State patronage in the German Democratic Republic: Artistic and political change in a state socialist society

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Modern art has a complex and deeply problematic relation to society and politics. This is true—and generally recognized—in the capitalist West. It was equally true of the state socialist countries of Eastern Europe. An exploration of the role art played in these countries is often blocked by a simple stereotype, that Stalinist policies have overwhelmed and deformed an art that otherwise—if granted its own integrity—would take on the forms and social functions of the arts in the West. This simplistic view arises out of moral outrage. Yet one can share the outrage and still reject the stereotype. Implicit in this stereotype is a conception of art that sees its historical development as ultimately determined from within, provided that art is given the social and political autonomy that it ought to have. This is naive reductionism, whether it is applied in the West or in the East.

Stalinism did indeed impose its will on art as on other spheres of social life in Eastern Europe. But this proposition does not describe fully the life and development of art in postwar Eastern Europe. The demands and dilemmas facing the artist in these state socialist societies were enormously varied and complex both before and after the decline of Stalinism. Stalinist impositions and total state control of art patronage must be seen as one extreme in a wide variety of patterns relating art to society and politics. At the opposite extreme is a model of the alienated artist without any formal patron or audience, producing for a market that neither directly sponsors nor values the creations. Exploring such interrelations of artist and patron in a state socialist country can help to broaden our view of the different relations possible between art and society, and, in turn, this can tell us much about the variable social nature of art.

This article is concerned primarily with visual artists in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), but their political situation was similar to that of creative artists in other media. Regardless of the art form selected, then, studying art and politics in the GDR is particularly informative because the historical background of the Weimar Republic and contemporary developments in the art of West Germany after World War II
remained an important reference point for artistic creation in East Germany after the war. At the same time, the establishment of the GDR represented a radical break with the past, a social and political transformation very different from the trajectory of change in West Germany.

From its very beginnings, modern art in all media also was intended to make a radical break with the past by rejecting traditional forms of patronage, just as it rejected traditional styles (though at the same time reacting to them), and deliberately distanced itself from the established expectations of the audience. Early impressionist exhibits in Paris were jeered at by visitors, as increasingly the autonomous development of art conflicted with any expectation that it serve society. Artistic autonomy became symbolized by a bohemian life style which--even if not lived by many artists--was viewed as spiritually akin to and even necessary for artistic creativity. In time, rapid change and development became the accepted norm for art in the West. Such norms became dominant in critical discourse as well as in the market place, and artists had to conform to a standard of constant change in their own styles if they expected critical acclaim and access to the elite market--or to any market in which art was taken seriously.

Artists and art traditions rooted in this historical background confronted a radically different situation in the newly created state of the German Democratic Republic. There, rather than facing the choice of creating for an avant-garde of intellectual elite (often nouveaux in wealth) or else starving totally unappreciated, artists were supposed to meet the needs of the working classes and serve the development of a new social order--the creation of a socialist society. In this new situation, they faced contradictions for which they were unprepared by past experience. After the Nazi period, even artists politically committed to the new political order retained many attitudes and ideological positions associated with the earlier development of modern art as they began to work again.

The first dilemma artists now faced involved conceptions about the function of art. Modern art had not only reflected the individual experience of artists in often marginal positions in society, it also tended to look critically at the surrounding society, focusing on suffering, fragmentation, and disorientation, and it rarely praised either the status quo or visions of the future. For artists to support and be supported by the now dominant socialist political elite this meant a radical about face vis-a-vis society and the state. A second contradiction was closely related, concerning the audience for art. Art in the new GDR society was to be accessible to the working people. Yet the more esoteric standards of earlier modern art could not be easily dismissed; in fact, for most artists, these continued to define artistic integrity and existential commitment. A third dilemma corresponded to the first two and concerned the increasing political control of artistic production and the need to conform to official expectations in order to carry on an artistic career at all. This dilemma was a serious one because along with control came opportunity. For many, there was real pleasure in being economically secure as an artist, rather than continuing to live under very marginal economic conditions; thus the temptation was strong to conform to the new political order's wishes.

Of course, such security required even support for the new vision--and increasingly the defective reality--of a socialist society, which insisted on art's popular accessibility. Both security and accessibility were formalized through political control that was a central feature of the obligatory style of "socialist realism." Still, as we will see, the meaning of this official doctrine, as well as the artistic responses to changing political demands, varied over time, even before the dramatic changes in the fall of 1989.

While visual art in the GDR was obviously affected by complex relationships with both the Soviet Union and the Federal Republic of Germany, it also evolved internally. This article will examine these issues, while focusing on the social and political context. It will give a brief background for the present organization and development of GDR art, describe the primary institutions responsible for its patronage (its production, reproduction and distribution), and explore some of the differences in attitudes toward the function and acceptable forms of art both among artists and the GDR's art audience. Finally, the article will discuss the importance of artists' emigration to West Germany, the increase in contacts with western art, and the impact of the recent dramatic political change on GDR artists and patronage structures. Recognition of both the influences of societal change on the art world and, in turn, the impact of internal developments in art on GDR society increase our understanding of the multifaceted relationship of art to political developments in a socialist society. On this basis, we may conclude that the difficulties encountered by
state patronage structures in the context examined here are not too unlike those experienced by institutional patrons of the arts in the contemporary world, regardless of type of political economy.

THE BEGINNING: GDR ART AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The heritage of GDR art was rooted not just in the immediate past of the Nazi period but more importantly in the more distant Weimar Republic and in the traditions of even more remote periods such as the realism of nineteenth-century painting. For twelve years during the Nazi regime, Germans were allowed to view only art that may be described as heroic and sentimental. Thousands of modern paintings were removed from museums and other collections. Goebbels said that the people wanted to see "the beautiful and sublime . . . a world of wonder shall open here before their eyes." To escape severe punishment or even death, those artists who would not conform to these Nazi criteria of acceptable art either emigrated or stopped working altogether. In 1946, immediately after the war, the new socialist authorities celebrated particularly those artists who had been persecuted during the Nazi period. Their works were featured in the first major postwar art exhibits in Dresden and Berlin, which included approximately 600 works by 250 artists from both West and East Germany. Represented were expressionists, former members of the Association of Revolutionary Artists of Germany, 1928-1933 (ASSO), as well as artists identified with a number of other artistic movements existing before World War II. The openness to a variety of artistic styles in this early phase was reinforced at the First Central Cultural Congress of the Communist Party (KPD) in 1946, where Wilhelm Pieck (who was to become first president of the GDR) emphasized the inviolability of an artist's freedom to choose the form he considered the best. In apparently full agreement, Major Alexander Dymschitz, representing the Soviet Military Administration (SMAD), pronounced that "during the Nazi period, art was the victim of a barbaric regimentation .... When families were represented, the artist had to make certain that the German family was portrayed with at least four children. This nonsense is over forever." This comment was consistent with the general policy of the SMAD, which aimed for a broad united front of antifascist forces, but this policy lasted only until mid-1948.

Indeed, already evident in the GDR were different attitudes toward the social role of art that flowed from the Soviet Union and became intensified by the cold war. Put into practice, these soon restricted the diversity of views permitted expression within the artistic and political community. Even in 1946, a report appeared in Neues Deutschland (the leading East German newspaper) on a meeting of the Saxonian Artists' Congress. There Colonel Tulpanow (then head of the information section of the SMAD) talked about the importance of a democratic development in art and the duty of the artist to express the feelings and goals of the people. He advised artists to pay attention to what was happening in the Soviet Union. Since the early 1930s, art in the Soviet Union had been dominated by socialist realism (a conception of art that actually might better be described as socialist idealism). The diversity of visions in the GDR that had survived the Nazi period to find expression in the 1946 Dresden exhibition had long since disappeared from the Soviet art world.

To be sure, the reaction of most GDR viewers to the art shown at the Dresden exhibition was largely negative. After all, they had been looking at Nazi "social realist" art for many years. Such negative responses provided ground for new accusations condemning formalism (the opposite extreme from socialist realism) by GDR political authorities: while anti-Nazi, these authorities also needed to establish an independent GDR identity separate from western "bourgeois" developments. Yet it was also on these grounds that, after the end of the Stalinist period, artistic development in East Germany was able to diverge from the Soviet model--a matter to which I shall return.

In any event, from 1946 on, those who conformed to the new political demands quickly took over positions of power in GDR artistic organizations and academies. The interest of many artists in gaining access to important positions and commissions, or merely in finding simple exposure, encouraged conformity and a turning away from styles that could be criticized as decadent, Western, formalistic. Other artists left the country altogether. The disillusionment and emigration of some of the most prominent artists left a deep gap in the GDR art scene, as previously sympathetic authorities turned against modernism. Indeed, only two years after his 1946 talk noted above, Major Dymschitz wrote in the Taegliche Rundschau (the SMAD
newspaper) that "although Fascism had shaped the artistic experience of a considerable percentage of the German people, that does not save decadent-formalist art from the criticism of the people. The Germans have basically healthy ideas about art but the art of the formalists is sick ...."[6]

Still, in the early years of the new regime, the diversity among GDR artists was considerable. A variety of groups built on traditions of the Weimar period, especially those that had been associated with leftist causes. The association of socialist artists of the Weimar period, ASSO, had included artists of expressionist, surrealist and abstract constructivist styles, and these traditions were renewed in (and immediately after) the 1946 Dresden exhibition, even if the more realistic artists were given more representation.

But in 1949, the Second German Art Exhibition was utterly dominated by socialist realism (although there was still a small representation of expressionists). The direction was clear: in 1951, new GDR chairman Walter Ulbricht characterized modernist painting, sculpture, and graphics as backward and said no such work could be taken as a model for the future development of the arts. A year later, Neues Deutschland attacked the pessimistic character of much contemporary art.[7] Accordingly, at the Third German Art Exhibit in Dresden in 1953, virtually all work permit:ed exhibition was natural illustration, socialist realism similar to work in the Soviet Union, or involved the use of stereotyped symbols such as flags, peace doves, and clasped hands. Correspondingly, in 1951 and again in 1959, the second and fourth congresses of the Artists' Union (Verband Bildender Kuenstler Deutschlands [VBKD]) took rigid lines for realism and against formalism.

The modernist styles were not forgotten, but since they could not be practiced, they could not be developed. Indeed, a current analyst of the period, Karin Thomas, suggests that there is probably no reputed German art historian who does not regret that the movements spawned by ASSO in the late 1920s were repressed by both the Nazi and socialist regimes and that so many years had to pass before young artists recovered these traditions as possible models for their own works.[8] In fact, it was not until 1988 that an exhibit was held in Berlin of former ASSO artists, commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the association.

With the death of Stalin in 1953, the political pressures in the arts eased somewhat: as in the Soviet Union, the Khruschev period promised greater artistic freedom from total state control. Artists such as Willi Sitte, Bernhard Heisig, and Werner Tuebke turned to more individualist forms of realism. They were the typical representatives of GDR art seen abroad in the 1970s and 1980s, although there were also other styles that could be described as impressionistic, decorative, and expressionist. The 1969 Leipzig district exhibit of the Artists' Union included artists oriented to the Neue Sachlichkeit of the 1920s.

Nonetheless, access to artistic developments in the West was still difficult. Though less isolated than their Soviet counterparts had been for long periods of time, East German artists had little information on contemporary Western trends. Subscription to Western journals was forbidden, and special permission was needed for access to libraries and other collections of material. (Some of the new developments in Western art became known later through West German television, increasingly available to nearly all GDR citizens.)

Thus one cannot speak of a continuous liberating development in the arts after the difficulties of the Stalinist period. In 1959, we see renewed efforts to bring artists into line with party expectations at a series of conferences. For example, at a meeting that year in Bitterfeld, artists and writers were urged to increase their contact with workers both in the art that they produced and through programs set up to involve them in direct exchange with workers. Amateur groups in the arts received greater attention and funding, inhibiting any sense of art's autonomy that might be associated with professionalism. Not surprisingly, in the same period (and intensifying after the fail of Khruschev), artists in the Soviet Union experienced a tightening of the reins. Thus the cultural scene was bleak throughout the Ulbricht era, even if there were some intense controversies about art. It was only in 1971, when Erich Honecker became first secretary of the Socialist Unity Party (SED), that artists could begin to hope for a greater acceptance of diversity in style and content.
In a talk to the Central Committee in 1971, Honecker declared that provided one started from the standpoint of socialism, there could be no taboos in art and literature, neither in content nor in style. Honecker was responding to increasing pressures in the society for social and economic improvements as well as to the ongoing demands of artists and writers. From that point on, artistic developments in the GDR reflected the continuing tensions between these demands and the self-defined needs of the state bureaucracies and ideologies. After a brief description of the way GDR art was organized, I will return to these issues.

**THE ORGANIZATION OF GDR ART**

As in the Soviet Union, the Ministry of Culture (responsible for policy on the arts, museums, and exhibitions as well as for the allocation of important funding) and the Artists’ Union shaped the official institutional world of GDR art and monopolized patronage. Both were linked to the leading party, the SED. Hans Joachim Hoffman, minister for culture, and Willi Sitte (until 1988 head of the Union) were members of the Central Committee of the SED. Under state control, exhibitions and sales of art took place in thirty-five national galleries. The Kulturbund was another relevant association—an umbrella organization sponsoring activities related to a broader audience, such as lectures, exhibits in small galleries, amateur circles of a variety of sorts, and hobby groups. Such activities often took place in the Kulturhaeuser, or club houses, which existed all over the region but which differed considerably in the scope and quality of their offerings to the public.

It was difficult to work as an artist in the GDR without being a member of the Artists’ Union. Eighty percent of the artists in the GDR joined the union as candidates for three years after graduating from the five-year program of art school. During this candidacy period, they were paid 300 marks a month. (The money was available only if they returned to their hometowns to work; if they insisted on remaining in the larger cities, they forfeited this stipend.) The union enforced official policy on the arts, but it also played a mediating role between official policy and the demands of the artists. It had the seldom-realized potential of becoming an institution that could provide great protection and support for its members.

Until the end of the GDR regime, the union negotiated collective or individual contracts for socially important art such as statues and murals commissioned by the various social organizations, enterprises, and the state. The cultural work of the Filer Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (FDGB), the national umbrella union of workers' collectives, included such contracts with industry and culture. The Offices of Fine Arts in the fifteen district governments were also important sponsors. These were part of the department of culture in each district. Typically, the people who staffed these offices had studied cultural politics and art history. The 6,000 members of the Artists' Union itself (which also included designers, commercial artists, and crafts-people as well as art critics, scholars, and administrators) were organized into specialty sections. Artists generally worked through the district branches of their union section to receive commissions, contracts, interest-free loans, and a number of other benefits.

To be sure, it was not impossible to work as an artist outside of the union, but it was much more difficult to gain access to jobs and studios, participate in major exhibits, pay for materials, travel abroad, or earn as much when selling work (because there was a higher tax for income from self-employed nonunion work). Furthermore, a number of welfare benefits, including access to vacation houses, were tied to union membership. As in other Eastern Bloc countries, conformity to prevailing norms was a criterion for general exposure of one's art and for receipt of all other benefits that come with being a member of the official artistic community.

One might ask why anybody remained outside of the union, and who did so. The answers are complex: aside from personal tensions and rivalries, they revolved around the issue of nonconformity, to either artistic or political norms. There were artists (some with subsequent international reputations) who throughout the forty years of the GDR's existence were not acceptable because of the work that they produced or because of the views that they expressed about art or other sensitive issues. Ultimately, their presence and survival pressured the state patrons to grant some of these artists a degree of recognition. In this, they were successful: even before the collapse of the regime, efforts were made to incorporate a wider
variety of artists into the union, sometimes as a result of the recognition that they found outside the GDR but also for a variety of other reasons, which will be discussed later.

On occasion, artists were rejected for union membership because they had not graduated from the official art institutions. This requirement became more stringent over the years, supposedly because of the increase in the number of would-be artists. Admission to the art schools was competitive, favoring those who moved toward professionalization (with its appealing as well as its limiting aspects) and giving an advantage to established positions, both artistic and political. Some critics have claimed that candidates were rejected because they had worked with noninstitutional artists before applying and not merely because they were unwilling to comply with prevailing artistic norms. The mechanisms of professionalization and professional education (well known from many different contexts in the West) merged here with an ideological and political selectivity specific to the GDR.

Although the art schools varied in artistic disciplines and emphasis, as well as in their adherence to socialist realism, all GDR art students went through a traditional training where the emphasis was on the figure; abstraction was discouraged. Not surprisingly, it was primarily the artistically conservative students who were chosen to participate in prestigious and specially supported programs after graduation and to work with a Master at the Academy of Arts.

While the union maintained a policy of exclusion and conformity, it made efforts to integrate young and innovative artists. The union was at once pulled in the direction of what it saw as its traditional responsibilities and toward new developments in the international art world. Political ideology alone was not at the heart of the ensuing conflicts: regardless of artistic predilection, those wishing to maintain positions of dominance and power, with all the attendant privileges, equally encouraged arrangements that reinforced traditional notions of art. This is evident because when advocates of new forms did become accepted and established, they too developed similar patterns of defense. Thus Willi Sitte, whose work was seen as innovative and new in 1971 at the end of the Ulbricht regime, ultimately became such a symbol of stagnation and limitation in artistic style and philosophy that in 1988, he was unable to maintain his position as head of the union.

ART GALLERIES AND EXHIBITIONS

Galleries in the GDR were run by a variety of institutions, including both the national and city governments, the Artists' Union, the Kulturbund, and subordinate parties such as the National Democratic Party (NDP) or the Christian Democratic Party (CDU). None were privately owned. They showed work that appealed to a variety of tastes and gave exposure to artists with diverse styles and aspirations—if not a universal range. However, such gallery exhibits were neither the only nor the major way of generating a sufficient income for artists. Even with the support they might have received from the union, it was difficult for artists to gain commissions for large projects and to sell their work for what they considered an adequate amount. Artists still had to be aggressive in obtaining commissions and in cultivating their own connections to institutions and organizations sponsoring art work, even if there was some mediating by the Artists' Union. To sell one's work abroad was attractive because it could bring valued foreign recognition as well as foreign currency earnings (even though GDR artists took home only about 15 percent of what they earned abroad in Western currency), but to get such exposure and sales was a very complicated affair.

Even gaining a commission of some importance did not always mean public acknowledgment or even exposure. Sometimes a museum, a factory, or a city government commissioned and bought but then simply stored the art; eventually the artist was perhaps asked to suggest where it should be placed. If the style was unacceptable either to the politicians or to the lay audience, it would be stored for a long time. This happened as often because of popular resistance as for political reasons.

In interviews I conducted in 1987-88, several gallery managers complained that for years the galleries were empty and that few people came to look at the art. Some galleries offered lectures on art to attract visitors, as well as interesting concerts; some of these were well attended and others were not.[10] Even the official, state-supported galleries still depended upon sales to individuals (in one, doctors were prime customers), and, in recent years, a variety of styles have become acceptable, however they might be
interpreted. (For example, abstract works by two young artists are described as part of the realistic tradition.) For galleries such as those in the Alte Museum and the Unter den Linden, which were to appeal to foreign visitors, the range of artistic styles was considerable.

The national exhibition held every five years in Dresden continued to attract both domestic and foreign attention. While it gave art greater visibility, it also continued to evoke anger and frustration among many artists both inside and outside the union. From its founding in 1946, this exhibit had developed into an affair of state, an occasion at which the highest representatives of party and state acknowledged the great and changing importance of the role of art in the GDR. Given the exhibit's prominence, controversy over the exhibition in 1972-73, the first under Honecker's regime, led to major changes in GDR arts policy.

For each of these enormous exhibitions, the works selected had to survive a competition that started at the local and district level, following which they were reviewed by the national union section representatives. Some people sat on both district and national boards and thus had enormous decision-making power. Cultural functionaries were involved in the selection process at all levels, even though the board was mainly composed of artists. One curator told me that even after the jury decided, non-voting representatives of the party and ministry added their views on particular works and that these views were usually decisive, especially if there was conflict, for example, between the district and the national sections of the Union.[11]

Thus a number of important artists were not shown in the last Dresden exhibit (1988-89). At the same time, the exhibit included many mediocre works, most notoriously a portrait of a member of the Central Committee, which was an embarrassment to many of the people involved. However complex the process of selection, increasing fury about the resulting show contributed to the important changes taking place in the Artists' Union even before the demise of the regime.

GDR ARTS POLICY AND THE AUDIENCE

Over the forty years of GDR existence, the goals of policy on the arts changed considerably. Throughout, they reflected specifically political considerations as well as the changing overall cultural climate. Influenced to some extent by the internal dynamics of the GDR art world, they were also affected by relations with the Soviet Union and with the West; after the events of 1989, they had become transformed again, both in reaction to past difficulties and, more importantly, in reaction to the prospects of unification. As noted above, at the outset GDR officials wanted the public to be exposed to art that would reeducate them out of their old, reactionary views and increase their general aesthetic understanding. Accordingly, emphasis was put upon German traditions of art, especially on those art works that would presumably encourage a positive view of socialism to counteract any cosmopolitan, "decadent" influences. Art was to be embedded in popular culture and understood by the people. People's own lives were to be reflected in what they saw. A common culture was to be created through the participation of many people in amateur art groups of all sorts, through visits and exhibits by artists in the enterprises, and through work collective excursions to art exhibits. Judged by this goal of a common culture, there definitely were positive changes in the GDR. There is little question that the general educational level was enormously increased; it is also true that masses of people who never before set foot in a museum or theatre have been exposed to the arts--even if it is apparent that for a number, these initial visits were strange events, experienced mostly as a compulsory union work collective activity.

An American artist visiting the last Dresden exhibit in the winter of 1987-88 might at first have envied the scene. Altogether, attendance totaled approximately 1 million--in a country of barely 17 million. People lined up to enter every day, idling the exhibition halls. Art students served as guides for groups and other interested people, explaining the goals of artists and how one might understand the works themselves. At the same time, the American artist could not help but notice that most of the audience remained totally confused about the very few works of contemporary art exhibited that were outside of the realist tradition as broadly interpreted--even as some were attracted by the increasing diversity of the art that had been on exhibit from 1972 onward.
Still, with few exceptions, school children had absolutely no exposure to contemporary art and were taught about the established and approved traditions. The myriad amateur art circles produced realistic painting and sculpture. Of course, all this is not fundamentally different from the situation in the West, except that in the GDR (as in the other state socialist countries of Eastern Europe), the state took an official position and actively sought to promote its own conceptions of the arts--one based totally on this "lowest common denominator" factor.

Yet it is probably fair to say that despite the efforts of the GDR to reach the masses and to create a single common culture, there was always more than one culture in the GDR: intellectuals created and supported more complex forms of the arts, even though they could not attract many workers to the more contemporary expressions of music, theatre, and art that they preferred.

In an effort to gauge the success of the national Dresden exhibit of 1987-1988 in reaching a broad audience, researchers interviewed viewers systematically, querying visitors to a Dresden district exhibit that was considered particularly innovative. According to Bernd Lindner, a sociologist involved in this study, approximately a quarter of the visitors attended under the auspices of their work collectives. Fully half of all the visitors were graduates of university and technical schools; twenty percent were skilled workers and masters, and thirty percent were students and apprentices. According to another informal estimate, seventy percent of the visitors were university graduates or students. (These latter proportions are similar to those of visitors to contemporary art exhibitions in the west as well.)

Despite the high educational level of most visitors to the exhibition, over 90 percent gave their full approval to the exhibits of applied arts, whereas for paintings, graphics and sculpture, approval was given by only 56 percent. Even with the vast majority of exhibited works being in realistic style, it was difficult for many to understand or appreciate what they were seeing.

From this survey and his other research, Lindner thought that about 650,000 people in the GDR were seriously interested in visual art, of whom two-thirds had traditional tastes. Thus only about 200,000 (only a small percentage of the adult population) were more developed in their ability to understand more complicated works. Despite (or perhaps because of its small size, this latter group had very intense artistic interests, visiting on average about ten exhibits a year and traveling all over the GDR to see international and local GDR exhibits. Among the most important of these were retrospectives on the work of Paul Klee, German expressionists of the 1920s, and Joseph Beuys. In each case, the Ministry of Culture approved exhibition of German art of international acclaim; to fail to do so, the GDR state would have continued to alienate its most educated citizens and to create additional difficulties in presenting itself as a viable alternative German state in the international community.

Accordingly, from the mid-1970s, there was an increase in the variety of styles shown; these included works in the tradition of late impressionism, a small number of constructivist and surrealist works as well as pictures based on montage and collage. Changes in artistic form and also in subject matter were considered important, even if controversial. There was a growing interest in depicting problematic aspects of everyday life, including expressions of isolation, alienation, and difficulties in interpersonal relationships--as well as in such broader issues as pollution, aggression, and war. Even historical paintings were designed to be more directly relevant to contemporary issues--some done in a cliched form, but others in a much more subtle and sophisticated one. Concurrently, GDR literature became known for its revealing and beautifully expressed understandings of personal life in a socialist society, the complex interweavings between ideal and reality. Thus it is not surprising that some GDR visual artists were interested in making a similar contribution with their work by bringing into the public discussion issues that were rarely if ever dealt with in newspapers or on television. That they could do so at all depended upon certain cultural functionaries, personally sympathetic and supportive of new artistic movements, who showed great courage in exhibiting these usually "unofficial" artists.

**EMIGRATION TO THE WEST**

Part of the pressure to permit such exhibitions came from outside the country. After the end of the Nazi period, many intellectuals and artists returned to what later became the GDR. However, disappointed with
the increasingly negative official reception to their work and frightened by the criticism of the Stalinist period, a number of artists again emigrated and contributed to external criticism of the GDR's civil liberties record. As we have noted, after 1972, in part to address such criticism, Honecker accepted new art forms under the premise of socialism. Yet insecurities continued among emigres and their domestic followers—and with reason. Thus even during the first exhibition to follow Honecker's official pronouncements, certain critical paintings were put in a side room during his visit along with a number of cultural functionaries, while other abstract works that were difficult to move were hidden behind photo equipment. No wonder artists did not completely trust the recent developments, even as they hoped for the future.[16]

Despite the gradual lifting of taboos after 1972, art in the GDR still had definite official and quasi-official tasks. Although it became possible for artists to criticize such conditions as the pollution of the environment and general issues of war, still forbidden were themes that linked material shortages in the GDR to its political system, criticism of atomic energy, the Berlin wall, the military structure, and even references to the "other" Germany, expressed in nostalgia for certain landscapes. It remained the case that those artists who conformed to the articulated norms were advanced and honored over those who were critical. The irritation of those artists who were excluded, or whose opportunities were limited, again led some to emigrate from the GDR even as greater freedoms were permitted.

Visual artists were not alone in suffering these restrictions. Dramatists, composers, and poets joined the painters in a continuing stream of talent to the West, particularly to West Germany, greatly enriching its cultural life at the expense of that of the GDR. Feeling these losses, cultural and political functionaries proclaimed again and again the importance of open discussion about all issues. There were increasing attempts at integrating artists into the official artistic institutions. However, many artists who were belatedly accepted felt tolerated at best rather than feeling really cherished; when given the opportunity, even more left for the West. According to one estimate, about a third of the fifty best artists in Dresden left between 1982 and 1987; these are figures comparable to the proportion of artists that emigrated during the worst period of Stalinist influence in the 1950s.[17]

In my interviews with some of these emigre artists, it became apparent that they held quite dissimilar attitudes towards the GDR and dissimilar ideas about art. Several had felt guilty about emigration and saddened by their inability to bring about change in the existing system. Others believed that the GDR would never change its basic political structure or its policy on the arts, so that there was no sense in attempting to be creative in such a restrictive atmosphere. For both groups, however, emigration to West Germany in the 1980s had many advantages: the language was the same, citizenship and several important health and other benefits were automatically granted to GDR emigres, there was immediate attention and public support for artists of any prominence, there were enticing financial rewards for those who were successful, and, most importantly, the whole world of Western art was now open and easily accessible.

During this same period, many Soviet and East European artists also emigrated to Western Europe and the United States.[18] Most had additional difficulties of dealing with an entirely strange culture and a new language. But both Soviet and GDR emigre artists experienced problems in their lives specifically as artists, including an acceptance and enthusiasm at the initial point of their arrival as "political refugees," followed by a benign neglect of their work and their fate. Some artists in both groups remained nostalgic for the intensity of the artistic atmosphere that they had known at home. As one of them put it:

I'm not someone who hates the GDR. Actually, I found more people there interested in art and books and not just money. There was also a greater respect for the artist. I miss going into the countryside and painting with a group of people. I don't have much work here; my life is harder.

However, many artists who have had limited success since emigration have not regretted their decision to leave the GDR at this time. It is my impression that this is especially true of the younger artists, those who came of age after Honecker started to loosen the controls in 1972 and who thus were most exposed to avant-garde art. Even if they have not yet established themselves as artists, they have had an easier time integrating themselves into the cultural life of the West than have the older artists, who are more comfortable with socialist realism. However, the emigre artists from both the Soviet Union and the GDR benefited from the increasing diversity of styles that had become acceptable in Western contemporary art.
DIVERSITY IN THE SUBSEQUENT GDR ART SCENE

The complex political maneuvering and the debates on the role of art in a socialist society that took place in the 1980s, along with the growing diversity of independent artistic expressions, made the GDR a fascinating place to observe these transitions even before the fall of 1989. During the decade, advocates of the importance of the artist's responsibility to the public typically retained a loyalty to some variety of realism and did not view themselves as alienated artists in the Western sense. Bernhard Heisig, one of the most established artists in the GDR (and in 1988 first vice-president of the Union of Artists under then-president Willi Sitte), made the following comment:

You want me to make myself into something I don't want to be... I always have to make something new, a strange idea of artistic freedom. If I am, here and there, an outsider, that is not my intention. I want to be a part of the aggravations as well as the joys of the society.[19]

Among those I interviewed in 1988 who had not emigrated, however, at least one was more upset with the financial difficulties of being an artist in the GDR than with the existing restrictions: "It's better to have something to work against rather than having it all open." Another (who had waited fifteen years for his first exhibit) commented: "It is good to be fighting for something and working outside the system for what you want. It's not such a tragic thing. Artistic production is individual production." These attitudes are potentially very important because in some sense modern art is an enclave enterprise in relation to society as a whole, oppositional to the dominant culture whatever form this may take. Thus there is some legitimacy and even structural base for resisting pressures from the authorities who are defined as illegitimate because they speak for the state. This is true even after the structuring of a reunified Germany, when the result for artists is the absence of political pressure: the state that grants freedom is to be critiqued as has been the state which denies it--even if for opposite reasons.

From the mid-1980s on, the exhibits, concerts, readings, and happenings in Prenzlauer Berg (a neighborhood in Berlin) showed the kinds of activities that were already taking place outside the official GDR culture system. The participants varied from members of the Artists' Union to young people who worked at a variety of odd jobs and remained outside of any formal artistic institutional structure. Their attitudes toward the regime also could not be easily classified; at the very least, however, there was a notion about the importance of the independence of the arts and a rejection of restrictions prohibiting any real critique of their own society. Visual artists crossed beyond the boundaries of their own media and cooperated with poets, dancers, and musicians. Tapes were made of such groups as Musik aus dem Land, Demokratischer Konsum, and the Bolshevikisches Chor Orchester. The members of these groups played openly, earned little money, and paid high taxes on their income (and were usually in debt because of what they owed for their technical equipment). Christoph Tannert, an art scholar and critic who worked with young artists in the union as well as lent his support to unofficial artists, walked a fine line in his efforts to legitimize the latter's work in the GDR. He played a role in providing increased exposure for the music groups as well. (In fact, the tapes of these groups were played on the state radio even though they were not sold in state stores. Many of the artists did not want the state directly involved in the production of their work in order to remain uncompromised before their audience.)

During this same period, however, some of these independent efforts were stopped by the authorities. For example, at a festival held in a culture house in Dresden which included contemporary art with jazz and rock, an artist reading from Neues Deutschland threw the headlines to the audience. Two artists were arrested, and the director of the culture house was fired.

Although the artists involved in these developments emphasized individuality of expression and fluidity, they also remained closely in touch with each other, meeting regularly in cafes and informing each other of unofficial exhibits and concerts. Exhibits were--and still are--held in ateliers or apartments, with as many as 100 people showing up for openings. As mentioned above, people interested in contemporary art and music traveled across the GDR for many of the events, although it is understandable that a young artist having an exhibit would be more likely to attract an audience from the same city. The balance between individuality and communal commitment has provided an interesting example of these transitions in a socialist society.
Artists also worked with poets in the creation of beautiful hand-produced books; such printings were typically in ninety-nine copies, which were sold openly, and collectors have bought them for very moderate prices. Still, joint poetry and art books (as well as journals) were somewhat easier to collaborate on and to market than joint productions involving sophisticated technology. The lack of technical equipment for all sorts of artistic productions was a problem in the GDR, and artists still remained behind the West in this respect even if they had more exposure than before to what was being done abroad.

Throughout this period, in addition to individual private initiatives in artistic production outside the state apparatus, the Protestant church was a haven for various independent art exhibits. As an institutional umbrella for a number of independent groups of all kinds (including peace and environmental groups), it allowed its facilities to be used for exhibits and performances as well. Some of these rooms were very simple; some included an informal care. In 1988, in one such room in the Zionskirche in Berlin, the minister, an energetic young man not so different in style from some of his contemporaries in the Communist party, spoke of creating a church "from below" where people such as social workers or nurses who studied some theology could be given space to establish alternative groups. Along these lines, the Evangelischer Kunstdienst, a Protestant artists' service, has maintained a gallery space. It has sponsored seminars on the arts with people from Western Europe, collected art journals, and offered some church contracts for artists. One of its publications, Dialog mit der Bibel, included a contribution by Herbert Sandberg, who was both Jewish and an SED party member. This group kept a delicate balance in asserting a degree of autonomy in GDR society. The involvement of artists in other church activities resulted in difficulties on more than one occasion. Within the SED itself, there seem to have been opposing views on how these various church activities should be bandied, and even as the pattern of an antagonistic cooperation between church and state became increasingly established, at times the authorities came down hard on young activists.

Still, all along, the West was an important and consistent orientation point supporting the somewhat autonomous artistic development in the GDR. The GDR had claimed that it would not be tied to any changes taking place in the Soviet Union, and that the significant opening for new art forms in 1972 was consistent with the changes in cultural policy under Honecker. At the same time, the enormous changes in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s could not go unobserved: GDR citizens traveled there; the House of Soviet Science and Culture in East Berlin sponsored talks and exhibits; certain newspapers and journals were sold (though they were on occasion banned [21]), and West German television closely followed Soviet developments while also informing viewers about the changes in Poland and Hungary.

As these liberating events occurred, however, the artists of the GDR still did not have the financial resources of some of these independent Soviet groups, and they were careful about the challenges in which they engaged. In part, this was because in the GDR, as noted above, there had been serious changes within the official union, which opened the door to a degree of democratization and thus to an increasing pluralism among the artists. Since 1972, despite--or perhaps because of--the improvement of conditions, the complaints of union members had increased along with a growing demand for autonomy. In response, the union officially identified itself with a degree of pluralism and acceptance of a wider variety of art--"art in socialism" rather than "socialist realism." Referring to the 1988 Dresden exhibit, then-union president Willi Sitte asked for courage to engage in an open discussion of differences with a tolerance for variety and mutual respect.[22] He also called for a greater participation of artists in determining contracts and payments, as well as for a greater role in deciding aesthetic concerns. The union had given permission for more artists than ever before to travel abroad; a few were allowed to work in the West for long periods of time and yet retain their GDR passports. However, it is clear that those in control attempted to maintain their power even in the face of pressures for change within the union, and the implications of decisions by the Congress of Artists in November of 1988 were uncertain for nearly a year.

The district elections for section leaders that preceded the 1988 Union National Congress indicated that changes would take place in its formal structure and that the congress elections might be affected. (To be sure, those elected in the districts did not necessarily openly pursue alternative policies; a number were primarily concerned with exhibits, travel, etc., and remained careful of what they said.) Still, with the vote of 54.5 percent of the artists eligible to participate, nearly half of those elected to the 635 leadership positions were new, and many of those had no party affiliation. Nearly a third of the new people elected were women, mainly designers, craft workers, and art scholars. The small proportion of painters and
graphic artists (those who—if they were stylistically safe—had been favored in the past) was in striking contrast to their greater representation in the concurrent Dresden exhibit. Among the newly elected was Christoph TanneR, the art scholar-activist noted above.

The results of the congress elections were debated for many months. As a result of the consensus building in informal meetings beforehand, Willi Sitte did not run for reelection to president of the union; he was to remain honorary president for life and a member of the Central Committee. The new head, Claus Dietel, was elected by acclaim, along with calls for greater democracy. While many of the old establishment people were reelected, others holding important positions in the art establishment were not. In sum, the leadership of the union was threatened and pressured by the criticism of a number of its members, even as many of the people elected to the congress were members of the state-affiliated artistic establishment. These tensions were still playing themselves out as the institutionalization of reunification proceed.


Some GDR artists participated in drafting resolutions advocating political reform and transformation both before and after the resignation of Honecker in 1989. Many took part in the protests and actions that brought an end to the regime and were prominent members of the newly formed political groups and parties.

As is true of every other former GDR social institution, the art world had become radically transformed. Artists experienced dramatic changes in their union, in their relations to buyers and sponsors, in their connection to the art world of the rest of Germany, and frequently in their very self-understanding of what it meant to be an artist in contemporary Europe.

By May 1990, although the union was still receiving funding from the state, it had a severely diminished role. A specially convened congress resulted in a thorough restructuring of the organization. With a changed name (which dropped any reference to the GDR), it proclaimed its political independence and increased decentralization. Autonomous state organizations that concerned themselves with welfare issues were combined with specialized sections (for photography, graphics, etc.) which were represented in the overall organization at both the state and the central level and which focused more on artistic interests than on social benefits. Despite these changes made in expectation of German reunification, the future of the union was in jeopardy, because West Germany had no union counterpart. In the period of transition, the new GDR parliament formed a special committee to examine and evaluate all existing groups and organizations in the GDR and their subsidies; the union, too, had to submit and justify its programs. The outlook for continued state subsidies is bleak. In the meantime, a few of the upper-level union functionaries opened a new gallery near the union headquarters where they will exhibit work by GDR and other artists, in addition to continuing their union work as long as they are able to do so.

Thus while some artists have reaped immediate benefits from the transformation of the GDR (such as the opportunity to exhibit without political restraints), others have felt the negative aspects of those same changes. There is a great deal of apprehension about the future material condition of artists. Many fear that art will not fare well in competition with the full spectrum of consumer goods that the population was denied for so long. As of this writing in late 1990, however, art sales do not seem to have declined; foreigners, especially West Germans, have bought up a great deal of the art at what were for them moderate prices. Indeed, some GDR artists have complained that their prices had been too low. A number of other artists fear that they will not be able to sell their work at all because their former state organizational patrons no longer commission works of art. Commercially unsuccessful artists who previously still enjoyed state support and all the fringe benefits that were provided through the union will have to find other work. In the meantime, however, artists pressured the state for continuing support and for maintaining the existing Culture Fund, (now secure until the end of 1994) which is financed by a tax on all cultural events and contributes to the welfare of artists.
Although most previously state-sponsored galleries remain open, some (e.g., the Kleine Gallery in Pankow) had to close because the municipality dropped its support. Christoph Tannert opened one of the first "public" private galleries. While several hundred people showed up for the opening, he and his partners (one of them a West German) feared that after the end of the year, they might not be able to continue using their present space; it is owned by the municipality, and because it is in an advantageous location, the city is trying to rent the space to a more profitable business. By the end of 1990, their rent had indeed soared.

One further conclusion is unquestioned: the artists who were--or will be--successful in the international art scene will no longer be able to capitalize on their political opposition. Instead of a focus on the content of their work, formal aesthetic considerations will play a more prominent role; and these, according to Christoph Tannert, were precisely those qualities which were comparatively neglected in the past. On the other hand, since GDR art was more "national" and "realistic" in its character than West German art, Tannert believes that these features will become more prevalent in German art overall.

Thus, the very role that art has played in culture and society is being challenged by the dramatic social and political changes that have taken place. Painters and sculptors, who through their work and actions were noticeable critics of existing political conditions, soon will be merely one voice in a multitude of voices in the public arena. Like their West German colleagues, they will create works of art for a more diffuse and less attentive audience, without official patronage and scant protection from the market.

Artists of the GDR find themselves exposed to a multiplicity of influences, and there is a corresponding multiplicity of reactions. At the same time that many feel uncomfortable about the pressures in the Western art world, which force the artist to respond to ever-changing demands and chase after galleries and patrons, they want to be innovative and take their place in the contemporary art world. Most do not view these new tendencies as irresponsible and completely individualistic. Indeed, they see their own development as well as the transitions in the dominant institutions of GDR art as part of the overall change that is taking place in Eastern Europe as well as in their own society.

CONCLUSION

In the GDR, art was considered a powerful tool used to influence society in ways that were supportive of the system. It was expected to express the dominant goals and values, even after these were no longer agitational and instructive in any simplistic sense. It was to be broadly accessible and to contribute to a common, nonfragmented culture. Because of this role of art and artists, art received substantial state patronage—through the Artists' Union, through museums and exhibitions, through public recognition and efforts at art education, through sponsorship of commissions by institutions not previously involved in art.

Yet a growing number of artists came to view these expectations with reserve and made insistent claims for more artistic autonomy. They believed it was crucial to develop new styles, techniques, and aspirations that included critique and negation of what was the dominant artistic culture. For some, this also meant a critique and negation of the dominant political system.

Nonconformist artists found support for their efforts in the very concepts of modern art and in the self-understandings of the international community of contemporary artists, most of whom do not see themselves as integrated in a similar way into their own societies. Indeed, the history of modern art fundamentally contradicts the vision of one common culture shared across divisions of work and education. To be sure, this vision is appealing to many, and yet it is at odds with the ideals of expressive individualism and artistic creativity; in this case, it also was at odds with the fact that GDR society had become increasingly differentiated and heterogeneous, making even more difficult the maintenance of any common culture. Modern art also contradicts one classic role that art has traditionally played: celebrating the status quo. On the contrary, it has tended to favor critique and negation. The developments of the 1980s deepened these tensions that had been alive throughout the four decades of GDR artistic history.

Ironically, over the years, nonconformist artists acquired a strong voice precisely because art had been established as an important component of official culture. If the expected praise was valued, then critique from the same source was even more audible. Yet allowing greater variety did not turn art policy on its
head. In fact, after 1972, artistic innovations and the tensions engendered with the official cultural views advanced by the party not only enlivened the art scene itself; they also stimulated a much broader and more intense interest in art, an art that yet did not fully reject its role in society and challenge hegemonic views.

The dissatisfactions continued to increase with each effort by the state to meet them. The deteriorating economic system in the late 1980s meant that a number of artists could not count on easy commissions. They were then granted coveted foreign exhibitions and commissions, which constituted a new patronage system and provided opportunities for responding to different incentives and for increasing their artistic autonomy. However, most of the foreign earnings were paid in GDR currency, and, in any event, only a few GDR artists benefited from these exchanges. For the rest, dependence on the union bureaucracy for permission to exhibit necessarily resulted in frustrations, and restrictions in the styles officially promoted left most GDR artists still excluded from the international art market. Again, as with other spheres of GDR life, partial reform did not succeed in meeting the demands of those with complaints.

Thus, the success of the artists' efforts presented increasing challenges to the existing patronage system and was linked to rapidly increasing demands for deeper changes in cultural policy overall. From the point of view of the artists, these successes were critical not only for their individual interest (though that was important) but for the common good. And that gave a special meaning to their art and to their politics.

Though enormous change was expected with the fall of the GDR, there were major unintended consequences of the dramatic events that plunged GDR artists into the different political economy of West Germany. The advantages of integration were clear. West Germany not only had a complex system of art markets and public and private patronage that give a high premium to individual choice and autonomy; at the outset at least, it also showed an intense interest in learning about and buying East German art. But this interest of many individuals and institutions and the generous West German subsidies for public art has not eliminated the uncertainty of working in a private market system in the arts and the difficulties of even understanding how that system can work to the artists' advantage. Artists now have enormous freedom, but they have lost the backing of a familiar--even if often detested--patronage system. Many are having to find a different way of earning their living, and many of those who persist are not yet able to deal with a system that is both less imposing and less secure.

BACKGROUND NOTE

The bulk of the research for this paper took place during 1987-1988 when I was supported by a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies for a study of mass organizations in the new towns of the GDR. After the completion of that project, I began intensive interviewing with managers of several art galleries in Berlin, Dresden, and Rostock, as well as with art students, art professors, and artists in these three cities. I also interviewed museum directors and union representatives on a variety of levels. These talks were complemented by a visit to the Bauhaus in Dessau and talks there with students, professors, and the director, Roll Kuhn. During the spring of 1990, a small set of follow-up interviews were done with a few artists, gallery managers and union representatives I had spoken with before. I am very grateful to Hartmut Zimmermann and other colleagues at the Free University for the use of the GDR research institute's library, to Dietrich Muehberg, Christiane Zieseke, and Dietrich Rueschemeyer for their insightful comments and enduring patience with this project, and to Simone Rueschemeyer for her help in gathering the material on the Berlin artists.

NOTES

1. Comments at the Degenerate Art Exhibit in Munich in 1937 and the “First Great German Art Exhibition” housed opposite in the House of German Culture.


4. Feist, ibid., 11.


10. Discussion with several gallery managers.

11. Discussion with union functionary.

12. Nearly 4,0(30 questionnaires were given out, to one out of every seven visitors in the two exhibit places, covering one exhibit place in one day and the second exhibit place the second day. About half of these were returned. In addition, there were personal interviews with viewers who came to both the district and national exhibit as well as with the tour guides.

13. See several articles in Bildernisches Volksschaffen 2, 1988, 30-33; Bildende Kunst, 1, 1988, 41-43; 2, 1988, 89-91; and Sonntag, 13, 1988, 3.


16. Edda and Sieghard Pohl, Die ungehorsamen Maler der DDR (Berlin: Verlag europaeische Ideen 1979), 21, 22.

17. A number of artists had been Riven permission to visit end even have extended stays In the West in the hope that they would remain In the GDR.

18. Rueschemeyer et al., op. cit.


20. Published by Evangelische Haupt-Bibelgesellschaft zu Berlin und Altenburg 1984; Juergen Rennert wrote the text with an introduction by Dr. Heinz Hoffmann, one of the organizers of the artists' service.

21. Sputnik, for example, was taken off the stands and, thereupon, caused an uproar among intellectuals.

22. Information, I January 1988, 4-5.
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