

DISTURBING THINGS: THE INTERPRETATION OF EAST GERMAN ARTWORK IN REUNIFIED GERMANY

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The Wende Museum in Los Angeles contains a number of medium-sized Lenin busts, which, back in the days of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), typically decorated the desks of party offices of the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Socialist Unity Party of Germany, SED), one of its many affiliated organizations, or the cupboards of loyal party members. Most of these follow the GDR mold, being mass-produced, plaster-cast, and covered with dark brown paint to resemble bronze, but one of them stands out, having been spray-painted pink and turquoise (Fig. 1). It is believed that the bust got its new flamboyant appearance during one of the demonstrations in Leipzig in October 1989 that helped pave the way for the fall of the Berlin Wall.

What is particularly interesting about the “Pink Lenin,” as it has come to be known, is its reversal of a common and omnipresent symbol. Nothing would have been easier than to destroy the bust in an act of anger and rebellion, yet the “artist” who altered the Lenin bust found a more creative solution in appropriating the symbol and radically redefining its meaning. Many of the protesters in Leipzig did not necessarily wish to overthrow communism and embrace the capitalist free market system; they wanted a radically reformed and democratized socialism “with a human face.” Accordingly, as this bust suggests, they did not need to destroy Lenin but just make him look a little bit more humane and cheerful.

This “fun fact” of the German Velvet Revolution seems to have a broader implication, however, for it shows how material objects can engender in us a deeper understanding of the nuances and ambiguities of history. The “Pink Lenin” does not exactly fit the picture that prevailed in the historical debates in Germany in the



Figure 1. *Vandalized (Pink) Lenin, 1965/1989*. In the collection of the Wende Museum, 2011.

early 1990s, which focused intently on the repressive character of the SED state, on the one hand, and the anti-communist resistance, on the other. That might even be one of the reasons why this pop art version of Lenin ended up in a Cold War museum in Los Angeles.

As this example shows, material objects, especially “things” with symbolic content like monuments and artworks, can force us to reconsider and complicate our sometimes overly generalized visions of the past in myriad ways. Here I will explore how they do so in the case of East Germany, which is especially promising in this regard as deeply ingrained Cold War positions strongly informed an often one-sided and politicized interpretation of history. I will argue that this interpretation did not sufficiently take into account the developments, ruptures, paradoxes, contingencies, and incongruities of lived history, nor the richness and variety of individual experience and agency. Moreover, I will suggest that “things” can play an important role in helping to define and subsequently diminish the gap between historical narrative and everyday experience. I will conclude with an analysis of the revaluation of street names and public monuments, as well as of the reception of East German artworks after 1989/90 as symbols of a politicized collective memory.

Historical narrative and truthfulness

It is commonplace to observe that history-writing is story-telling: it has a narrative structure, and this historical narrative is not history itself. This is not to say, however, that history-writing is just a form of literature as the two genres have different purposes. Whereas novelists may use historical evidence in creating stories, historians aim to make sense of historical evidence in a narrative structure that is formed by their interpretation of the facts. This structure, in turn, is consciously or unconsciously based on their personal outlook, life experiences, and moral convictions; in other words, they always construct the interpretation of historical facts—the causal nexus of a narrative—in their minds. Unless one believes that one’s interpretation of the past happens to be identical with the fundamental logic of human history itself, it is clear that no single historical narrative can claim to be “true” in any universal, objective sense.

At the same time, there are rigorous standards of quality in historical research—this is where the difference between literature and history becomes apparent. Whereas novelists might write historically valid and original works and historians might produce

studies of great literary skill, novelists will be judged primarily on their literary qualities; historians on their truthfulness regarding the available historical sources. Historians have the moral obligation to do justice to the relevant sources and use them respectfully, trying to reconstruct and understand their original meaning, as far as this is possible.

Looking at historical things in this light makes it clear how, as sources of our interpretation of the past, such things might become problematic or even disturbing. In 1801, the philosopher Hegel had defended his dissertation in which he claimed that our solar system necessarily contains seven planets, so that Herschel's discovery of Uranus in 1781 constituted the final contribution to our understanding of this system. Confronted in his doctoral defense with Giuseppe Piazzi's discovery of the new small planet Ceres (now defined as a dwarf planet, or planetoid) between the orbit of Mars and Jupiter that same year, Hegel allegedly responded, "So much worse for the facts." Apocryphal though this story may be, it well illustrates how facts can be disturbing when they fail to correspond to one's interpretation of reality.

A more complex and nuanced example from history- and art-history-writing shows how such interpretations stamp "history." Authors of historical and art historical reference books are confronted with the dual task of presenting facts and suggesting a coherence among them. Without their narrative structure, reference books would just be encyclopedias. A comparison of various examples immediately reveals that each one tells its own story, developing different criteria for the selection of facts or artworks derived from its overall interpretation. For instance, reference books published roughly between 1950 and 1980 tended to identify world (art) history with Western (art) history and to describe developments in terms of progress: the theory of modernity informed most historical reference books, whereas art historical theories from Gombrich to Greenberg shaped the narrative structure of "progress" in terms of artistic skills and the purity of artistic means. Not so long ago, art historical reference works largely neglected nineteenth-century symbolism and twentieth-century realism or treated them as a hindrance to artistic progress. They left the disturbing facts of life out of the story or portrayed them as obstacles to be overcome.

This example is particularly apt in this context because theories of modernity and artistic progress were instrumental in the construction

of a Western postwar identity during the Cold War. Although both political systems viewed themselves as rightful heirs to the values of the European Enlightenment, the Western theory of modernity maintained that these values could only be realized by means of democracy, a liberal market, and respect for individual freedom. The corresponding art historical perspective associated modern art with Western freedom and individuality as opposed to the propagandistic realism of the Third Reich and the Soviet Bloc.

Several representatives of the art world prominently articulated this perspective. For example, René d'Harnoncourt, vice-president of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, called modern art a "foremost symbol" of democratic society, and museum director Alfred Barr Jr. stated that "the modern artist's nonconformity and love of freedom [could] not be tolerated within a monolithic tyranny," and therefore that modern art was "useless for the dictator's propaganda."¹ In West Germany, Martha Mierendorff and Heinrich Tost argued in the same vein in their *Einführung in die Kunstsoziologie* (Introduction to the Sociology of Art) of 1957 that realist art was always susceptible to ideological abuse, whereas abstract art was free, carried no national symbols, and was not restricted by any borders so that dictatorial regimes always distrusted it.² Although few modern artists before 1945 had actually been staunch supporters of liberal democracy, and a democratic majority of people living in the Western world around 1950 did not care much for modern art, this very association played an important role in reshaping Western artistic identity. By implication, it also shaped our view of communist art as the very denial of the essential character of artistic production. This view strongly influenced the German art debates of the 1990s.

A clash of narratives

The fall of the Berlin Wall has been associated with the phenomenon of "broken" biographies. After 1989, there were paradoxical consequences to East Germans having to assimilate to a system most of them were not directly familiar with. On the one hand, many naturally welcomed the Western standard of welfare and the new political and personal freedoms, but, on the other hand, a great many experienced a feeling of displacement since their understanding of what constituted a meaningful life differed considerably from that of their Western counterparts. Identities in East and West Germany had largely been developed in direct opposition to one another. Not surprisingly, many East Germans readily distanced

1 Harnoncourt as quoted in Jonathan Harris, "Modernism and Culture in the USA, 1930-1960," in *Modernism in Dispute: Art since the Forties*, ed. Jonathan Harris, Francis Frascina, Charles Harrison, and Paul Wood (New Haven, 1993), 57; Alfred Barr, "Is Modern Art Communist?" *New York Times*, December 14, 1952, cited in David Cauter, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (Oxford, 2003), 549.

2 Quoted in Martin Damus, *Kunst in der BRD, 1945-1990: Funktionen der Kunst in einer demokratisch verfaßten Gesellschaft* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1995), 183-84.

themselves from the strictly bipolar model of Cold War history, while many politicians, intellectuals, and artists in the West fully identified with it, confusing their self-image with reality itself in the tradition of Hegel's apocryphal remark about the solar system. For them, the fall of the Berlin Wall amounted to nothing less than the final victory of the West in the Cold War, along with the end of socialism. American philosopher and political scientist Francis Fukuyama captured this sentiment well with his thesis of "the end of history."³

During the 1990s, two fundamental narratives emerged that each tried to make sense of the history of the GDR and, by implication, of its possible relevance to reunified Germany. The first is an extension of the Cold War theory of totalitarianism, according to which the GDR was an evil system that denied its citizens the basic human rights of individual freedom and well-being, so that the country and its history have to be unequivocally dismissed. To be sure, a lot of scholarly attention has been dedicated to political opposition and dissidents in the GDR, and especially to their role in dismantling the SED regime from the inside during the late 1970s and 1980s.⁴ However, the strong focus on the dichotomy between state and opposition, or socialists and dissenters, which might make sense in an abstract and generalized way, actually complicated the issue of integration and assimilation after 1989/90, since it often proved extremely hard to make a clear distinction in everyday reality. Were East Germans who abhorred the regime but did not participate in any active political opposition, perhaps out of fear of disciplinary action against themselves or their families, to be considered totalitarians or opportunists in need of some form of reeducation? And what about those who participated in the system, or even worked as unofficial members of the state security apparatus (Stasi), but did so—or so they later claimed—to help others retain a private, intellectual sphere or "niche" within a hostile system? If the history of coming to terms with East German biographies, as opposed to the political system itself, has proven anything, it must be, to quote novelist Rose Macaulay, that the powers in human beings of evading influences and escaping obvious references are unlimited.⁵

The second narrative subsequently countered this black-and-white interpretation of GDR history with a hardly less one-sided perspective: the *Ostalgie* view of GDR history. According to this alternative point of view, the fall of the Berlin Wall was a mixed blessing for most East Germans as the East German state was

3 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1992). In his book, Fukuyama marks the end of the Cold War, and the corresponding "victory" of liberal democracy, as the endpoint of mankind's social evolution, and consequently, he understands the "end of history" to mean the termination of a continuous battle between political systems and ideologies.

4 E.g., Deutscher Bundestag, ed., *Möglichkeiten und Formen abweichenden und widerständigen Verhaltens und oppositionellen Handelns, die friedliche Revolution im Herbst 1989, die Wiedervereinigung Deutschlands und Fortwirken von Strukturen und Mechanismen der Diktatur: Materialien der Enquete-Kommission "Aufarbeitung und Folgen der SED-Diktatur in Deutschland,"* Vol. 7, 1 & 2 (Baden Baden, 1995); Christian Joppke, *East German Dissidents and the Revolution of 1989: Social Movement in a Leninist Regime* (New York, 1995); John C. Torpey, *Intellectuals, Socialism and Dissent: The East German Opposition and Its Legacy* (Minneapolis, 1995); Erhart Neubert, *Geschichte der Opposition in der DDR 1949-1989* (Bonn, 1997); Detlef Pollack and Dieter Rink, eds., *Zwischen Verweigerung und Opposition: Politischer Protest in der DDR 1970-1989* (Frankfurt a.M., 1997); Eberhard Kuhrt, Hannsjörg F. Buck, and Gunter Holzweissig, eds., *Opposition in der DDR von den 70er Jahren bis zum Zusammenbruch der SED-Herrschaft* (Opladen, 1999); Gareth Dale, *Popular Protest in East Germany, 1945-1989* (New York, 2005).

5 Rose Macaulay, *Non-Combatants and Others* (London, 1986 [1916]), 111.

actually superior to the West in terms of full employment, social security, and a widespread sense of solidarity and idealism that were completely lost in the West German world of mass consumption, harsh competition, and social inequality. This view involves a rather undifferentiated reevaluation of East German culture, including some typical consumer products that were taken off the market soon after reunification but were later reintroduced for aesthetic, nostalgic, and political reasons.⁶ Whereas the narrative based in the theory of totalitarianism makes no distinction between the state and its citizens, the *Ostalgie* perspective does so in a radical way, portraying a form of East German well-being that existed in the GDR in spite of the SED and Stasi. By implication, the totalitarian approach to GDR history condemns all East Germans to a broken biography, but the *Ostalgie* approach, for its part, potentially boils down to a shameful denial of the physical and mental hardships that those who suffered from political oppression in the GDR endured.

Debates about the interpretation of the past can provoke discussion about the specific meaning of concepts associated with defining historical moments. The Wende Museum in Los Angeles takes its name from precisely such a contested concept. Egon Krenz used the term “Wende” (turning point) in his acceptance speech as new general secretary of the SED Central Committee on October 18, 1989, indicating that his succession of Erich Honecker marked a GDR move toward more openness, liberalism, and democracy. Although Krenz was echoing the term that *Der Spiegel* had put on its cover two days earlier to describe developments in the GDR, his use of it rendered it controversial as an indicator of the process leading up to the events of November 9. In particular, historians, intellectuals, and politicians who tend toward the totalitarian view of GDR history dismiss the term “Wende” not only because Krenz used it—he being a representative of the GDR who had lost all moral credibility after supporting the Chinese suppression of the Tiananmen student protests in June 1989—but also because they would prefer “downfall” to “turning point”: the former stresses the breakdown of communism and the victory of the West in the Cold War and downplays the historical importance of reform tendencies in Eastern Europe and especially the GDR.

⁶ See Hans-J. Misselwitz, *Nicht länger mit dem Gesicht nach Westen. Das neue Selbstbewußtsein der Ostdeutschen* (Bonn, 1996).

Disturbing things

One-sided perspectives on GDR history have to cope not only with problematic words but also with a lot of “disturbing” things. Different

views of the present can determine interpretations of the past, resulting in problematic things that function as a projection screen of diverging ideologies. Street signs and monuments referring to communist history in the former GDR are a case in point. Since street names and monuments reflect a society's self-image by selecting historical persons and events that deserve collective commemoration, it is not surprising that the German government decided to intervene and change many of them after reunification.

As it was unclear whether the street sign purification campaign should restrict itself to GDR officials and other representatives of Stalinism or be extended to individuals more generally associated with the history of socialism, a number of street names that were ultimately changed were hotly contested.⁷ West German artist Raffael Rheinsberg captured the idea of a broken history associated with street name politics well in his work *Gebrochen Deutsch* (Broken German) of 1993, a modernist rectangle in the Western artistic tradition put together from abandoned East German street signs. His work is “disturbing” in the sense that it points to a collective loss of meaning and reference and somehow symbolizes a new narrative East-West synthesis not based on common ideals and dreams but on mutual irritations and reproaches.



Figure 2. Lenin Monument (1968-69) by Nikolai Tomsky at Leninplatz in Berlin-Friedrichshain, now known as Platz der Vereinten Nationen, demolished in 1991. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lenin-statue-in-Berlin.jpg>.

7 Helga A. Welsh, Andreas Pickel, and Dorothy Rosenberg, “East and West German Identities: United and Divided?” in *After*

Unity: Reconfiguring German Identities, ed. Konrad H. Jarausch (Providence, 1997), 130-32; Dirk Verheyen, “What’s in a Name?”

Street Name Politics and Urban Identity in Berlin,” *German Politics and Society* 15, no. 3 (1997): 44-72, here 61-62.

The debate about the rearrangement of the Neue Wache at Unter den Linden in the eastern part of Berlin provides an example of altered monuments. In the GDR, this pavilion designed by the Prussian architect Karl Schinkel functioned as monument to the victims of militarism and fascism. After reunification, it was rearranged as a monument to the victims of war and tyranny, including all those who had succumbed to Nazi terror as well as to the Soviet and GDR regimes, and to the fallen German soldiers of both world wars. Although critics condemned this as an attempt to unburden history by including German soldiers as victims instead of perpetrators,⁸ it is more important in this context that this reconfiguration directly associated the GDR—the state that had always defined itself in terms of antifascism—with Nazi Germany as one of the totalitarian regimes that had to account for German suffering. In so far as it posed difficult questions about the identity of reunified Germany, the Neue Wache became a disturbing thing.

Equally contested was the dismantling of Nikolai Tomsky's large monument of Lenin from 1968-69 at Leninplatz in Berlin-Friedrichshain (Fig. 2), now known as the Platz der Vereinten Nationen (United Nations Square). Although this pompous sculpture seemed to represent everything that was reprehensible about "real socialism," some East Germans in favor of retaining it stressed the difference between Lenin's socialist ideas and their perverted realization in the GDR and Eastern Europe. Moreover, in a non-socialist state, the Lenin sculpture opened new possibilities for coming to terms with the past. In early September 1990, Krzysztof Wodiczko used the monument quite literally as a projection screen, dressing Lenin like a tramp walking a shopping cart with his personal belongings. Despite these arguments and numerous protests, the monument was slated for dismantling by November 1991, and someone posted a sign on the fence surrounding the site that read: "Here the city council of Berlin is unburdening German-German history as part of a campaign against dissenters."⁹ The Lenin monument had become a disturbing object for those in power who wanted to rewrite East German history by cleansing public space of its socialist markers.

As this example amply demonstrates, things can suddenly become "disturbing" due to a change of circumstances. Witness the different meanings attributed to a simple black square in various artworks highlighted by Arthur Danto and Susan Buck-Morss:

8 Christian Meier, "Das Problem eines Berliner Denkmals," *Die Neue Gesellschaft/Frankfurter Hefte* 8 (1997): 733-43.

9 The original reads "Hier entsorgt der Senat von Berlin deutsch-deutsche Geschichte im Rahmen einer Säuberungsaktion gegen Andersdenkende," quoted in Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (London, 1997), 79-85.

Alphonse Allais's jokingly entitled *Negroes Fighting in a Cave at Night* of 1879, Kasimir Malevich's famous *Black Square* (1913–15), and Ad Reinhardt's black squares of the 1950s and 1960s. While all of these artworks at first sight look exactly the same, they have completely different meanings on account of the various periods and contexts of their production and reception.¹⁰ In the context of Lenin as "icon," it is interesting to recall the Lenin portrait that the Novi Sad-based Hungarian artist Balint Szombathy carried through the streets of Budapest in his performance *Lenin in Budapest* in 1972 because of the new meaning the artist conveyed by altering the framework. The poster he used was the same as those typically carried during mass rallies and organized festivities. While a socialist artist was, of course, expected to identify with Lenin as the father of East European socialism, in a society where this identification was so completely ritualized and institutionalized, Szombathy's explicit individual confirmation of this devotion had a comical, and therefore slightly subversive, effect.¹¹ This shows how Lenin in his function as socialist icon could be used to mockingly mirror socialist power politics even during the heyday of state socialism in Eastern Europe, turning him into a disturbing symbol.

A clash of art histories

The art debates since the 1990s strongly reflect the clash between Eastern and Western narratives after reunification. Frequently, the artistic tradition of the GDR has been portrayed as a symbol of East German totalitarianism, reducing individual expressions to political ideology. Precisely in the context of such interpretations, East German artworks can assume a "disturbing" quality.

In a much quoted interview with Axel Hecht and Alfred Welti published in June 1990, Georg Baselitz, an artist from East Germany who fled to the West in 1957, stated that there was no such thing as GDR art since all sincere artists had left the socialist state. Those who had remained, he held, were just "arseholes" who had supported a criminal regime and renounced the fundamental qualities of true art—fantasy, love, and creative madness—in the process.¹² With this forceful language, Baselitz confronted the creativity and individualism of the West with the totalitarian smothering of all creative impulses in the Soviet Bloc. Various art critics and journalists echoed this idea in other publications; for example, Hans-Joachim Müller described East German painting generically as "agitprop" in *Die Zeit* in 1994.¹³

10 Arthur Danto, *The Madonna of the Future: Essays in a Pluralistic Art World* (New York, 2000), 416–31; Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 89–95.

11 Misko Suvakovic, "Art as a Political Machine: Fragments on the Late Socialist and Postsocialist Art of Mitteleuropa and the Balkans," in *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism*, ed. Ales Erjavec (Berkeley, 2003), 117.

12 Axel Hecht and Alfred Welti, "Ein Meister, der Talent verschmähnt: Interview mit Georg Baselitz von Axel Hecht und Alfred Welti," *Art 6* (1990): 54–72, here 66–70.

13 Hans-Joachim Müller, "Mahnwachen-Schnelldienst," *Die Zeit*, May 20, 1994.

This stance was not confined to West Germans and exiled East Germans. One can find a similar though more subtle and better supported line of thought in the publications of East German art critic, journalist, and exhibition organizer Christoph Tannert. Tannert argued that a considerable number of artists unwittingly supported the system, despite distancing themselves from the narrow principles of socialist realism from the 1970s on, by being artistically active under a morally reprehensible regime. This even held true for unofficial artists, he maintained, because they were not actively involved in the political opposition against the SED leadership. In other words, for Tannert, the burden of artistic participation in a rotten system outweighed any possible critical intentions and individual motivations among the artists.¹⁴

Uwe Lehmann-Brauns, cultural speaker of the CDU in the federal state of Berlin, lent fierce support to opponents of “totalitarian art” on several occasions. When, for instance, the Kunstbeirat des Deutschen Bundestages (Art Council of the German Parliament) chaired by Rita Süßmuth published the list of artists the committee had selected for the artistic decoration of the renovated Reichstag building in 1998, Lehmann-Brauns criticized the inclusion of a single living painter who had made his career in the GDR, Bernhard Heisig, by comparing his artwork to that of the Nazi sculptor Arno Breker. Lehmann-Brauns rebuked the Kunstbeirat, pointing out that reunified Germany was not a continuation of the GDR with new borders, and that it should be self-evident that artists who supported the first or the second German dictatorship could not be represented at the very heart of German parliamentary democracy.¹⁵

The equation of GDR art and National Socialist culture, as expressed by Lehmann-Brauns, found its conceptual climax in the exhibition organized by Achim Preiß in Weimar in 1999, *Aufstieg und Fall der Moderne* (Rise and Fall of Modernism). In this tripartite exhibition, a collection of early twentieth-century art from Weimar represented the “rise” of modernism in the Schloßmuseum, whereas selections of Nazi and GDR art, separated by one floor, stood for the “fall” in the multi-purpose building at the old National Socialist *Gauforum* (regional district forum) in Weimar. This presentation obviously portrayed Nazi and GDR art as the totalitarian antithesis of the free Western art tradition. The East German exhibition consisted of gray partitions overloaded with some five hundred paintings, as well as a single white wall containing works produced in exile, or “inner

14 Christoph Tannert, “‘Nach realistischer Einschätzung der Lage...’: Absage an Subkultur und Nischenkultur in der DDR,” in *Der Riß im Raum. Positionen der Kunst seit 1945 in Deutschland, Polen, der Slowakei und Tschechien*, ed. Matthias Flügge (Dresden, 1994), 41-48.

15 Paul Kaiser, “Die Grenzen der Verständigung,” in *Enge und Vielfalt. Auftragskunst und Kunstförderung in der DDR*, ed. Paul Kaiser and Karl-Siegbert Rehberg (Dresden, 1999), 458.

emigration,” arranged in a more spacious way to suggest a clear distinction between “official” and “unofficial” art in the GDR.

The exhibition concept can be viewed as an echo of the historical approach that focuses exclusively on the distinctions between state and opposition. In the case of art and culture, it leads to rather bizarre results because art and culture never unconditionally and unequivocally reflect political realities, let

alone dogmatic political theories. To present East German—or, for that matter, East European—art and culture exclusively in terms of political totalitarianism is to grossly underestimate the power of individual creativity, even under dictatorial regimes.¹⁶ The simple fact is that it is impossible to summarize forty years of GDR painting under a single heading since the history of East German painting is marked by a number of radical changes, parallel developments, and contingencies.

For instance, it is necessary to qualify the common view that the painters and sculptors of the *Leipziger Schule* (Werner Tübke, Bernhard Heisig, Wolfgang Mattheuer, and others) represented the SED regime as “state artists.” Although this view informed much of the radical critique of the 1990s, it fails to appreciate the complexity of these artists’ careers. To begin with, a number of these artists actually countered the dominant simplistic and dogmatic socialist realism of the 1950s and 1960s with a more complex and individual style and iconography. Originally disciplined by the regime, they only came to be officially recognized after West German art critics (e.g., Eduard Beaucamp) and collectors (e.g., Peter Ludwig) showed interest in these new artistic developments.¹⁷

Moreover, the Leipzig artists paved the way for younger artists to expand the limits of experimentation and explore new artistic horizons, far surpassing their predecessors in the process, despite



Figure 3. Margret Hoppe, *Die verschwundenen Bilder* (*Vanished Images*), 2006: Werner Tübke, *Fünf Kontinente* (*Five Continents*), 1959, Interhotel Astoria, Leipzig. Courtesy of the artist. In the collection of the Wende Museum, 2011.

¹⁶ For an excellent study of Soviet art in terms of political control and individual creativity, see Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* (New Haven, 1998).

¹⁷ Beaucamp, an art critic for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, even suggested that the *Leipziger Schule* could inspire Western modernist painting, which, in his view, had reached a deadlock. See his collection of essays: Eduard Beaucamp, *Der verstrickte Künstler. Wider die Legende von der unbefleckten Avantgarde* (Cologne, 1998).

the regime's vigorous attempts to counter this development. The fundamental critique of "real socialism" in some of the works of Mattheuer, who would hardly qualify as a "natural" representative of GDR state art, is fairly unmistakable. Likewise, it is unjustified and misleading to dismiss Tübke, Heisig, and others as obedient manufacturers of visual propaganda.¹⁸

I would like to conclude with the suggestion that these one-sided approaches towards GDR art and culture do not meet the criterion of historical truthfulness. Politically or ethically motivated as they may be, they tend to completely overlook the "disturbing" quality of their sources, their capacity to qualify and renounce simplistic interpretations and narratives. Margret Hoppe, in her photo series *Die verschwundenen Bilder* (Vanished Images) of 2006, impressively captures exactly this disturbing quality by documenting the absence of East German paintings and sculptures after their removal from public life in reunified Germany (Fig. 3). The desolate spaces she depicts seem to reflect the real-life consequences of a rigorous process of "coming to terms with the East German past"—in this case with East German artwork. As historians, we should try to understand the complexity and paradoxes of life and culture in a totalitarian state, and in doing so try to remain critical toward our own inevitable biases, realizing that the end of the Cold War not only disturbed "their" historical narrative, but "ours" as well.

18 There are several excellent studies on (certain aspects of) the history of GDR painting. Apart from Kaiser and Rehberg's volume mentioned above (n15), see, e.g., Martin Damus, *Malerei der DDR. Funktionen der bildenden Kunst im Realen Sozialismus* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1991); Eckhart Gillen, *Das Kunstkombinat DDR. Zäsuren einer gescheiterten Kunstpolitik* (Cologne, 2005); Bernd Lindner, *Verstellter, offener Blick. Eine Rezeptionsgeschichte bildender Kunst im Osten Deutschlands, 1945-1995* (Cologne, 1998); Stephanie Barron and Sabine Eckmann, eds., *Art of Two Germanys: Cold War Cultures* (New York, 2009); Eckhart Gillen, *Feindliche Brüder? Der Kalte Krieg und die deutsche Kunst 1945-1990* (Berlin, 2010).

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