

# TO EACH HIS OWN REALITY

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The Cold War's geopolitical division of Europe – in a way representing a doubling of the characteristic split in the epistemology of Modernity – also affected the way in which the continent's artistic relationships during this period are treated. The division has left its traces on art-historical research, traces which the research project "OwnReality. Jedem seine Wirklichkeit" aimed to investigate. Thus a trans-European team of art historians and philosophers was set up to study the artistic relationships between France, the FRG, the GDR and Poland in the period between 1960 and 1989.<sup>1</sup> Instead of attempting the systematic reappropriation of these relationships by recording them quantitatively according to a specific method, the aim was to investigate them from multiple perspectives with respect to the pair of terms "Wirklichkeit" and "Realität" [Translator's note: two closely related words expressing "actuality", the former concerning the "effect" and the latter referring to the "thing"].

In view of the limitations imposed by the ideological conflict, the relationships between the socialist and capitalist spheres were not especially numerous, since circulation and all forms of exchange were severely restricted. Nevertheless, these limitations pose a whole series of questions: the Iron Curtain may have achieved a territorial split between European countries with different social models – on the one hand capitalist, on the other communist – but did not their rivalry trigger mutual dependencies? Despite all the limitations, people, books and artworks certainly did circulate between the East and West. What consequences did that have for the way the divide was grasped? Both ideological systems observed art and exhibitions as a means of embodying the values on which their societies were based. The discourse they produced also reflected the geopolitical divide. However, did such artistic practices also pursue the same ambitions? Were they not confronted by the same aesthetic problems? Was there not a single artistic experience – on both sides of the Iron Curtain – that connected them in some way? How would they have been perceived?

During the project "OwnReality. Jedem seine Wirklichkeit", we asked ourselves to what extent our perspective on this by now historical period is perhaps still characterised by the logic of division. Division and relationship – both closely interwoven – were reflected both in the narratives of the Cold War and their academic analysis. The aim was to investigate that connection.

Some questions had already been addressed from the perspective of "social history", while others were gathered around common thematic fields as part of research and exhibition projects on the practices of Eastern and Western Europe. Some were studied in a form of art history orientated towards social and cultural criteria, while others were more interested in aesthetic responses to the arts. How could the overlapping perspectives of these different approaches be activated? In the project "OwnReality. Jedem seine Wirklichkeit", we decided to pool the different perspectives and study these relationships based on artistic practises. We could therefore use diverse levels of analysis to determine the relationship between the concrete experiences that artistic practices offer, and the forms of representation and projections that these practices can certainly cause.

1. Between 2010 and 2016, the project was funded by a Starting Grant from the European Research Council. Led by the author at the Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte (DFK Paris), the research group consisted of History of Art doctoral students (Maria Bremer, Constanze Fritzsche, Krzysztof Kosciuk, Aneta Panek and Julia Sissia) and post-doctoral Philosophy researchers (Clara Pacquet and Clément Layet), see <https://dfk-paris.org/de/>.

2. Re. the term “Wirklichkeit” in GDR art, see e.g. the analysis in the journal *Bildende Kunst* (<https://dfk-paris.org/de/page/ownrealityquellen-1357.html>), interviews with the Auto-Perforation artists Thomas Liebscher and Günter Richter from the Leipziger Grafikerbörse, as well as with Christine Rink (<https://dfk-paris.org/de/page/ownrealityinterviews-1359.html>), and case studies by Jérôme Bazin, Constanze Fritzsche, Sigrid Hofer, Angelika Richter, Annette Urban and Angelika Weißbach (<https://dfk-paris.org/de/page/ownrealityfallstudien-1361.html>).

3. See all the activities of the research group at <https://dfk-paris.org/de/page/ownreality-Projektaktivitaeten-799.html>.

4. See also Mathilde Arnoux, *Geteilte Wirklichkeit. Für eine Geschichte der künstlerischen Beziehung zwischen Ost und West in Europa während des Kalten Krieges*, Paris 2021 (in print), online edition: <https://books.openedition.org/editionsmsh/8026>.

To do justice to this aim, the project “OwnReality. Jedem seine Wirklichkeit” focused on the pair of terms “Wirklichkeit” and “Realität”, which played such an important role in discourse during the period in question. The two terms were activated on either side of the Iron Curtain and also formed the actual theme of artistic creation. Over the years and depending on the context, these terms were used very differently. Our project researchers investigated this contrast by analysing art journals, carrying out interviews with contemporary witnesses and studying individual cases. In this way, each researcher developed their very own perspective on the same term – each supported by examples and arguments. In the interdependence between these perspectives, their respective, problematic creation also became apparent. How was reality located with respect to established categories? How could its conception conform to territorial and political forms of logic and contribute to the definition of a specific understanding of historical relationships? How could these terms simultaneously induce one to blur these distinctions and undermine this logic? Taking the example of four states – France, the FRG, the GDR and Poland, which were selected because they embody the diversity of experiences during the Cold War in Europe within a specific period, namely the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, during which the political East-West relations had become relatively relaxed following the death of Stalin – we investigated the way in which the pair of terms “Wirklichkeit” and “Realität” were expressed in art journals and exhibitions.<sup>2</sup> Thus the aim was not to address the artistic relationships on the basis of a previously determined circulation diagram, and instead to study the terms in the context of discourse, art theories and artistic implementation. Should they be regarded as a fundamental determinant that structured every relationship, or as a constructive element of a complex polyphony?

In implementing our research and examining the results, we had to prevent the traces of division from constantly resurfacing. In this context, it was impossible to establish a definition of “Realität” and “Wirklichkeit”. Instead, the aim was to formulate the diversity of perspectives on the two terms. The workshops organised during the project formed the appropriate framework in which the diversity of these voices became clear depending on the respective horizons.<sup>3</sup> To suitably reflect this art history with its chorus of heterogeneous and parallel voices, the results were compiled on the trilingual website [www.dfk-paris.org/ownreality](http://www.dfk-paris.org/ownreality) – based on the source material of journals, interviews with artists and art critics as contemporary witnesses of the period in question, as well as on case studies carried out by members of the research group and associated researchers. This enabled multi-perspective research on highly contrasting and complementary material. Instead of succumbing to the expectations of an excavation of previously unpublished sources, the presentation of results was guided by a communitarianisation of rarely compiled material – results that represent less a résumé and much more an initial approach, from where other points of intersection between usually contrasting levels of relationship can be studied; results aimed at inspiring other researchers to appropriate them and consider relations in Europe that are newly shaped according to different forms of logic – namely sensorial and artistic rather than territorial and political.<sup>4</sup>