



Invitation to the Press Conference

Art in the GDR

*A Retrospective Exhibition of the Nationalgalerie Berlin, in cooperation with
the Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany, Bonn
Funded by the German Federal Cultural Foundation*

22 October 2004 – 13 February 2005

Re-(en)visioning Art in the GDR

Thirteen years after the end of Communism in East Germany, the exhibition looks back on forty years of art in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The exhibition shows works of art that demonstrate a preoccupation with – although often manifested as a refusal of – the social fabric of the GDR and its artistic program. Presenting a diversity of artistic positions, the exhibition challenges current perceptions of “GDR Art”: it serves neither the cliché image of “Socialist Realism”, nor the simplistic polarization into State and Dissident art. Rather, it follows a narrative that shows the complex relationships – including the similarities – between oppositional and conformist art. Curated by Eugen Blume, “Art in the GDR” brings together 270 works by 136 artists in a variety of media, including painting, drawing, collage, sculpture, photography, and film.

“Formalism” – “Realism” – “Art in Socialism”

The exhibition explores the “maneuvering room” of art in the GDR in twenty stations. It begins chronologically with the “Zero Hour” of 1945 and the immediate post-war years in which Dresden artists such as Wilhelm Lachnit endeavoured to revive modernist artistic traditions banned in the Third Reich. Although this working through National Socialism and the war belonged to the self-understanding of the GDR, modernist artistic expression soon fell into disrepute. Defamed in the 1950s as “formalist” by the leadership of the Communist Party (SED), which promoted an optimistic portrayal of everyday life under Socialism, modern art nonetheless continued in the GDR. Abstract artists created both informal and constructive, concrete art. Figurative artists drew inspiration from modern masters like Picasso and Léger. Also working outside the “straight jacket” of official artistic ideology, was the Dresden “Blue Wonder” circle of artists around Strawalde (Jürgen Böttcher) with his archaic and at the same time poetic authenticity of expression. Artists like Albert Ebert found their niche in a sensitive observation of the everyday. Others found a retreat in the inner laws of painting. In contrast, Collage in the GDR actively subverted the realism dictate of the SED leadership. Similarly, Edmund Kesting’s early montages of photographic negatives, displayed in the Corridor of Photography and Graphics, held up a distorted mirror to reality. In addition to exploring thematic and stylistic currents, the exhibition also looks at the art centers of the GDR: Berlin, Dresden, Halle, Karl-Marx-Stadt (now Chemnitz), and Leipzig. Berlin is presented as a concentration of different artistic outlooks: Visions of the City and Nature find their Antithesis in Otto Dix-inspired Versim. Out of the early melancholic pictures of the so-called “Black Period” developed the Berlin School, which avoided all State platitudes. In contrast, art in Leipzig, under the leadership of Werner Tübke, Bernhard Heisig, and Wolfgang Mattheuer, while metaphorical and critical, was at times co-opted by the State. In addition to groups and schools, there were also important artistic loners: the free-floating intelligence of both Gerhard Altenbourg and Carl Friedrich Claus unfolds in the Hall of Drawings. The tendencies of the 1980s appear in several rooms: wild, expressive painting, provocative photo art, and the music-like imagery of “Poetic Abstraction”. At the end of the exhibition, we return to the theme of history as a source and failure of Utopia, an idea that photography at the end of the GDR increasingly treated with irony or replaced completely with an unflinching view of reality. Also on view in the exhibition will be a series of films by painters like Strawalde (Jürgen Böttcher), the “autoperforation” artists, and many others, as well as original television recordings from the GDR of the official Dresden art exhibitions. This documentation was developed especially for this exhibition in cooperation with the German Broadcast Archive, Frankfurt am Main – Potsdam-Babelsberg.

**The press conference will be held on 21st October 2004 at 11.00 a.m. in the
Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany.**

The exhibition will be opened for viewing by 10 a.m.. Please register by Fax (+49/228/9171-211) or E-Mail (ferreira@kah-bonn.de). **Extensive essays and photo material are available at the press office or www.bundeskunsthalle.de. Please direct all requests for interviews to this office.**

We are looking forward to your visit.

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