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To Each Their Own Reality: The Art of the FRG and the GDR at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1981

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In 1981, two exhibitions of contemporary German art take place in succession at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. The first, entitled *Art Allemagne Aujourd'hui* (Art Germany today), is organized by Suzanne Pagé and René Block at L'Arc and at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, and it embodies the recognition of German art of the second half of the twentieth century by French museums.¹ Alongside the works of Joseph Beuys, Wolf Vostell, Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter, Hanne Darboven, Palermo and Klaus Rinke, the exhibition presents paintings by Georg Baselitz, A. R. Penck, Markus Lüpertz, and Jörg Immendorff; this is one of the first

¹ See the catalog of *Art Allemagne Aujourd'hui. Différents aspects de l'art actuel en république fédérale d'Allemagne* (Paris: ARC/Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris, 1981). The first stages of this research were carried out in the context of a thesis. See Mathilde Arnoux, "Les musées français et la peinture allemande 1871-1981" (Thesis, MSH/Centre Allemand d'Histoire de l'art, 2007). More in-depth research subsequently followed during a seminar, the results of which were published and which we recommend for a thorough study of the exhibition *Art Allemagne Aujourd'hui*; see Mathilde Arnoux, "Art Allemagne Aujourd'hui ou la reconnaissance de l'art allemand contemporain par les musées français," *Etudes germaniques* 64 (2009): 1037-53. The article mentioned here is the result of research into new archives and our continued reflections on the marks left by the Cold War on writing about the history of art.

events outside Germany to showcase these artists.² A few months later, an exhibition opens which has now almost faded into oblivion. Only a few specialist publications on the issue of the cultural relations of the GDR, such as *Kunst als Botschafter einer künstlichen Nation* by Christian Saehrendt, still refer to it. This exhibition, organized by Bernadette Contensou, is entitled *Peinture et gravure en République démocratique allemande*. It presents works by Bernhard Heisig, Werner Tübke, Volker Stelzmann, Hartwig Ebersbach, Arno Rink, and others, who are now considered to have been the most important representatives of GDR art.³

These two exhibitions are to be seen in the context of the signing of cultural agreements between France and both Germanies at the beginning of the 1980s. In February 1981, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing meets Helmut Schmidt on the occasion of the Franco-German Summit, which for the first time focuses on the issue of cultural relations between the two countries. Originally planned for November 1980, the opening of *Art Allemagne Aujourd'hui*—an ambassadorial exhibition of contemporary German culture—is postponed so as to provide the backdrop for this meeting. The exhibition of GDR art occurs in the context of the signing of the cultural agreement between the GDR and France in 1980, and paves the way for the establishment of a French cultural center in East Berlin in 1984. A GDR cultural center opens at 117 Boulevard Saint Germain in 1983. Beyond the characteristic matters of cultural diplomacy, a study of these two exhibitions reveals the impact of the Cold War on the selective approach to the past taken by the two Germanies. Through their choices, each explains the grounds for, and legitimacy of, having established the values system that prevails in their own country. *Art Allemagne Aujourd'hui* sees itself as the legitimate representative of contemporary German identity, while the GDR exhibition asserts the good founded by socialist realism to better embody a possible alternative to the crisis of values experienced by the West. Each one presents a distinct and rival model of society. The ideas proposed in each exhibition catalog thus reveal the extent to which the ideological issues resulting from the Cold War had a strong impact

2 This interest in young German artists is expressed in various exhibitions organized in the same year in Europe; on this subject, see *Schilderkunst in Duitland 1981. Peinture en Allemagne* (Brussels: Société des expositions du Palais des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles, 1981), and *A New Spirit in Painting* (London: Royal Academy, 1981).

3 See, for example, the GDR artists recently presented in the exhibition *Kunst und Kalter Krieg. Deutsche Positionen 1945–89*, Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, 2009.

on the way in which FRG and GDR art were presented and interpreted. Everything appears to place the two Germanies in stark contrast and it would therefore be unthinkable to establish any kind of relation between the artistic practices used on either side of the Iron Curtain. Today, it is striking to note that the differences between the two models are manifested around a common axis constituted by the notion of the real/reality. As it is sufficiently abstract, this notion is freely interpreted by each Germany; it very much determines the understanding of the artistic scene in the form of a model, at the same time justifying the distinctiveness and legitimacy of that model. This notion—used in a characteristic manner in each case—merits special examination in order to gain a better understanding of what differentiates the discourses on the art of the FRG and that of the GDR.

The pieces selected for *Art Allemagne Aujourd'hui* are extremely diverse. Although not exhaustive, the selection could be considered representative of what was being done during the 1960s and 1970s in Germany. This is thanks to Suzanne Pagé and her wisdom in working with René Block, one of the most important figures in the Western art market, as well as the recommendations of artists such as Vostell and Beuys.⁴

Suzanne Pagé's introduction stresses the variety of practices. Apart from the "case of Beuys," who is set aside as a timeless phenomenon,⁵ Suzanne Pagé marks the distinction between the pre-1968 generation, characterized by engagement, and that of post-1968, characterized by disillusionment. The diversity of practices, illustrated by the variety of mediums presented (painting, sculpture, environments, video installations, etc.), but also by distinct ways of creating art, speaks for a complex and multifaceted Germany and rules out the idea of a supposed Germanness. Freed from simplistic terminology, the search to validate specifically German characteristics is based on the originality of contemporary artistic practices. However, anyone attempting to get closer to the artistic singularity of Germany cannot really be content with characterizing it by its diversity and originality; coherence must be found in the scene in question. This coherence will be affirmed through one drawing and three themes that can be found in the catalog texts.

4 Suzanne Pagé, "Introduction," in *Art Allemagne Aujourd'hui*, 5.

5 On this subject, see Maité Vissault, *Der Beuys Komplex—l'identité allemande à travers la réception de l'œuvre de Joseph Beuys (1945–1986)* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2010).

In response to the need to find coherence, René Block creates a picture of the river of German art, which illustrates several sources from which contemporary German art finds its inspiration. Coming from the avant-garde schools of the beginning of the century—expressionism, dadaism, Bauhaus, etc.—it ignores New Objectivity. After having gone underground during the Nazi period, the river resurfaces. Beuys is one of the tributaries having given it most nourishment, and several rivers and streams merge to keep it moving, passing through New York and Paris. The variety and diversity of the sources make up the river that inspires Germany and its culture; it is their sum that constitutes the importance and power of German culture. There is no univocity. Contemporary creation is a complex network covering all of Germany and its culture benefiting from permeations from outside.

The first theme, which aims to set out the diversity of expression in a coherent whole, is very much influenced by the diplomatic issues that prevailed during the exhibition. This theme develops the idea that the originality and variety of expression are largely dependent on the political system of the FRG as a guarantor of freedom, modernity, creativity, and autonomy.

The second theme presents the autonomy of the FRG, in relation to the United States, as a characteristic that interlinks artistic expressions. This is not about a wholesale rejection of the United States—without which the river of German art would not pass through New York. The aim is to break with the idea of a universal model, of standardization in line with American values to highlight the value of the singularities.

Finally, to affirm this coherence of expression, the works—varied as they may be—are for the most part placed in the context of a notion that can be identified with the real. According to the works, this notion is interpreted from a temporal point of view (the real being current events, the present) or from a material point of view (the real being the surrounding world, that of concrete objects), which corresponds with the very ambiguity in the definition of the term. This link between the works and the real, in terms of current events, is recurrent.

The relationship with the real differs from one artist to the next. It is applied to practices that use the introduction of objects in works (Vostell) and to certain forms of conceptual art that aim to remove the barrier between art and life (Haacke), as well as in certain practices—returning to representation

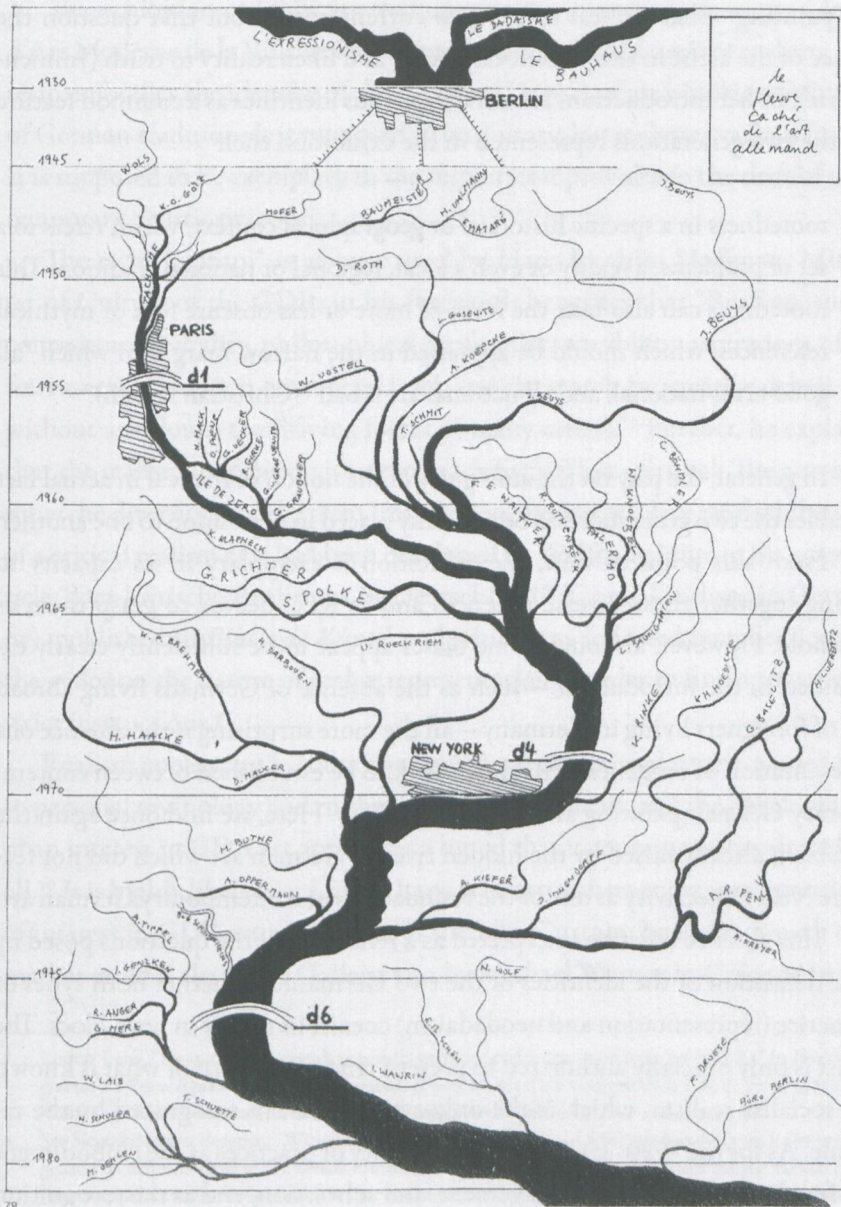


Figure 30.1.

René Block, *Le fleuve caché de l'art allemand*, catalogue *Art Allemagne Aujourd'hui*.
Différents aspects de l'art actuel en république fédérale d'Allemagne.
Musée d'Art moderne de la ville de Paris, 1981. Courtesy René Block.

in painting—that are less tuned into current events, but that question the place of the artist in the present-day world and liken reality to truth (Immen-dorff). In her introduction, Suzanne Pagé thus identifies as a common feature of the two generations represented in the exhibition their

rootedness in a specific historical or geographical context, which refers to a set of problems, a reality or even a local, regional or national tradition. This rootedness can also take the form of more or less obscure folk or mythical references, which should be appraised in the narrow margin in which “all good art is national, and all national art is bad” (Christian Krogh).⁶

In general, the play on the ambiguity of the notion of the real in actual fact enables the two generations to be generally placed in opposition to one another.

From this point of view, the exhibition is exemplary in its capacity to bring together these diverse practices and in its endeavor to grasp them as a whole. However, although some biases appear to be sufficiently clearly explained in the introduction—such as the absence of Germans living abroad or of foreigners living in Germany—all the more surprising is the absence of a presentation of tendencies enabling a link to be established between contemporary German painting and New Objectivity. Here, we find once again the problem already raised by the hidden river of German art which did not feature New Objectivity as one of the foundations of contemporary German art.

This absence must be interpreted as a reflection of the questions posed by the definition of the identities of the two Germanies, whether both types of practice (representation and neodadaism) coexist in reality in both blocs. The East is only officially authorized to present tendencies born of what is known as socialist realism, which is the only type of realism recognized by the regime. As for the West, it presents the diversity of practices as the embodiment of freedom of expression, engagement, and subversion, and as the recognition of the individual. Such a strong assertion of the “real” as the object of contemporary German artists’ concern in their capacity to unite a variety of practices is actually in opposition to the ambitions of the East, which gathers all practices around one and the same movement: realism.

6 Pagé, “Introduction,” 6.

The exhibition of GDR art that opens a few months later at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris is presented under the aegis of realism. The term embodies the identity of the GDR and is part of an historic continuity of German tradition. It is supposed to be unitary, but it claims various forms. It is supposed to be exemplary in the responses it provides to the drift of contemporary artistic practices.

The term "realism" is at once used by Hans Joachim Hoffman, Minister of Culture of the GDR, in his foreword; he writes that "Realism, social commitment, vitality, philosophical profundity, sensibility, aspirations of effectiveness and action on a social level, and the search for creative debate are without any doubt the driving forces of many artists."⁷ Further, he explains that the realism in question is not so much formal but spiritual. The aim is to show the diversity that the term "realism" encompasses. Here we find the idea of a critical realism as it had been developed by Wolfgang Hütt in his 1957 article "Der kritische Realismus in Deutschland" (Critical realism in Germany), published in *Bildende Kunst*⁸ and which was followed by reflections in the 1960s on the nature of realist representation in order to find a way round strict instructions.⁹

Realism appears as "a counterproposition" committed to the tendencies, to personal mythology and to thematic disengagement, and the development of an interest in GDR art appears as a signal that it contains values shared by all.¹⁰ It is highly likely that Lothar Lang is referring here to recent expressions of interest in GDR art to the west of the Iron Curtain: be it the growth of a market around the Hake Gallery, run by Michael Werner in Cologne in the

7 Lothar Lang, "De quelques particularités de la peinture et des arts graphiques en R.D.A.," in *Peinture et gravure en République démocratique allemande* (Paris: Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris, 1981).

8 Wolfgang Hütt, "Der kritische Realismus in Deutschland," *Bildende Kunst* 1 (1957): 9–13.

9 See Siegfried Heinz Begenau, "Wir müssen über die Form sprechen," *Bildende Kunst* 6 (1965), 287–92. Begenau was editor-in-chief of the review *Bildende Kunst* and, in his 1965 text, he presents the various paths that can lead to realism. He considers that realist content takes precedence, not form. The form does not need to be naturalist in order to carry the realist message.

10 Lang, "De quelques particularités de la peinture et des arts graphiques en R.D.A." "The reasons for the growing interest shown in GDR art are diverse and do not lie alone in the remarkable continuity of a relentless, passionate search for new and realist forms of expression, adapted to our time. It is much more likely that one of the reasons for this phenomenon lies in the fact that GDR art is perceived as a counterproposition committed to tendencies, to personal mythology, and to thematic disengagement. In other words, a broad public is interested primarily in the ideas (content) to which GDR art gives expression in its works. Through art, an interest is shown in the country in which these works were created and in the social processes under way there."

late 1960s; the makeup of the Peter Ludwig collection; or the participation of six GDR artists in documenta 6 in 1977.

The term “realism” is used by every author contributing to the catalog; Raoul-Jean Moulin, art critic for *L’Humanité*, presents realism as a traditional German value and thus gives it its historical legitimacy.¹¹ Remaining thus true to the Zhdanovist conception of socialist realism which takes its inspiration from classical heritage,¹² Moulin also appeals to traditional views of French criticism of German art, which attribute to it realist qualities ranging from ugliness to a sense of expression.¹³

If we return to the river metaphor illustrated by René Block for the FRG scene, the art of the GDR would have as its source the Renaissance and New Objectivity; it would not be disturbed by tributaries, and it would be alone in feeding Germany and its culture. Its ambition would be to expand, and it would irrigate land well beyond Germany’s borders. This image shows the major divisions between the two Germanies, and thus the views carried by the *Art Allemagne Aujourd’hui* exhibition are seen in a new light. In rejecting the critical realism of the West, which takes its inspiration from the 1920s

11 Raoul-Jean Moulin, “Pour tenter d’en finir avec quelques idées reçues,” in *Peinture et gravure en République démocratique allemande* (Paris: Musée d’art moderne de la ville de Paris, 1981). “Without providing an inventory of the works collected here, the first thing to note is the fact that the majority of them claim to be realist. But there are several forms of realism that express not only several conceptions of what is real, but also several conceptions of the painter’s work that can be seen even in certain painters who refer to socialist realism. In their differences, these realisms interrogate us and interrogate the painting, because the questions they pose—beyond any political reduction—are articulated in relation to the realist tradition of German art since the Renaissance, from Dürer to Dix, but also in relation to the expressionist shock of the 1920s and to the new methods of representation that spread throughout the world from the 1960s. This is the context in which the preoccupations of Sitte, Heisig, Mattheuer, Stelzmann or Tübke are to be seen.”

12 Boris Groys, *Staline œuvre d’art totale* (Nîmes: Jacqueline Chambon, 1990).

13 On this subject, see the writings of Claude Digeon in *La crise allemande de la pensée française* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959); René Cheval, “Cent ans d’affectivité franco-allemande ou l’ère des stéréotypes,” *Revue d’Allemagne* 4 (1972): 603–14; Gabriel Blecke-Byrne, “French Perceptions of German Art (1800–1850). Studies in Stereotypes and their Ideological Influence” (PhD diss., Brown University, 1989); the pieces by Uwe Fleckner, “L’art allemand et son public français. Réception et transferts artistiques au XIXe siècle,” François-René Martin, “Une critique agonistique. Schongauer et Grünewald en France, entre 1840 et 1914,” Christian Heck, “Entre naturalisme et mystique: Joris-Karl Huysmans et les primitifs allemands,” in *De Grünewald à Menzel. L’image de l’art allemand en France au XIXe siècle*, ed., Uwe Fleckner and Thomas W. Gachtgens (Paris: MSH/Centre Allemand d’Histoire de l’Art, 2003), 1–14, 57–84, and 85–100; Marie Gispert, “L’Allemagne n’a pas de peintres. Diffusion et réception de l’art allemand moderne en France durant l’Entre-deux-guerres, 1918–1939” (PhD diss., Université Paris I, 2006); Friederike Kitschen, “Befremdlich anders: das französische Bild der deutschen Kunst,” in *Deutsche Kunst. Französische Perspektiven, 1870–1945. Quellen und Kommentare zur Kunstkritik*, ed. Friederike Kitschen and Julia Drost (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2007), 89–98.

and from New Objectivity in particular,¹⁴ Suzanne Pagé excludes the practices that reveal the preoccupations shared by both the FRG and the GDR, and she asserts the singularity of the Western scene, she defines its originality. The autonomy claimed in relation to the United States intends to demonstrate that Western Europe possesses the resources to respond to the crisis of the avant-gardes and does not need a new universal model like the one proposed by Lothar Lang.

However, if we take a closer look, there is no more coherence in the content than the style at the heart of the German scene of the GDR as it is represented, and the term realism is all encompassing. Of course, only the traditional painting and engraving practices are presented, but they are nonetheless extremely varied. Next to official figures—each of whom expresses their commitment to the SED in different terms, with the ideological reach of their works being far from univocal—such as Bernhard Heisig, Willi Sitte, or Wolfgang Mattheuer—we also find Hartwig Ebersbach or Claus Carl-friedrich, whose collage and drawing practices do not carry the conventional hallmarks of socialist realism. Thus, despite the introductory discourse that seemed to want to standardize everything under the term “realism,” the exhibition is testament to the diversity of artistic production in East Germany, thanks to Bernadette Contensou, who refused to have the choice of artists dictated to her.¹⁵

14 In the 1970s, the representatives of this trend were graphic artists such as Klaus Vogelgesangs or Wolfgang Petrick.

15 Willi Sitte, president of the Union of Artists, and Lothar Lang, art critic and art historian, had drawn up a list of artists who were to appear in this exhibition. Lang, who, “can quite clearly leave the country easily, is very familiar with international art, and as he is a good friend of Mr. Sitte, it was easier for me to put through the changes I wanted to make to the established list” (account by Bernadette Contensou following a trip she made to the GDR in October 1979 in preparation for the exhibition). Moreover, this aspect had been a decisive point in the preparation of the exhibition. Dr. Prehn, first secretary of the embassy of the GDR, had initially suggested, on the recommendations of his country, an exhibition containing 100 to 120 paintings and prints by Bernhard Heisig, Harald Metzkes, Willi Sitte, and Werner Tübke. But Bernadette Contensou refuses to have the choice of artists dictated to her. With a great deal of support from the official cultural relations bodies, this exhibition does not inspire the enthusiasm of the organizer. Bernadette Contensou writes: “This general survey allows us to create an exhibition that is not spectacular—to borrow the term used by a representative of the German Ministry of Culture—but that is rather interesting at an information level. This exhibition was to present some twenty artists and engravers; sculpture, which is very academic, is not of interest. The generation of the immediate postwar period is largely represented by Willi Sitte and Bernhard Heisig—president and first vice president respectively of the Union of Artists—and in these capacities they are inevitable. Their work is extremely revealing of this generation, which is obsessed by the problems of the battle against fascism and the glorification of work. But these two artists also show a real painter’s temperament. The younger generation, more liberated from this obsession, shows—at

Through these two exhibitions, the two German cultures appear to be distinct, each one characterized by different artistic practices and heritages. However, this question of the division of German culture is at the heart of the debate concerning the “German question” formulated at the beginning of the 1980s. It raises the fundamental question as to whether the division of the country was the essential cause of divided national feeling, and whether the reunification of Germany alone would provide a way out from this dilemma. It would be presumptuous to think that the organizers of the exhibition had sought to give a definitive answer to the question, yet their choices were still strongly influenced by a certain conception of contemporary German culture. Showcasing the contemporary art scene of West Germany in “its perspectives, its radicalism, and its difference” is not an attempt to reunite the two Germanies in one and the same culture; rather, it is an attempt to declare an official representative.

From the opposition of the postwar years between abstraction in the West and socialist realism in the East, the 1960s slide toward a complex opposition, expressing equivalent facts between the “real” as carried by the diversity of expression in the West and the “real” as carried by realism in the East. Each of these conceptions has an effect on the choices made at the heart of cultural heritage, in accordance with the image that the country wishes to convey. Beyond art, these are two visions of the world in direct opposition. One can thus understand the way in which classifications were made on each side of the Iron Curtain by applying the principles under which attempts were made to place works of arts. These discourses have strongly affected our understanding of the artistic scene of this period. Taking into account the political, ideological calling of the artistic scenes of these years, one can only hope to return to the works, interrogate the intentions of the artists, and question the validity of the oppositions expressed in the published texts and speeches on the subject.

least among the artists we have chosen—an openness toward international art.” During a trip to the GDR in October 1979, before which she was guaranteed the freedom to choose works, Bernadette Contensou visits five exhibitions: in Dresden, Leipzig, and Halle, “huge district events” bringing together the artists living in the region, from the most famous and the most official of the GDR to the youngest generations, displaying their most recent work. In Berlin, the thirty-year exhibition traces an historical panorama of the plastic arts since the foundation of the GDR.