Review of "Cultures in Conflict: Visual Arts in Germany Since 1990" by Marion F. Deshmukh

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Most discussions of the production of art in the former communist countries of Europe have attempted to take into account the broader political and social context of these societies, usually in one of two ways. The most common focus is on the work of art itself and the experiences and the self-understanding of the artists in a particular society. That is the orientation of _Cultures in Conflict_, a small volume prepared after a conference on East German art, part of the Humanities Program Series of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies at Johns Hopkins University. The second thrust, an analysis of the institutions of art, their links to the political system, and their impact on the education and professional opportunities of artists, is not a primary focus of this volume.

It consists of four papers and a short afterword. Marion Deshmukh begins with some observations on the reception of East German visual arts in the United States, pointing out, for instance, that among academics, there was far more interest in East German literature than in the visual arts. Richard Pettit notes the difficulty of controlling the dissemination of literature, but the “particular brad of East-West German politics and all the related social tensions perhaps played the greatest role in discouraging interest in the West, including the United States in east German art and culture (53).” He writes, however, that within the GDR, leading East German artists nevertheless enjoyed respect, privilege, and controversial attention similar to that enjoyed by their literary colleagues. As Matthias Fluegge observes, a number of the less official and often younger artists were followed with interest in the GDR.

Eckhart Gillen and Richard Pettit concentrate on the experiences of four east German artists. Gillen includes A.R. Penck in his discussion, one of the most important artists to have emigrated from the GDR, whereas Pettit focuses on the work of the prominent GDR painter and graphic artist Werner Tübke, examining the influence of the Italian Renaissance and the “debt” to socialist realism in much of his work. Pettit notes that in 1972 Tübke, a privileged but controversial artist, rejected an offer to emigrate to the Federal Republic. In a recent interview, he explained: “I really have nothing in common with official West German art. But this is not a question of East-West politics. By chance I happen to live here (in the East) and also by chance I don’t happen to like very much the kind of loud, abstract art that is produced so often these days” (55).

This volume does not analyze the institutions of art, the educational institutions, the Academy of Arts, the official union of artists and its district associations, and the conflicts and changes in policies concerning the fine arts over the years. This makes it difficult to grasp the variations and the innovations that existed in the art world even before unification. As suggested in this collection, the early decline in experimentation and the attention to certain innovative movements that existed during the Weimar period did relate to the political constellation in the Soviet
Union, and they did relate to the expectations and understandings of a wider audience after the Nazi period. And for a long period of time artists experienced isolation, difficulties with travel and seeing, discussing, and showing their work abroad. But the GDR was not Nazi Germany; it evolved even with its authoritarian patterns and intense bureaucratic rigidity out of the Stalinist period, and both the experiences of artists and the art produced indicated increased, if not sufficient, possibilities.

Matthias Flügge, editor of the journal *Neue Bildende Kunst*, notes that since the late 1980s the work of the artistic opposition was known and that “a type of ‘other culture’ existed which often shared a capillary exchange with the official culture” (32). In his excellent contribution, he points to this second culture’s own system of “valuation” not immediately accessible in the art work itself. Reminding the reader that identification with the system was stronger in East Germany than in other East European countries, even in opposition, he notes that rejection took place “mainly in a historicism of that which was modern” and that the “concept of authenticity measured itself only too often by the level of flight from society” (33). Flügge stresses the importance of recognizing GDR art as an informative, particular path of recent European history. Indeed the volume makes an interesting contribution to this inquiry.

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In this laconic and discerning study, Hans Belting offers a personal interpretation of both German art and German art history. Flying high over the cultural terrain of the last two centuries, he picks out salient features, interpreting both their contours and their changing meanings. The fact that Belting has both produced important scholarship on German art from a wide range of periods and written repeatedly on art theory serves him well in this far-reaching endeavor. While his essay first appeared in German in 1992, for this new, well-illustrated translation he has added a substantive introduction for the English reader.

The writer’s rare combination of erudition and clarity make this text a pleasure to read, and while it is brief, it is also pithy. First and foremost, Belting examines the intimate and “troublesome” relationship between German art and nationalism from the late-eighteenth century to the present. Advancing a cultural version of the controversial Sonderweg thesis, he argues that the visual arts in Germany really do present something of a special case. Even in the Romantic period, the Germans were labeled “artistic barbarians,” and indeed painting and drawing were consistently subordinated to literary production (41).