

Art of Two Germanys / Cold War Cultures

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Jan 25–Apr 19, 2009

Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg, 27 May - 6 September 2009

Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, 3 October 2009 - 10 January 2010

Reviewed by: Doris Berger

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) is the first host of an ambitious exhibition project about the art of post war Germany, or more specifically: the two Germanys. It features 300 art works that were created between 1945 and 1989 by 120 artists from West Germany (FRG, Federal Republic of Germany) and East Germany (GDR, German Democratic Republic). The subtitle „Cold War Cultures“ stresses the fact that there were ideological implications in the art production on both sides of the Iron Curtain. LACMA's Senior Curator Stephanie Barron initiated this exhibition and found in her German colleague and co-curator Eckhart Gillen, from Kulturprojekte (Berlin), a most knowledgeable partner. Both curators have worked in the area of German art before, but whereas Barron has concentrated on topics situated historically earlier, such as German Expressionism, the „degenerate art“ show by the Nazis, and the art and culture of the exiles and émigrés in California, Gillen is a specialist in postwar German art with a particular expertise in art from the GDR.^[1] For the extensive catalogue, which also offers historical background information, Barron collaborated with Sabine Eckmann (Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis) who co-edited the book.^[2]

The exhibition display is organized in chapters following a chronological order and starts with the destruction of Germany at the end of the Second World War. From 1945-1949 a grim Germany is shown as lost in mourning and debris documenting the apocalyptic scenario and the searching for a new cultural identity after the horrors of the Nazi era. Photographs of bombed remains by Richard Peter Sr. or Herbert List and drawings by Wilhelm Rudolph as well as Hans Grundig's painting „To the Victims of Fascism“ (1946/49) visualize death and destruction in a painful way. At the same time, joy in the newly gained freedom from the Hitler dictatorship can be seen in colorful abstractions painted right after the war by Ernst Wilhelm Nay and Werner Heldt.

In 1949 Germany's split into two different political systems started a formal and ideological debate: the West saw abstract art as a sign of freedom,^[3] while the East developed its own distinct language of figurative art (Social Realism), officially defying abstract art.^[4] In a remarkably installed gallery, these two different artistic approaches are juxtaposed. Although the works clash aesthetically, their proximity shows convincingly that both art productions were part of an ideological machine, however divergent. In addition, the curators manage to transcend a simple binary thinking and build a bridge between the ideologies by presenting the outstanding work of the artist Herrmann Glöckner (Dresden). He officially worked as a GDR graphic designer but privately made abstract art with small objects of daily life. This room with the Glöckner showcase in its center epitomizes the aim of the exhibition, through discussing the political implications in their

dialectics but transcending them at the same time.

The art of the '60s is presented as an explosion of the senses. Entering this room, viewers are engulfed by the intense chocolate smell from Dieter Roth's „Schokoladenlöwenturm“ (1969) and visually overwhelmed by the abstract formations by the ZERO group. There are photographs of different Fluxus performances, a reconstruction of Gerhard Richter's installation „Volker Bradke“ (1966) and Sigmar Polke's wall installation „Die Fünfziger Jahre“ (1963-69). Here, the main focus lies on capitalist culture of the West during the years of the „Wirtschaftswunder“. Wolf Vostell's „B-52 (Lippenstiftbomber)“ (1968) is an adequate multilayered metaphor for this time. But the question is: what happened in the East at that time? When the Berlin wall was erected in 1961, hopes for a politically different society were shattered and many East Germans moved to the West. The cultural climate of the 60s in the East was very different from the thriving culture of the West, nevertheless art outside of the official Social Realism always existed. Why do we not see what had been produced there, such as the officially disapproved but nevertheless existing abstract art?^[5] Stephanie Barron explained this as an aesthetical decision and stressed the fact that she wanted to avoid a continuous ongoing comparison between East and West in the same rooms throughout the exhibition.

Large exhibitions of comparable size and ambition are always confronted with necessary exclusions and various decisions that stay hidden from the audience. Regarding the declared aim of the exhibition to show the impact of politics on society and art, it is regrettable though that there remains a blind spot on the feminist movement that was so important in Germany in the 1970s. This perspective would have been significant because pre-war gender roles recurred in the post-war era. Especially in the so-called „free“ West the role models for women were less free than in the East. The western ideology of the economic boom (Wirtschaftswunder) was efficient in sending women back to their kitchen. Decades later, these reactionary gender politics caused various artistic reflections on the status of images and the power of representation. Thus, feminist art had a greater impact in the development of West German art, which could have been found in the works by Ulrike Ottinger, Ulrike Rosenbach or Annegret Soltan. The following galleries representing the late 1960s and '70s are devoted to works that deal critically with the Nazi past, indeed a very important subject that shaped this time as well. Although we see important paintings from East and West by Baselitz, Lüpertz, Schönebeck, Kiefer, Tübke, Penck, Mattheuer, Vostell and Richter, the gap of missing works of women artists and their coming to terms with their past and present is highly visible. ^[6]

The galleries devoted to the art of the 1980s are more diverse. While some works still deal with the Nazi past, like Georg Herold's brilliant sculpture „Laokoon (Laokoön)“ (1984) and Olaf Metzel's project „Türkenwohnung“ (1982), other works tackle issues about terror connected to the RAF (Red Army Faction) in West Germany. Another perspective is devoted to the photographic documentation of the East and West German societies. The curators effectively show the important role of photography for both East and West since the 1950s. Interestingly, the show brings together several works of women photographers who were active in the GDR, such as Evelyn Richter, Barbara Metselaar-Berthold, Helga Paris, Gundula Schulze Eldowy, Maria Sewcz, or Sibylle Bergemann.^[7] Another outstanding body of work from the 1980s are the provocative and surrealistic performances and objects of the „Autoperforation Group“ (Else Gabriel, Via Lewandowsky, Micha Brendel, and Rainer Görß) that went beyond any kind of sense making machinery.

On the question why this exhibition originated and is first shown in Los Angeles, curator Stephanie Barron answered that there is a deep interest in German art and culture in California, partly because of so many well-known immigrants that found refuge here during the Nazi era. In a review of the show in the New York Times Michael Kimmelman stated that this exhibition represented „a fresh and sympathetic view of postwar art on both sides of the Wall.“ [8] I would like to add that the educational value should not be underestimated either, simultaneously showing the aesthetic developments and the socio- political contexts of two Germanys during in the Cold War. Even though there are blind spots, this exhibition in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art is a tour de force through post war German art history that finally engages the audience to look closer on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

[1] Other exhibitions curated by Stephanie Barron: German Expressionism 1915-1925: The Second Generation, Los Angeles County Museum of Art 1988; „Degenerate art“: The Fate of the Avant-garde in Nazi Germany, Los Angeles County Museum of Art 1991; Exiles + Emigrés: The Flight of European Artists from Hitler, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1997. Eckhart Gillen curated the exhibition *Deutschlandbilder: Kunst aus einem geteilten Land*, Martin Gropius Bau 1997; see also his publications, such as: *Kunst in der DDR*, co-ed. with Rainer Haarmann, Köln 1990; *Das Kunstkombinat DDR: Zäsuren einer gescheiterten Kunstopolitik*, Köln 2005. *Feindliche Brüder? Der Kalte Krieg und die deutsche Kunst 1945-1989*, Köln 2009.

[2] Stephanie Barron/Sabine Eckmann (eds.), *Art of Two Germanys: Cold War Cultures*, exhib.-cat. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, New York: Abrams, 2009.

[3] That might be comparable to Abstract Expressionism in the US, see: Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art. Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983.

[4] For Walter Ulbricht abstract art was an expression of the capitalist downfall and contradicted the GDR ideology as he stated in a speech at Volkskammer on 30 October 1951: „Wir wollen in unseren Kunsthochschulen keine abstrakten Bilder mehr sehen. Wir brauchen weder Bilder von Mondlandschaften noch von faulen Eiern. Die Grau-in- Grau-Malerei, die ein Ausdruck des kapitalistischen Niedergangs ist, steht im schroffsten Widerspruch zum heutigen Leben in der DDR.“

[5] This was the focus of an entire exhibition. See: Sigrid Hofer (ed.): *Gegenwelten. Informelle Malerei in der DDR. Das Beispiel Dresden*, exhib.-cat. Marburger Kunstverein, Frankfurt a. M./Basel: Stroemfeld/Roter-Stern, 2006.

[6] One reason might be that some of the works have been shown in the critically acclaimed group exhibition on feminist art curated by Cornelia Butler entitled *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007. Despite that, it would have been extremely important to include some works with feminist concerns in the show in order to relate feminism to a wider social and political development. The risk is high that the uncanny prediction of Amelia Jones comes into effect: „... all of us writing about and exhibiting art under the rubric of feminism are participating in a broad scale PR campaign that packages feminism as a commodity to be bought and sold (and, very soon no doubt, to be rendered obsolete once again).“ Amelia Jones, „1970/2007: The Return of Feminist Art,“ in: *X-tra*, v. 10, no. 3, Spring 2008, p. 5.

[7] The American reception compares some of the artists to its own cultural reference system. Barbara Metselaar-Berthold is called „East Germany's Nan Goldin“ or Schulze-Eldowy as a „kind of German samizdat Diane Arbus“. See Michael Kimmelman, „Art in Two Germanys Often Spoke the Same Tongue,“ in: *The New York Times*, 12. February 2009.

[8] Michael Kimmelman, „Art in Two Germanys Often Spoke the Same Tongue“, in: *New York Times*,

February 12, 2009.

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