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**German Art Collections and Exhibits since 1989:  
the Legacy of the GDR**

This chapter examines several pivotal exhibitions of GDR art that took place within Germany around the turn of the twenty-first century. Unification has occasioned a thorough reappraisal of the German visual art tradition, partly because of the practical problems of reintegrating public collections, but also extending to broader questions about figurative and historical art. Naturally, this raises questions about the modes of presenting art in the twenty-first century, particularly in light of the two German dictatorships of the last century. Should the cultural products of a forty-year period – which had always maintained strong connections with their earlier German ‘heritage’ – be subsumed into longer-term narratives, set apart as historical curiosities of little aesthetic value, or removed altogether?

In the twenty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall the enlarged Federal Republic of Germany achieved remarkable success in maintaining political and social stability in the centre of Europe. In the process it witnessed and fostered a renewed cultural self-confidence, which drew upon the German past but which was also in the international contemporary vanguard. A component of that past is the forty-year cultural production of the German Democratic Republic, and contributing to Germany’s international profile are a number of visual artists whose careers at least began in the GDR. Prices for contemporary work at salerooms around the world confirm that living German artists – such as Gerhard Richter, Georg Baselitz and Anselm Kiefer – are amongst the most sought-after. There may be a number of reasons for this, but not least amongst them are that many German artists confront difficult historical topics and that they do so in a primarily figurative manner. The contribution of the visual art of the GDR to this situation is evident, but also complex.

In Germany since the collapse of the GDR there have been many twists and turns in the approaches taken towards its cultural legacy. The state-sponsored visual arts faced an initial period of outright rejection – certainly in western Germany, and to an extent in the East too – which has been followed by a shifting set of interactions between present-day concerns and the visual heritage of the GDR. Aesthetic, political, ethical, pragmatic, economic, and personal con-

cerns entered into a long-running debate in Germany, called from time to time – with no great originality – the *Bilderstreit*.<sup>1</sup> At its narrowest, the discussion has been about whether the artists and artistic products of a dictatorship should be accorded legitimacy and credibility within a democratic society. At its broadest, it has involved a major reappraisal of the history of German art. This reappraisal has three principal dimensions: the German artistic canon; the art of the Cold War years; and an aesthetic evaluation of what remains from the art of the GDR. Although its focus has been primarily within Germany itself, it is part of broader international debates about German visual culture and about art in the post-Cold War world more generally. Major exhibits of German art from many periods have been staged in unprecedented numbers in Great Britain since the mid-1980s, opening up new perspectives on post-National Socialist and post-Cold War Germany.<sup>2</sup> The United States hosted an exhibit of GDR art just as the regime was fracturing, and since then there have been many individual and thematic shows, which have often explicitly addressed questions of German history and identity. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) in particular has placed significant emphasis on the difficult history of German art in the twentieth century, most recently in the ‘Art of Two Germanys’ exhibit, which subsequently travelled to Nuremberg and Berlin.<sup>3</sup> More broadly on the post-Cold War theme, Soviet and Chinese painting have been opened up to the markets and to the viewing publics.<sup>4</sup> The specific links between Germany and Russia were explored in two giant, multi-media shows in Berlin and Moscow in 1995-6 and 2003-4.<sup>5</sup>

This discussion of collection and exhibition strategies in Germany since 1989 takes place, then, within a much wider international context. Many of the larger exhibits are co-operations between institutions in two or more countries; the art market operates across national boundaries, and in many countries, museum and gallery development is seen as an important economic driver, in addition to its cultural functions. Nonetheless, the emphasis here will be upon the changes which have taken place in Germany itself since German unification. It will be seen that the partial incorporation of the visual legacy of the GDR is only one component of a bigger picture.

### **Reconfiguring Germany's Art Galleries**

The reappraisal of the German visual art tradition has several facets related to the end of Germany's division. It is in part a means of addressing the practical problems of redesigning, reinterpreting and reintegrating the public collections of the two German states. The challenge has been most acute in Berlin, where huge public investment has been made in a realignment of the city's museums and the Preussischer Kulturbesitz. One by one the major international institutions on the museum island in the heart of the old 'capital of the GDR' are being closed, renovated and reopened: the Alte Nationalgalerie, the Bode-Museum, and most recently, the Neues Museum.<sup>6</sup> The nearby Deutsches Historisches Museum, which used to culminate its documentary displays in the sunny uplands of real existing socialism, has been completely reconfigured and extended. Ambitious plans are also in train for the partial re-creation of the Hohenzollerns' city palace, the Schloss, as an international cultural meeting-point, the Humboldt-Forum. Meanwhile, in what had been West Berlin, the post-war developments of the Dahlem museums and of the Kulturforum on the Potsdamer Strasse (including the Neue Nationalgalerie from the 1960s and the Gemäldegalerie, housing the paintings of the old masters, from the 1990s) have needed to be rethought in the context of the coherent distribution of Berlin's treasures across the city. Other developments include the establishment in 1996 of the contemporary art exhibition space in the converted Hamburger Bahnhof, the opening in 2001 of the Jüdisches Museum, the new wing of which was designed by architect Daniel Libeskind, and the rehousing nearby of the Berlinische Galerie in 2004. Not all of these initiatives could be described as parts of a grand strategy for the city, and some of them have their origins well before 1989. Nonetheless, they are all testimony to serious attempts both to commemorate and to celebrate, connecting the traumatic past with Germany's prolific artistic heritage. No museum in Berlin – whether primarily historical or cultural – escapes the need to position itself in relation to the Third Reich, World War II and the Cold War, even if they are not its prime focus.

It is not only in reunited Berlin, however, that there have been changes. Throughout Germany museums and galleries have wrestled with matters directly or indirectly connected with the demise of the GDR and German unification: how to present figurative and historical

art; how to deal with the pre-twentieth-century past in the light of the two German dictatorships of the last century; and the modes of presenting art in the twenty-first century. It is striking that in the 1990s there were three primary reorganisations in German public art galleries: of the art of the nineteenth century; of contemporary art; and of the GDR art in the galleries of eastern Germany, at first removing most of it from the walls and only later coming to a more considered position.

Major institutions in both the old and the new Federal States – in Berlin, Leipzig, Dresden, Frankfurt am Main, Hamburg, Hanover and elsewhere – closed their nineteenth-century galleries for refurbishment or complete rebuild. Both nineteenth- and twentieth-century collections were redesigned in a major extension of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg also in the 1990s, and in September 2000 the extraordinary Georg Schäfer collection of nineteenth-century paintings moved into its own purpose-built museum in Schweinfurt, twenty-five years after the death of Schäfer himself. Germany's presidency of the European Union in the first half of 2007 was marked by an exhibit in Brussels and then Munich entitled pointedly 'Views on Europe: Europe and German Painting in the 19th Century'. A series of galleries linking German art to most of the countries of Europe in turn culminated in a display of Adolph Menzel as the epitome of both German particularity and cosmopolitanism.<sup>7</sup>

This apparent rediscovery of the nineteenth century is not just a German phenomenon. Recent decades have seen that era given much more attention in Britain (the Pre-Raphaelites) and the United States (the Hudson River school), while French academic work by artists such as Bouguereau has become more visible and popular again since the 1980s. Nineteenth-century portraiture and landscape from Russia have also been exhibited in the Netherlands, Britain and elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> In the German case, however, there are issues at stake which give the nineteenth-century works a particular resonance. Both the National Socialists and the promoters of socialist realism in the GDR accorded nineteenth-century German artists such as Menzel and Wilhelm Leibl special status, both for their realism and – in Menzel's case – for their portrayal of German history. Throughout the years of the GDR the work of these artists was explored, in particular in the Frederick the Great paintings of Bernhard Heisig.<sup>9</sup> The romanticism of the earlier Caspar David Friedrich (of whom there was a huge retrospective in

Essen and Hamburg in 2006-7) was especially prized by the National Socialists, and has more recently influenced Wolfgang Mattheuer in the East and Anselm Kiefer in the West of Germany.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the re-display of German nineteenth-century portraiture, landscape and history painting poses some uncomfortable questions about the relationship of modern united Germany to nationalist discourses of the nineteenth century and the uses to which they were put in the twentieth. These questions were certainly asked before 1989, though within certain constraints in the GDR, but they now feature more prominently in the political context which has developed since then. As in other countries, there is an element of rehabilitation of the non-Impressionist nineteenth century, but also a confrontation with the more difficult history of German visual art over the last two centuries. Meanwhile, vast new spaces for contemporary art have also opened in a number of cities. The Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin was followed a year later, in 1997, by the Galerie der Gegenwart of the Kunsthalle in Hamburg, and in 2002 by the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich. Next door to the latter, a public-private initiative, the Museum Brandhorst, followed in 2009. This institution, like the Museum Frieder Burda in Baden-Baden, opened in 2004, derives from a private collection of the modern and contemporary. In all these cases the prominent figures of the post-1945 West German art scene (including those, like Gerhard Richter, who had migrated from the East) are displayed alongside their famous international counterparts, primarily from the United States. Here too there is a sense of the rehabilitation of the German within the international, a connection which had been so brutally ruptured by the National Socialists and which had been tested during the Cold War. In one instance, the historical linkages caused major controversy. The Hamburger Bahnhof displays derive in large part from the private collection of Friedrich Christian Flick, and the association of his family's considerable fortune with both the National Socialist regime and with the corruption of the political parties of the Federal Republic led to protests about the housing of the collection in Berlin. The argument that Flick was thereby making amends for the past did not convince all commentators.<sup>11</sup>

There were, of course, many different factors involved in this dramatic overhaul of collection and exhibit venues – cultural tourism and new technology amongst them. Parallel developments can also be observed in Britain, France, Spain and the United States. Nonetheless,

German unification in 1990 played a particular part in the way in which German galleries and museums now came to show the present and the past of German art in an international context. An especially troublesome feature was the reassessment of the art of the GDR. Should the cultural products of a forty-year period – which had always maintained strong connections with the earlier German ‘heritage’ – be subsumed into longer-term narratives, set apart as historical curiosities of little aesthetic value, or junked altogether? Since unification, all three things have happened, in varying degrees.

### **Exhibiting GDR Art**

Before 1989, the works of at least some artists from the GDR were known in the Federal Republic. The quartet of Heisig, Mattheuer, Willi Sitte and Werner Tübke, plus a small number of other practitioners approved by the GDR authorities, exhibited in the West, notably at the sixth Documenta in Kassel in 1977. And several West German private collectors and gallery-owners made a speciality of exposing GDR art to connoisseurs. Peter and Irene Ludwig built up their collection in Oberhausen,<sup>12</sup> and Galerie Brusberg displayed such works on the Kurfürstendamm in West Berlin. Rather than necessarily showing any political sympathy with the GDR, this niche market appealed because of the figurative subject matter and the painterly styles – expressionist in the case of Heisig and Sitte, old-masterly in the case of Tübke, and with touches of *Neue Sachlichkeit* and surrealism in the case of Mattheuer. These approved artists from the GDR also benefited from being permitted to travel and to exhibit abroad: in Italy, Britain, France, and eventually the United States. This was part of a deliberate foreign policy strategy, which also favoured this cultural outreach as a means of generating hard-currency income.<sup>13</sup>

The relatively privileged world of the most prominent artists of the GDR was thrown into immediate disarray by the events of 1989-90. These so-called ‘Painter Princes’ came under attack from several quarters, notably from Georg Baselitz, who described them succinctly if impolitely as ‘Arschlöcher’. In an interview in 2005 he made it clear that his controversial comment had only ever applied to the usual four suspects:

Die Arschlöcher-Bemerkung betraf nur die Staatskünstler Heisig, Mattheuer, Tübke und Sitte. Diese vier Maler sind korrupte Künstler, die mit dem miserablen System einer Diktatur an vorderster Stelle gearbeitet haben. Sie waren abhängig

von der Stasi und schlechte Maler noch dazu. Mit diesen Leuten kann man nicht Frieden schließen.<sup>14</sup>

In this viewpoint come together two of the most crucial accusations made about the prominent artists of the GDR: that they were collaborators with a dictatorship *and* that they were bad painters. An attack on the role of individuals, however, did not in itself address the question of what was to be done with their works and those of others in the holdings of the museums and other institutions of the GDR. Article 35 (2) of the Einigungsvertrag did specify that: 'Die kulturelle Substanz in dem in Artikel 3 genannten Gebiet [i.e. the GDR] darf keinen Schaden nehmen.'<sup>15</sup> However, this was scarcely a specific enough statement about what 'cultural assets' might include, or of what would count as 'damage'.

One of the first effects of German unification on the reception of East German art was, according to Bernd Lindner, an immediate slump in visitor numbers to museums and exhibits. He also detected a change in the social profile of visitors, with a fall in the number of 'workers' involved. Neither of these developments was surprising, in the light of all the other concerns and distractions facing the population of eastern Germany in 1989-91. Furthermore, as the economic infrastructure collapsed or was reshaped, the social and cultural roles of enterprises disappeared, and many smaller exhibition spaces closed for financial reasons. There was some attraction, though, in new experiences from the West. In 1991, again according to Lindner, the most successful show in the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden was of Andy Warhol.<sup>16</sup>

In the course of the 1990s, several large exhibits and conferences were held in the old GDR and Berlin about various aspects of official art under the SED. For the most part the shows documented state art policy and the collections of the parties and mass organisations. In other words, the emphasis – particularly in the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin – was on the *historical* dimension, rather than on questions of the intrinsic aesthetic merit, if any, of the works on display.<sup>17</sup> Even this 'documentary' aspect came to be one of considerable controversy, attached in particular to the name of Burg Beeskow, south-east of Berlin. This had been one of several collecting points for the art of the GDR, others being at Festung Königstein in Saxony and in Halle. The collapse of the SED regime had entailed, in some cases almost immediately and in others over a longer timeframe, the

dismantling of an infrastructure of public art. As political parties, mass organisations, and agricultural and industrial enterprises were dissolved and their premises disposed of, vast quantities of officially-sponsored artwork found itself without ownership. This was for the most part not the more prestigious material, which was already to be found in museums and galleries, but – with some exceptions – the day-to-day stuff, with particular reference to the working population. Some examples were from the early days of socialist realism in the 1950s, but far more was derivative material from the later decades. Much of it had little obvious political relevance, and included innocuous landscapes, portraits and still lifes, plus all kinds of handcraft kitsch, political busts and so on. Herbert Schirmer, CDU Minister of Culture in the de Maizière government of 1990, was instrumental in creating the Dokumentationszentrum Kunst der DDR for the new Federal States of Berlin, Brandenburg and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, an enterprise which occasioned much debate in the 1990s.<sup>18</sup> There were those, like the artist Hans-Hendrik Grimmling, who argued that the material collected was just rubbish to be disposed of.<sup>19</sup> A visit to the storage rooms at Burg Beeskow certainly reveals a lot of dross, which in most other countries would never have been retained at public expense.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, there is a powerful historical argument that since such a collection of 23,000 artefacts has been amassed, it would now be irresponsible to let it be lost. It need not be *Ostalgie* (though it can be), which suggests that future research on GDR culture and society would be damaged if this resource were to be abandoned. There have been some interesting thematic exhibits from the collection, but the designation ‘documentation centre’, rather than ‘art collection’ is undoubtedly the more appropriate.

The Weimar exhibit of 1999 was a special landmark in the debate about the art of the GDR. Weimar, European city of culture in that year, witnessed a tri-partite show on the theme of ‘Aufstieg und Fall der Moderne’.<sup>21</sup> The curator Achim Preiss used a variety of techniques to draw a line under what he saw as the historic art of the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> The first part of the show, in the Schloss, concentrated on the development of the ‘modern’, particularly in its Weimar context. Its temporary hanging of works in front of the old masters collection was not without its critics, but this was as nothing compared to the reception of parts two and three. These dealt respectively with the Third Reich and the GDR and were housed provocatively in the

decrepit post-war Mehrzweckhalle on one side of the unfinished National Socialist Gauforum. On the ground floor, works bought by or on behalf of Adolf Hitler were propped up against boards. Classicised erotica on the one hand and peasant genre scenes on the other were presented in this tawdry setting, deliberately to denigrate them. This treatment, redolent to many of the ways in which the Nazis themselves had displayed rejected art in 1937 and beyond, coupled with what was happening on the floor above, led to a deluge of criticism. Because of the way in which the space on the second floor was organised, it appeared that GDR art was being equated to the art of the Third Reich. Through the use of heavy grey tarpaulin, the main area had been converted into a sort of rotunda evocative of Tübke's *Frühbürgerliche Revolution in Deutschland* panorama at Bad Frankenhausen. The paintings, in no very obvious order, were hung closely together and two or three deep. The effect was of an amateur show or flea market. There were two other main spaces: the corridor which led into the rotunda, flanked on one side by monochrome photographs of drab daily life and on the other by giant canvases from the Palast der Republik in Berlin on the theme of 'Wenn Kommunisten träumen'. Leaving the central space, there was then a 'wedge' of a room displaying the work of artists – such as Gerhard Altenbourg – less to be described as 'official'. Although in the press and, more often, in the visitors' books there were expressions of interest in and support for the provocative exhibit concept, the overwhelming response from artists, politicians and the general public was that of outrage. Described in retrospect as 'das unsägliche Sammelsurium, das ein Architektur-Professor von phantastischer Inkompetenz 1999 in der Kulturhauptstadt Weimar hatte veranstalten können,'<sup>23</sup> the show was accused of taking a West German attitude towards the whole of GDR art and in the process trashing and ridiculing it. Legal proceedings were launched by several artists to have their paintings taken out of the exhibit, and on one occasion two artists physically removed their works. There was a re-hang in an attempt to placate the critics, but then the exhibit closed six weeks earlier than intended.<sup>24</sup>

If Preiss had intended to provoke, which he surely did, then he was entirely successful. However, the exhibit was undoubtedly a gross misjudgement. This was not because it was critical of major and minor figures in the GDR art world, nor because it raised questions about the equivalence of Nazi and GDR art (without giving any serious

answers), but because it flouted the conventions of how to treat the works of living artists, because it failed to take account of a potential similarity with the pillorying character of 'Degenerate Art' in 1937, and because it treated (almost) all painting produced in forty years of the GDR as if it were the same. In a sense, though, Weimar 1999 had a longer-term therapeutic effect. So much vitriol had been thrown and so much debate about the worth of GDR art had been had that subsequent discussion could be more measured. Several conferences followed – for instance, in Leipzig in May 2000, in Schloss Neuhardenberg in August 2003, and in Bonn in May 2007 – which brought together critical partners from all sides of the debate.

The next major exhibit after Weimar, 'Kunst in der DDR' in 2003, could not have been more different in its approach, nor in its reception.<sup>25</sup> First shown in the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, and revived in 2004-5 at the Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in Bonn, 'Kunst in der DDR' was, if anything, over-reverential in its approach. Unlike the Weimar extravaganza, it was curated by two East Germans, Eugen Blume and Roland März, whose careers had been in the GDR. They divided the galleries in part chronologically and in part thematically, missing out almost all stereotypical socialist realism from the 1950s and including some, if not many, artists who had been thorns in the side of the GDR authorities. One such was A.R. Penck. The overall impression was that there had been expressive, abstract, and conceptual strands in the art of the GDR, in addition to the undoubted prevalence of figurative, realist and historicising tendencies. The Leipziger Schule received solemn attention, including such works as Mattheuer's *Ausgezeichnete* (1973-4), an image which has long been used to illustrate social disillusionment and tension in later GDR society. Documentary aspects of the exhibit and the catalogue confronted questions about state control and lack of artistic freedom, without retreating from the basic premise that GDR art changed over time, was various in style and scope, and had serious things to say about modern society and German history.

Beyond the stand-alone exhibits, museums in eastern and western Germany have found various ways of handling the artistic legacy of the GDR. Examples may be taken from four cities. The Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, after coming under fire for its initial inclusion in a re-hang of works by Sitte and others, has a small sample

from the major quartet and a few others. The preliminary 1:10 version of Tübke's Panorama is amongst them. Though the GDR is covered in rooms of its own, there is otherwise no particular distinction, positive or negative, from the way in which the other twentieth-century galleries are handled. In the extraordinarily spacious new build of the Museum der bildenden Künste in Leipzig, there is a more-or-less permanent exhibit in the lower ground floor given over to art from both German states 1949-89. This gives the opportunity for viewing 'East' and 'West' German works alongside each other, and throws up some illuminating parallels. Before it closed for renovation, the Albertinum in Dresden reduced the number of GDR works on its walls; in its reopened splendour in 2010, large spaces are devoted to Gerhard Richter and Georg Baselitz, and Mattheuer and others are still on display. The re-opened Stadtmuseum on the other hand concentrates on Dresden art, not making a particular distinction between works produced before or after 1949. Of particular interest – both because it was located in the old Federal Republic and not in the GDR, and because of a particular controversy which will be elaborated below – is the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg. There the twentieth-century collection is displayed so as to include art from both the Third Reich and the GDR. However, both are shown in small side-rooms as if to emphasise that the art is problematic and should not be viewed as a natural part of the German canon. From the Third Reich are Adolf Ziegler's *Akt* (1942) and Sepp Hiltz's *Die rote Halskette* (1942), both much reproduced images from the Great German Art Exhibit. From the GDR were displayed in 2006-9 Sighard Gille's less than socialist realist *Gerüstbauer – Brigadefeier* (1975-7) and Wolfgang Peuker's disturbing portrayal of sexual violence, *Wände* (1981). The main galleries, on the other hand, follow the 'normal' pattern of expressionism, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and then post-war international abstraction and conceptual art.<sup>26</sup>

The display ethos of the Nuremberg museum is that it takes a documentary, rather than an aesthetic or art historical approach to modern German art, and it was this contention which lay behind the controversy in 2000 and beyond over the planned Willi Sitte exhibit. The headline news at the time was that the showing of 'Willi Sitte – Werke und Dokumente' had been called off because of protests about the honouring of an artist who had played a major part in the power structures of the GDR art establishment. In fact, as the volume which

emanated from a symposium on the subject in Nuremberg in 2001 makes plain, the debate was rather more complicated than that. Since the project had a 'documentary' focus, it had always been intended that the show of Sitte's work would be accompanied by political materials, some of which raised questions about his role as President of the Verband Bildender Künstler der DDR. When allegedly new revelations came to light in 2000, the board of the museum decided to undertake further research before permitting the exhibit to be staged. In the event, subsequent debate between the museum, Sitte himself, and other interested parties meant that the show never took place at all.<sup>27</sup> This has not prevented Sitte's works from being displayed in a fine new gallery in Merseburg, which also houses the Willi-Sitte-Stiftung für realistische Kunst.<sup>28</sup> There are similar private foundations for the late Werner Tübke and Wolfgang Mattheuer in Leipzig, both associated with the gallery of Karl Schwind, established in Frankfurt am Main in 1989 and specialising in figurative works from the former GDR.<sup>29</sup>

Another approach to the art of the GDR has been to reassess groups of works which were either on the fringes of acceptability to the regime or were produced more-or-less in private. These aspects were present in the 2003 'Kunst in der DDR' exhibit but are also very effective both aesthetically and commercially in smaller galleries. The 1950s have been fertile ground in this respect, where figurative – but in GDR official terms 'formalist' – works have been shown alongside documentation of interference and suppression by the authorities. The Kunstverein 'Talstrasse', a private gallery located in Halle on the other side of the river Saale from the shade of the Burg Giebichenstein art school, has shown such works in 'Verfemte Formalisten' (1998) and 'Meisterschüler vom Pariser Platz' (2007). In the works of Manfred Böttcher, Harald Metzkes, Ernst Schroeder and Werner Stötzer, the latter show conveyed a powerfully bleak and reflective 1950s atmosphere, which bears comparison with contemporaneous works in Britain and elsewhere.<sup>30</sup> The international dimension – in this case French, rather than British – is also to be found in Sigrid Hofer's exposition and analysis of abstract Art Informel in Dresden. This show – in Marburg, Dresden and also at the Kunstverein 'Talstrasse' – was a reminder of all the work which was created in the GDR outside the official channels.<sup>31</sup> It also suggested that there should be more consideration of those artists who switched between figurative and

abstract modes when circumstances suggested. Although not included in the exhibition, Hans Kinder in Dresden was one such artist; his abstract works of the Weimar Republic and of the 1970s and 1980s are now stressed more than his ultra-socialist realist contribution to the 1953 Dresden exhibit: the Freie Deutsche Jugend carrying aloft a portrait of Stalin.<sup>32</sup>

The twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall occasioned numerous ceremonies and exhibits in Germany and abroad, which reflected on the events of 1989-90 and also on the world as it has changed so dramatically since that time. As far as the visual arts were concerned, the major event was 'Art of Two Germanys/Cold War Cultures' or, in its German version, 'Kunst und Kalter Krieg: Deutsche Positionen 1945-89'. This exhibit, in three variants in Los Angeles, Nuremberg and Berlin, benefited from joint American-German curation by Stephanie Barron and Eckhart Gillen, which to a certain extent distanced it from the internal German debate since 1989, as discussed in Justinian Jampol's essay in this collection. For a show which stressed its Cold War location, the displays were remarkable for downplaying the explicitly political. In a broadly chronological format, the works from East and West Germany were shown intermingled, emphasising the thematic, particularly the 'German', connections. In a significant departure from 'Kunst in der DDR' from 2003-5, socialist realism was properly represented with a number of works by Rudolf Bergander, Heinz Löffler, Otto Nagel, Heinz Drache and Heinrich Witz. The Los Angeles version was in an art museum, whereas the German variants were displayed in the 'documentary' context of the Nuremberg venue and in the historical museum in Berlin. This difference serves to highlight the ambiguities of how East German art is to be presented, even twenty years after the demise of the GDR.<sup>33</sup>

### **Reconsidering GDR Art**

What, then, are the main issues which lie behind the chequered history and sometimes acrimonious disputes around the visual art of the GDR? In some respects, but only in some respects, there are similarities with the discourses surrounding the Salon and the Impressionists in late nineteenth-century France, the academies and the secessions in the German Kaiserreich, National Socialist art and expressionism, and, of course, socialist realism and 'formalism' in the

Soviet Union in the 1930s and the GDR in the 1950s. Put a little simplistically, the official art of the GDR came to represent figurative and recognisable art attuned to popular taste, but sufficiently connected to the longer western canon to allow for intellectual art historical debate. Opposite of this and its precursors was the uncontrollable, 'unfinished' and speculative, which – if it referred to real life at all – did so in critical and disturbing ways. But this dichotomy refers primarily to the early decades of the GDR, and even then not completely. Though it is clear that in some respects the implementation of socialist realism *did* connect visual art with the working people, there is also no doubt that the more disturbing images of Heisig, Tübke and Volker Stelzmann and the fleshy nudes of Sitte were off-putting rather than inviting. On the other hand, in the 1970s and 1980s some of the rather more bleak everyday images from the Leipziger Schule did strike a chord with their public.<sup>34</sup>

From its very beginnings, socialist realism in the GDR had to contend with accusations that its products differed little from those of the National Socialists. If there were elements of truth in that early on – minus, of course, the fundamental racist element in Nazi art – the development over a much longer time span than the Third Reich ever managed led to a wide differentiation of approaches. Where comparisons came back to bite, though, was when the question of dealing with GDR art was set alongside questions of how, even today, to present art from the Third Reich in public settings. The 1999 Weimar exhibit, no doubt quite intentionally, brought this to the forefront. It is instructive in this context to consider the flourishing of recent art-history scholarship on the Third Reich. Whereas most standard works on the subject quite rightly highlight racial and gender stereotyping, rural ideals, celebration of military valour and other propagandist purposes, the in-depth studies of individual artists which have appeared since the mid-1990s pay much closer attention to the iconography and its origins.<sup>35</sup> One does not have to claim that Werner Peiner, Adolf Ziegler, Adolf Wissel and so on are great artists worthy of rehabilitation in order to be able to subject their works to serious scrutiny and to uncover their intentional and implicit meanings. This approach can be very suggestive of broader social and cultural meaning, and is something substantially different from simply displaying them in historical exhibits on 'dictatorship', valuable though some of these may be.<sup>36</sup> The same thing surely applies to artists from the GDR, a regime which, though

unpleasant and oppressive in many regards, did not launch war or genocide. The protected artists were serving a non-democratic system and they were complicit in the suppression of others, but if one were to judge which art might appear in public on the grounds of complete political independence and personal moral integrity, there would be many empty galleries around the world, let alone in Germany itself. The problem seems to lie in a combination of 'neutral' art connoisseurship on the one hand and the commercial pressures of a celebratory art world on the other. If artists from the more distant past are judged by scholarship to be great visionary practitioners, fetching large sums in the auction houses, then the fact that they might have been superstitious, sexist, racist, violent lackeys is of no consequence to us. It may add a spice to the experience of looking at their works, but their personalities and behaviours cannot impinge upon us. That this is not true of the artists of the Third Reich even now, nor of the artists of the GDR, is a problem. It can, of course, be sidestepped by the ultimate damnation that no official art under those regimes could be good art. This was, of course, one of Baselitz's thrusts.

So what might lie behind the argument that work by the official artists of the GDR should not be displayed because it is no good? Leaving aside the truism that judgements about whether a work of art is any good or not vary even between trained professional critics, the accusation seems to rest both on distaste for modern political art on behalf of those in power and on a low esteem for eclectic, highly-referenced 'historical' pieces. Sitte, Heisig and Tübke repeatedly showed in their work that they were incredibly well-versed in the western canon. In positively post-modern fashion they included multiple visual citations in their paintings from the German and Italian Renaissances, from nineteenth-century artists such as Menzel and Courbet, and from critical artists of the twentieth century, such as Picasso, Otto Dix, Max Beckmann and Felix Nussbaum. Their non-German references were, however, two-edged. Only because they were accorded the right to travel and exhibit abroad, it could be argued, were they able to indulge fully in a rounded aesthetic, whereas artists less reliable politically were denied such luxuries and even hampered in their exhibiting at home.

Despite their eclecticism, there cannot surely be substance in any claim that GDR cultural policy and formal academic training promoted uniformity of style. In fact, the styles of Sitte, Heisig,

Mattheuer and Tübke are very distinct the one from the other, and their works are almost invariably recognisable across a crowded room. The problem has perhaps more to do with authenticity of another kind. All four are/were critical artists, but – except to an extent in the case of Mattheuer – their critique was always directed westward, rather than towards the shabby political regime which they served. This applies particularly to their treatment of the National Socialist past. War and fascism are condemned in dramatic fashion, but Nazism's racism and genocide only appear tangentially and/or belatedly. Personal responsibilities are not evoked openly – although they obviously do lie behind Heisig's tortured scenes of Breslau – and all the blame is placed upon the Federal Republic. In the light of recent world affairs Willi Sitte may, however, have a point when he suggests that his *Höllenstein Vietnam* (1966-7) might still have a resonance today.<sup>37</sup>

One view voiced since the 1970s is that the major artists of the GDR and their pupils had a connection with the German visual heritage which for decades in West Germany was subsumed under international modernism and postmodernism. Elements of this come out in the post-1990 debates. In his letter of 5 June 1999 to Rolf Bothe, criticising the Weimar exhibit, Mattheuer wrote as a postscript, 'Was ist das überhaupt für ein Begriff: DDR-Kunst. Spricht man je von BRD-Kunst? Wenn überhaupt, dann doch von deutscher Kunst.'<sup>38</sup> And Heisig, resentful of Baselitz calling him an 'Ausländer', declared in 2005: 'Ich bin Deutscher. Ostdeutscher, aber Deutscher!'<sup>39</sup> It is a slightly dangerous position, however, and one redolent of GDR rhetoric itself, to assume with Günter Grass that in the GDR 'es wurde deutscher gemalt', while West German art was cosmopolitan and international. Joseph Beuys was very clearly working within a German tradition, and Anselm Kiefer has made an international career through reflecting in his work about the uncomfortable German past.

As the older artists die – both Tübke and Mattheuer in 2004 – and the work of new generations develop, the sensitivity of the display of work from the GDR has undoubtedly diminished. There are still the dangers of a 'canon' of GDR art being created (Peter-Klaus Schuster), or alternatively of relegating the art of the GDR to a 'Bilder-Zoo' (Bernd Lindner), but in practice there is now a welcome variety of critical treatments. The ultimate irony is that amongst the plethora of artistic forms in a now pluralist united Germany, figurative realism is

one of the strongest. With surrealist, one might even say postmodernist, aspects, this has developed in western Germany as well, but currently to the fore is the so-called Neue Leipziger Schule.<sup>40</sup> The large mysterious canvases of Mattheuer-pupil Neo Rauch decorate not only the Museum der bildenden Künste in Leipzig itself, but also galleries nationally and internationally. His disturbing constellations of figures frequently draw upon historical, and often revolutionary, allusions, placing them in the context both of the nineteenth century and of the GDR.<sup>41</sup> Rauch's wife, Rosa Loy, applies a feminist perspective in her images of near-identical female twins.<sup>42</sup> Others associated with the 'school' include Tim Eitel and Christian Brandl. Norbert Bisky, whose troubling portrayal of naked or near-naked adolescent boys and girls references the art of the Third Reich and socialist realism, was born in Leipzig, though he studied under Baselitz in Berlin. There can no longer be any doubt that the legacy of the GDR is fully part of the serious visual culture of united Germany today, and has raised many interesting questions about the longer-term history of the visual arts in Germany. Whether 'eastern' works from 1949-90 grace major art galleries or are stacked in warehouses, they deserve to be subject to careful historical and art historical scrutiny, without thereby implying that the dictatorship was acceptable, or for that matter that liberal democracies produce only good art.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Kunstsammlungen zu Weimar, ed., *Der Weimarer Bilderstreit: Szenen einer Ausstellung: Eine Dokumentation*, Weimar: VDG, 2000; Friedrich Dieckmann, 'Bilderstreit und ein Ende?', *Freitag*, 34, 15 August 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Examples include: Gabriele Wittrin, ed., *Tradition and Renewal: Contemporary Art in the German Democratic Republic*, Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1984; Christos M. Joachimedes, Norman Rosenthal and Wieland Schmied, eds, *German Art in the 20th Century: Painting and Sculpture 1905-1985*, London: Royal Academy of Arts and Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1985; Keith Hartley, ed., *The Romantic Spirit in German Art 1790-1990*, Edinburgh, London and Stuttgart: South Bank Centre, National Galleries of Scotland and Oktagon Verlag, 1994; Ingrid Ehrhardt and Simon Reynolds, eds, *Kingdom of the Soul: Symbolist Art in Germany 1870-1920*, Munich, London and New York: Prestel, 2000; Françoise Forster-Hahn, Claude Keisch, Peter-Klaus Schuster and Angelika Wesenberg, eds, *Spirit of an Age: Nineteenth-Century Paintings from the Nationalgalerie Berlin*, London: National Gallery, 2001. In London there have also been individual retrospectives of: Georg Baselitz (2007), Max

Beckmann (2003), Joseph Beuys (1999 and 2005), Lovis Corinth (1997), Otto Dix (1992), Isa Genzken (2009), George Grosz (1997), Rebecca Horn (2005), Jörg Immendorff (1995), Wassily Kandinsky (1999 and 2006), Martin Kippenberger (2006), Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (2003), Paul Klee (2002), Gabriele Münter (2005), Albert Oehlen (2006), Sigmar Polke (2003-04), Gerhard Richter (2003-4 and 2009), Charlotte Salomon (1998-9), and Rosemarie Trockel (1998-9).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Nisbet, ed., *Twelve Artists From the German Democratic Republic* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Busch-Reisinger Museum, 1989; Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002; Reinhold Heller, ed., *Confronting Identities in German Art: Myths, Reactions, Reflections*, Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2003; Mark Coetzee and Laura Steward Heon, eds, *Life After Death: New Leipzig Paintings from the Rubell Family Collection*, Miami and North Adams: Mass MoCA, 2006; Sabine Rewald, ed., *Glitter and Doom: German Portraits from the 1920s*, New York, New Haven and London: Metropolitan Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2006; Ulrich Bischoff, Elisabeth Hipp and Jeanne Anne Nugent, eds, *From Caspar David Friedrich to Gerhard Richter: German Paintings from Dresden*, Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2006. See Justinian Jampol's essay in this volume for details of the major LACMA exhibitions.

<sup>4</sup> On the Soviet Union, see Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998; and also the online catalogue at <http://www.behind-the-iron-curtain.de/download/katalog.pdf> of a Berlin exhibit in 2009-10 entitled 'Behind the Iron Curtain: The Art of Socialist Realism'. On China, see the catalogue of a 2005-09 exhibit in Bern, Hamburg and Berkeley, California: Bernhard Fibicher and Matthias Frehner, eds, *Mahjong: Chinesische Gegenwartskunst aus der Sammlung Sigg*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2006. And in 2008-9 the Saatchi Gallery in London hosted 'The Revolution Continues: New Chinese Art'.

<sup>5</sup> Irina Antonowa and Jörn Merkert, eds, *Berlin-Moskau/Moskau-Berlin 1900-1950*, Munich and New York: Prestel, 1995, and Pawel Choroschilow, Jürgen Harten, Joachim Sartorius and Peter-Klaus Schuster, eds, *Berlin-Moskau/Moskau-Berlin 1950-2000*, 2 vols, Berlin: Nicolai, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> See 'Editorial: Berlin's Museumsinsel', *The Burlington Magazine*, 148 (2006), 71-2; 'Editorial: Berlin's Neues Museum', *The Burlington Magazine*, 151 (2009), 815.

<sup>7</sup> Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden and Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen München, eds, *Blicke auf Europa: Europa und die deutsche Malerei des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Henk van Os and Sjeng Scheijen, *Ilya Repin: Russia's Secret*, Groningen and Zwolle: Groninger Museum and Waanders, 2001; David Jackson and Patty Wageman,

eds, *Russian Landscape*, Schoten, Groningen and London: BAI, Groninger Museum and The National Gallery, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Jörn Merkert and Peter Pachnicke, eds, *Bernhard Heisig: Retrospektive*, Munich: Prestel, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> Hubertus Gassner, ed., *Caspar David Friedrich: Die Erfindung der Romantik*, Essen, Hamburg and Munich: Museum Folkwang, Hamburger Kunsthalle and Hirmer, 2006; Ursula Mattheuer-Neustädt, ed, *Wolfgang Mattheuer: Abend, Hügel, Wälder, Liebe: Der andere Mattheuer*, Bielefeld and Leipzig: Kerber, 2007; Andrea Lauterwein, *Anselm Kiefer/Paul Celan: Myth, Mourning and Memory*, London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> See Peter Kessen, *Von der Kunst des Erbens: Die 'Flick-Collection' und die Berliner Republik*, Berlin and Vienna: Philo, 2004; and Thomas Ramge, *Die Flicks: Eine deutsche Familiengeschichte über Geld, Macht und Politik*, Frankfurt am Main and New York: Campus, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Bernhard Mensch, ed., *Durchblick: Ludwig-Institut für Kunst der DDR Oberhausen*, Oberhausen: Ludwig-Institut, 1984.

<sup>13</sup> See Christian Saehrendt, *Kunst als Botschafter einer künstlichen Nation: Studien zur Rolle der bildenden Kunst in der Auswärtigen Politik der DDR*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2009; Wittrin, *Tradition and Renewal*; and Nisbet, *Twelve Artists From the German Democratic Republic*.

<sup>14</sup> Karolina Pajdak and Frank Zauritz, 'Rot-Grün ist das Peinlichste, was in Deutschland seit des Kriegsend passiert ist', *B.Z.-Online*, 4 September 2005, at: <http://www.bz-berlin.de/archiv/in-der-b-z-am-sonntag-spricht-der-gro-szlig-e-maler-georg-baselitz-ueber-seine-kopf-ueber-bilder-das-leben-in-einem-120-zimmer-schlo-szlig-und-die-kanzler-portraits-article268034.html> (accessed 20 December 2010).

<sup>15</sup> *Der Einigungsvertrag*, Munich: Goldmann, 1991, p. 901.

<sup>16</sup> Bernd Lindner, "'Anders als in Dresden damals...': Ostdeutsche Kunstrezipienten und ihre Ausstellungserfahrungen nach 1989', *Deutschland Archiv*, 31 (1998), 732-44.

<sup>17</sup> For example, Monika Flacke, ed., *Auf der Suche nach dem verlorenen Staat: Die Kunst der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR*, Berlin: Deutsches Historisches Museum and Ars Nicolai, 1994; Monika Flacke, ed., *Auftragskunst der DDR 1949-1990: Bildende Künstler in der DDR zwischen Ästhetik und Politik*, Berlin: Deutsches Historisches Museum, 1995; Dieter Vorsteher, ed., *Parteiauftrag: Ein Neues Deutschland: Bilder, Rituale und Symbole der frühen DDR*, Berlin: Deutsches Historisches Museum, 1996; Paul Kaiser and Karl-Siegbert Rehberg, eds,

*Enge und Vielfalt – Auftragskunst und Kunstförderung in der DDR: Analysen und Meinungen*, Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 1999; and Dokumentationszentrum Kunst der DDR, ed., *Volks Eigene Bilder: Kunstbesitz der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR*, Berlin: Metropol, 1999.

<sup>18</sup> *Die Depots der Kunst: Symposium 13. bis 15. November 1996 Burg Beeskow*, Beeskow: Dokumentationszentrum Kunst der DDR, [1997].

<sup>19</sup> Hans-Hendrik Grimmling in conversation with the author, Berlin, 22 November 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Author's visit to Burg Beeskow, 15 November 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Rolf Bothe and Thomas Föhl, eds, *Aufstieg und Fall der Moderne*, Ostfildern-Ruit: Kunstsammlungen zu Weimar and Hatje Cantz, 1999.

<sup>22</sup> Achim Preiss, *Abschied von der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Weimar: VDG, 1999.

<sup>23</sup> Dieckmann, 'Bilderstreit und ein Ende?'

<sup>24</sup> Kunstsammlungen zu Weimar, *Der Weimarer Bilderstreit*.

<sup>25</sup> Eugen Blume and Roland März, eds, *Kunst in der DDR: Eine Retrospektive der Nationalgalerie*, Berlin: G+H Verlag, 2003.

<sup>26</sup> See Ursula Peters, ed., *Moderne Zeiten: Die Sammlung zum 20. Jahrhundert*, Nuremberg: Germanisches Nationalmuseum, 2000.

<sup>27</sup> G. Ulrich Grossmann, ed., *Politik und Kunst in der DDR: Der Fonds Willi Sitte im Germanischen Nationalmuseum*, Nuremberg: Verlag des Germanischen Nationalmuseums, 2003.

<sup>28</sup> *Willi Sitte: 28. Februar 2006 – 85. Geburtstag*, Merseburg: Willi-Sitte-Galerie, 2006. The website (accessed 22 December 2009) is at: [http://www.willi-sitte-galerie-merseburg.de/Willi\\_Sitte.html](http://www.willi-sitte-galerie-merseburg.de/Willi_Sitte.html).

<sup>29</sup> See <http://www.galerie-schwind.de/galerie.0.html> and <http://www.tuebke-stiftung-leipzig.de/> (both accessed 22 December 2009).

<sup>30</sup> Dorit Litt and Matthias Rataiczky, eds, *Verfemte Formalisten: Kunst aus Halle (Saale) 1945 bis 1963*, Halle (Saale): Kunstverein 'Talstrasse', 1998; Matthias Rataiczky and Dorit Litt, eds, *Meisterschüler vom Pariser Platz: Malerei und Plastik aus Berlin der 1950er Jahre*, Halle (Saale): Kunstverein 'Talstrasse', 2007.

<sup>31</sup> Sigrid Hofer, ed., *Gegenwelten: Informelle Malerei in der DDR: Das Beispiel Dresden*, Frankfurt am Main and Basel: Stroemfeld, 2006.

<sup>32</sup> Hans Kinder, *Figurationen: Aus dem A-Zyklus*, Halle (Saale): Staatliche Galerie Moritzburg and Landeskunstmuseum Sachsen-Anhalt, 2001; *Dritte Deutsche Kunstausstellung Dresden 1953*, Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1953, unnumbered plate: Hans Kinder, 'Weltfestspiele 1951'.

<sup>33</sup> Stephanie Barron and Sabine Eckmann, *Art of Two Germanys/Cold War Cultures*, New York: Abrams, 2009; Stephanie Barron and Sabine Eckmann, eds, *Kunst und Kalter Krieg: Deutsche Positionen 1945-89*, Cologne: DuMont, 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Bernd Lindner, *Verstellter, offener Blick: Eine Rezeptionsgeschichte bildender Kunst im Osten Deutschlands 1945-1995*, Cologne, Weimar, Vienna: Böhlau, 1998; Birgit Poppe, *Freizeit und Privatleben in der Malerei der DDR: Formen und Funktionen neuer Motive der Leipziger Schule nach 1970*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000.

<sup>35</sup> For example, Ingeborg Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei und Kunstpolitik im Nationalsozialismus*, Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1994; Anja Hesse, *Malerei des Nationalsozialismus: Der Maler Werner Peiner (1897-1984)*, Hildesheim: Olms, 1995; Olaf Peters, *Neue Sachlichkeit und Nationalsozialismus: Affirmation und Kritik 1931-1947*, Berlin: Reimer, 1998; Elke Frietsch, 'Kulturproblem Frau': *Weiblichkeitsbilder in der Kunst des Nationalsozialismus*, Cologne, Weimar, Vienna: Böhlau, 2006; Nikola Doll, *Mäzenatentum und Kunstförderung im Nationalsozialismus: Werner Peiner und Hermann Göring*, Weimar: VDG, 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Most recently, 'Kunst und Propaganda: Im Streit der Nationen 1930-1945', Deutsches Historisches Museum Berlin, January-April 2007.

<sup>37</sup> Author's conversation with Willi Sitte, Merseburg, 22 July 2007.

<sup>38</sup> Wolfgang Mattheuer to Rolf Bothe in: *Der Weimarer Bilderstreit*, 5 June 1999, p. 132.

<sup>39</sup> Barbara Möller, "'Ich bin Ostdeutscher, aber Deutscher!'" Martin-Gropius Bau: Berlin ehrt Bernhard Heisig', *Hamburger Abendblatt*, 15 October 2005 at: <http://www.abendblatt.de/daten/2005/10/25/495940.html> (accessed 21 December 2010).

<sup>40</sup> See Claudia Mesch, 'Socialist Primitivism and the "New" Leipzig School', *The Art Book*, 14:1 (February 2007), 54-5.

<sup>41</sup> Neo Rauch, *Neue Rollen*, Wolfsburg: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, 2006.

<sup>42</sup> Ulrike Lorenz, ed., *Rosa Loy: Die Verbündeten*, Gera: Kunstsammlung Gera, 2003.