernist painting. Having featured cover colour illustrations of works by Peter Brueghel, Bonnard, Modersohn-Becker, Matisse, Cézanne, Picasso, Heckel and Liebermann in its first four issues, *BK* encouraged this trend by a gradual shift of focus towards showcasing more contemporary realist artists. *BK*’s February 1948 issue articulated similar responses. A teacher thought that the last fifteen years had altered ‘man’s

inner constitution and realm of ideas.’ It was irrelevant whether people *liked* the art, what was more significant was ‘what did art have to say about humanity?’ An economist suggested that artists should never try to ‘falsify reality just to create comfortable paintings for the masses.’³⁶ Many engaged with the debates about the relationship between form and content, disappointed over the amount of editorial space devoted to ‘outmoded obsessive commodity art like Dadaism’, or wanting to emphasise that Expressionism now had few devotees. Then there were those attributing the disconnection between art and humanity to art’s ‘formlessness,’ ‘dull colours’ and ‘exhausted figures’. Art should reflect the ‘flowering cities, people bursting with strength and opulence, mirrored rooms and splendid still lives.’³⁷ Many whose everyday hardships necessitated a more mundane lifestyle would have seen such optimistic visions as mere escapist fantasy.

BK gave most prominence to those letters addressing their editorial agenda, for example the relationship between art and the worker. Those published were nearly all from the *SBZ*, reflecting *BK*’s steadily increasing politics of censorship. In a feature issue on abstract art, non-representational painting was criticised as ‘freedom in an empty land devoid of people’ or as ‘a tragic anachronism.’ These selective views of realist painters and cultural commentators from newspapers around Germany were cited as ‘representative’ of nationally held opinion.³⁸ The letters page failed to reappear from spring 1948. One can conclude that its cessation coincided with the editors’ realisation that their mantra for a ‘new’ art had won the argument in eastern Germany, exemplified by their lampooning of one reader’s vituperative attack against the magazine’s values by reproducing his letter inside an ornate frame. *BK* was a ‘blasphemy [...] that poured scorn on culture, taste and aesthetics’, and what they printed, ‘a series of Southern cannibalistic derailments into a spiritual wasteland.’³⁹ This shows editorial confidence that such views were out of kilter with the broader public opinion they been instrumental in shaping.

In complete contrast to *BK*’s strategy of gathering public opinion to underscore its humanist message, *Das Kunstwerk* focused on the wider international debates over re-establishing art’s status in post-war society, although the first ‘World Congress of art critics’ met in Paris in July 1948 with the Soviets refusing to participate and Germany not invited. Keynote themes were freedom, justice, and the awareness of the individual responsibilities of the art critic. Resolutions were passed on the formation of a new representative Association of International Art Critics,

extended museum and gallery opening hours, the international exchange of books and periodicals, increased exposure of art through travelling exhibitions with visual art as a core component within a corresponding agenda for reforming public education. Crucially for Germany's future prospects, it was agreed that a committee be set up in each country to establish the 'historical, social [and] psychological origins that have affected the art of the last 50 years, and have contributed to the genesis of abstract art in all its shades.'⁴⁰

In January 1949, *KW* debated the formation of a German Art Historians' Association, although its tone was highly ambivalent, citing as its unfortunate precedent the former Nazi Culture Minister Bernhard Rust's decree of March 1939 that had established an identical organisation.⁴¹ Despite this note of caution, a second German Art Historians' Conference took place in Munich in 1949 with some 300 experts gathered from throughout Germany, Austria, Switzerland and the USA. Artistic concerns were discussed objectively without reference to 'the problems of the time' (*Zeitprobleme*). The final day's 'explosive theme', nineteenth and twentieth century art, provoked 'an extraordinary excitement amongst the participants.'⁴² Hans Sedlmayr and Werner Haftmann typified the polarisation of cultural discourse in western Germany at the time. Sedlmayr adopted a somewhat 'superior, clever and wholehearted defence of his diagnosis of a cultural 'crisis of the times', whereas Haftmann 'proclaimed his approval for art's absolute freedom as the highest value of fine art'.⁴³

Symbolic of the cultural breach between East and West, *KW*'s account of the Munich conference was silent on the major presence of German artists from the *SBZ* whose representatives were at pains to dispel the myth of 'limits on artistic freedom' in their Zone, preferring to discuss the issues of public commissioning of art versus private patronage, what form commissions should take and the dubious relevance of critics attending exhibitions. Artists from the Western Zones must have observed with some envy that some 90% of commissions in the Soviet Zone were from the public sector⁴⁴ providing incentives for artists to produce works for which they might obtain funding. Certain artists spoke of being short of work and the difficulties this caused. Those in the East however had been able to look to trade union protection through its union for its artists and writers (*Gewerkschaft Kunst und Schrifttum*), part of the Free German Trades Union Congress⁴⁵ or democratic organisations like the *Kulturbund*. Despite this outward appearance of cultural independence, this contributed to artists'

sense of security and forged bonds between artists irrespective of their individual creative philosophies.

Conclusion

In many ways, these pluralistic visions of painting's future direction highlighted humanism's underlying contradictions as well as the new opportunities and therefore encouraged progressive debate. These distilled into intractable arguments between those seeking to protect the freedom of art, and those who thought art should serve to underpin a new social order. This ideological clash raised other difficult questions by concentrating artists' minds over the relevance of the *Kulturgeschichte* to painting's new role post-1945 and what should or could be salvaged from a past culminating in Nazism. Many chose to forget this awkward legacy, and by sidestepping the question of guilt, thus render obsolete art they viewed as part of an unwanted past.

From 1945 to 1949, painting reacted as a litmus paper for a country in shock about its past and confused about its future. Confident about how art could once again be a force for good but bitterly divided over how to achieve these aspirations, the democratic humanist era played a key part in art's renewal. Humanist painting as an expression of individual freedom of thought and the personalisation of hopes for a better future had survived in its very separate incarnations and helped to create conditions for painters to articulate their different experiences and aspirations. Icons of post-war German art such as Beuys and Kiefer, and a new generation of artists brought up in the East just before or during the war, such as Penck, Polke and Richter were thus able to deal with and to accomplish what to many, seemed impossible in May 1945 – re-engage, re-establish and re-identify as *German* artists.

¹ Angela Schneider, 'Abstraction as a World Language: Winter-Wols-Baumeister-Nay', in *The Romantic Spirit in German Art 1790-1990*, ed. by Keith Hartley and others (London: South Bank Centre/ Edinburgh: Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art/ Berlin: Nationalgalerie, 1995), pp. 450-452.

² Martin Damus, *Kunst in der BRD 1945-1990*, (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1995), pp. 11-12.

³ Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*, trans. by E. & C. Paul, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951), pp. 129-31.

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- ⁴ Carl-Ernst Matthias, 'Künstlerkongress in Dresden', *Bildende Kunst* (hereafter *BK*), 1 (1947), 3-11.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Heinz Trökes, 'Moderne Kunst in Deutschland', *Das Kunstwerk* (hereafter *KW*), 8/9 (1947), 73-75, 73; Werner Dopp, 'Dresdens Ruf an alle Deutschen,' *BK*, 7 (1949), 205.
- ⁷ 'Ein gesamtdeutscher Überblick Dresden 1949', *BK*, 9 (1949), 267.
- ⁸ *BK*, 10 (1948), 12-16.
- ⁹ Emil Endres, *BK*, 1 (1949), 219.
- ¹⁰ Max Grabowski, 'Kunst im Leben des Volkes', *BK*, 3 (1947), 15-16.
- ¹¹ Heinz Lüdecke, 'Wie kann den Künstlern geholfen werden?' *BK*, 1 (1949), 14-15.
- ¹² Lüdecke, 'Maler des proletarischen Humanismus', in *Otto Nagel*, (Berlin: Deutsche Akademie der Künste, 1954).
- ¹³ Gerhard Pommeranz-Liedtke, 'Wohin führt der Weg der deutschen Kunst?' *BK*, 9 (1949), 267-268.
- ¹⁴ Jost Hermand, *Kultur im Wiederaufbau - Die Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1945-1965*, (Frankfurt: Ullstein, 1989), p. 68.
- ¹⁵ Egon Vietta, 'Franz Radziwill', *KW*, 6 (1946-47), 42.
- ¹⁶ Hermand, 171-172.
- ¹⁷ Ludwig Emmanuel Reindl, 'Werner Scholz', *KW*, 1/2 (1948), 11-18 (p. 13).
- ¹⁸ Hermand, 68-71.
- ¹⁹ Heinrich Böll, 'Maler und Zeitgenosse', in *Meistermann - Werke und Dokumente*, 11-14 (p. 12).
- ²⁰ Egon Vicke, 'Willi Baumeister. "Das Unbekannte in der Kunst"', *KW*, 5/6 (1948), 84; *BK*, 1 (1949), 38.
- ²¹ Lüdecke, 'Die Entwirklichung der bürgerlichen Kunst,' *BK*, 2.5 (1948), 12; Rudolf Schlichter, *BK*, 10 (1949), 315.
- ²² Egon Vietta, 'Der Späte Baumeister. Zur Deutung seines bildnerischen Werkes', *Kunst*, 1 (1948), 97-102 (p. 101).
- ²³ Heinz Trökes, 'Der Surrealismus', *KW*, 8/9 (1947), 30-36, 35; also discussed in Trökes, 'Moderne Kunst und Zeitbewusstsein', *BK*, 3 (1948), 17-19 (p. 19).
- ²⁴ Cf. Lüdecke, 'Die Jugend hat das Wort', *BK*, 6 (1947), 21-23; Ernst Wüsten, 'Junge Generation', *BK*, 3 (1947), 17-19.

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- ²⁵ ‘Zum Kunstleben der Gegenwart’, *BK*, 1 (1949), 72. According to October 1946 statistics of the 46,021 working in the artistic professions in the *SBZ*, 4,195 were painters or printmakers 2,697 being women.
- ²⁶ Matthias, *BK*, 1 (1947), 3-11 (p. 5).
- ²⁷ Hans Kinkel, ‘Zweite Deutsche Kunstausstellung Dresden 1950’, *KW*, 4 (1950), 44-45.
- ²⁸ Rudolf Engel, ‘Zur Situation der deutschen Kunst’, *BK*, 10 (1949), 311-312.
- ²⁹ Carl Georg Nestler, ‘Die Kunst, eine Funktion der Geschichte’, *BK*, 4 (1949), 130-131.
- ³⁰ ‘Moderne Kunst in Deutschland’, *KW*, 8/9, (1947), 13.
- ³¹ *Otto Nagel - 65. Geburtstag*, (Berlin: Deutsche Akademie der Künste, 1959), p. 27.
- ³² Lüdecke, *BK*, 1 (1947), 15.
- ³³ Franz Steglitz, *BK*, 2 (1947), 26-27; cf. Albert Ludwig, Halberstadt, 6/11/1947, *BK*, 2 (1948), 27-29.
- ³⁴ Carl-Ernst Matthias, ‘Wir sagen unsere Meinung’, *BK*, 2 (1947), 27.
- ³⁵ Letters from Göritz, 31/5/1947; Wilhelm Röske, Magdeburg, 27/5/1947; Berlin, 8/6/1947; Annette Schröder & Lene Wörle, Bautzen, 27/6/1947; Wilhelm Mecklenburg, Berlin-Britz, 3/6/1947, *BK*, 6 (1947), 29; cf. *BK*, 2 (1948).
- ³⁶ Letters from H. Gerhardt, Lengefeld (Sachsen), 23/11/1947; Herta Brand, Berlin, 12/11/1947, 19/11/1947, *BK*, 2.2 (1947), 27-29.
- ³⁷ Idem., Letters from Fritz Werner, Gera, 31/10/1947; Lothar Stiller, Naumburg/Saale, 26/11/1947; Dorothea Wendt, Dresden, 13/11/1947.
- ³⁸ ‘Stimmen über abstrakte Malerei’, *BK*, 4 (1948), 28. Letters from *Westdeutschen Rundschau*, Wuppertal, *Die Wochenpost*, Stuttgart, *Neue Zeitung*, München, *Abendpost*, Hannover, *Saarländische Zeitung*, Saarbrücken, *Zeitschrift für Kunst*, Leipzig.
- ³⁹ Letter from M. Besser, Steinwiesen, 10/11/1947, *BK*, 2 (1948), 28.
- ⁴⁰ Aleksis Rannit, ‘Erster Weltkongress der Kunstkritiker,’ *KW*, 8/9 (1948), 46-47.
- ⁴¹ A.E. Brinckmann, ‘Deutscher Kunsthistoriker-Verband?’ *KW*, 1 (1949), 52.
- ⁴² Gustav Barthel, ‘Deutsche Kunsthistorikertagung in München,’ *KW*, 8 (1949), 55.
- ⁴³ Idem., cf. Hans Sedlmayr’s *Der Verlust der Mitte - die bildende Kunst des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts als Symptom und Symbol der Zeit*, (Salzburg: Müller, 1948).
- ⁴⁴ ‘Begegnung mit Westdeutschen Künstlern’, *BK*, 10 (1949), 353-354.

⁴⁵ Idem.