German Post-war Printmaking

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In late 1989 the Berlin Wall fell. Suddenly, within a few months the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) collapsed and the reunification of the two Germanies became a new reality, changing not only the political map of Europe, but also making apparent the separate and different development of Germany's respective cultural scenes, especially its visual culture. In 1945, after the Third Reich had ceased to exist, the four Allies had divided the country into four sectors. The three western parts merged into the Federal Republic of Germany, while the Russian-controlled part became the GDR. These were two separate states with their own particular art scenes, political questions, internal problems and discussions, possibilities for artists and reactions to other cultures and countries. Not very much was known in West Germany about fine arts in the East, except for a few prejudices and the assumption that all good artists formerly living in the East now lived in the West. Of course this was not the case; as one now discovers, there was a lively, albeit hidden scene in East Germany, which became much more obvious to a wider public after 1990. The whole development of visual culture in these two countries – or a divided country, if one likes – was distinct. Never before in modern times had a state or country dissolved in legal terms, but with the capitulation of the Wehrmacht this was exactly the situation. A continuation seemed possible, but only under completely different auspices, and therefore the question of tradition and continuation emerged. Since the early 1970s it had already been agreed in principle that a kind of continuity existed, not from the Weimar Republic through to the Third Reich and on to the two post-war Germanies, but instead from the art of the 1910s and 1920s directly to the visual arts after 1945.

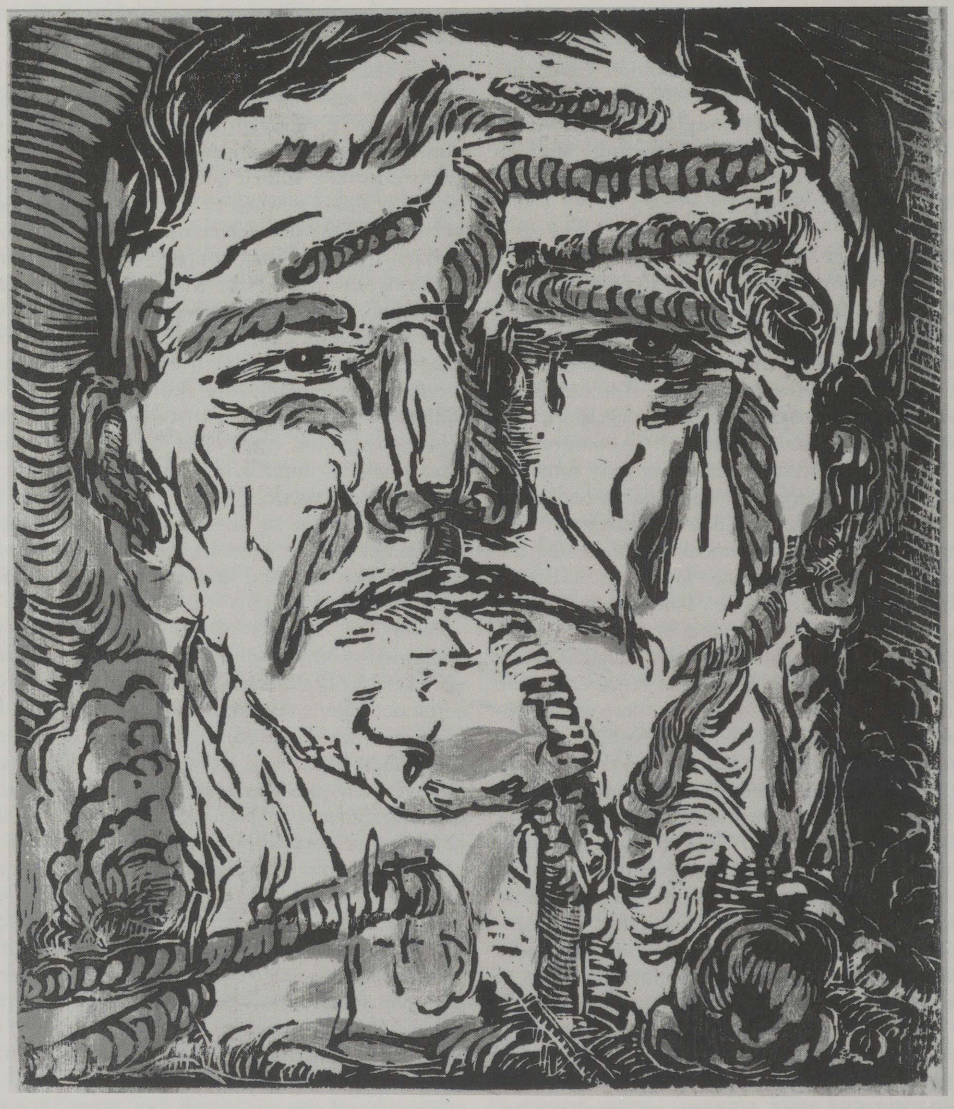
For probably the first time, German printmaking has come into focus for an exhibition, shown firstly at Wellesley College and then at the Kunsthalle Kiel. It is surprising that German printmaking has not been portrayed in this way before, although it is often considered to be one of the more innovative and internationally important movements after World War II. Although an increasing number of museums outside the German-speaking countries are interested in these prints and have started collecting them rather actively, the dearth of shows devoted to German printmaking goes hand in hand with the lack of literature. Except for some of the better-known printmakers working in Western Germany from the 1970s onwards, for whom some monographs are available, the rest are relatively unknown outside specialist circles.

The catalogue under review, a bilingual edition of several essays and two interviews, tries to explore the wide field of German printmaking over nearly five decades and in two different states, with their respective situations, political requirements and restrictions, as well as possibilities. One has to bear in mind that for a medium-sized catalogue to consider every aspect is not possible, and often some desirable points seem to be missing. For once, however, one should not unduly stress its shortcomings, but concentrate on what was achieved and what the aims and benefits of such a publication are.

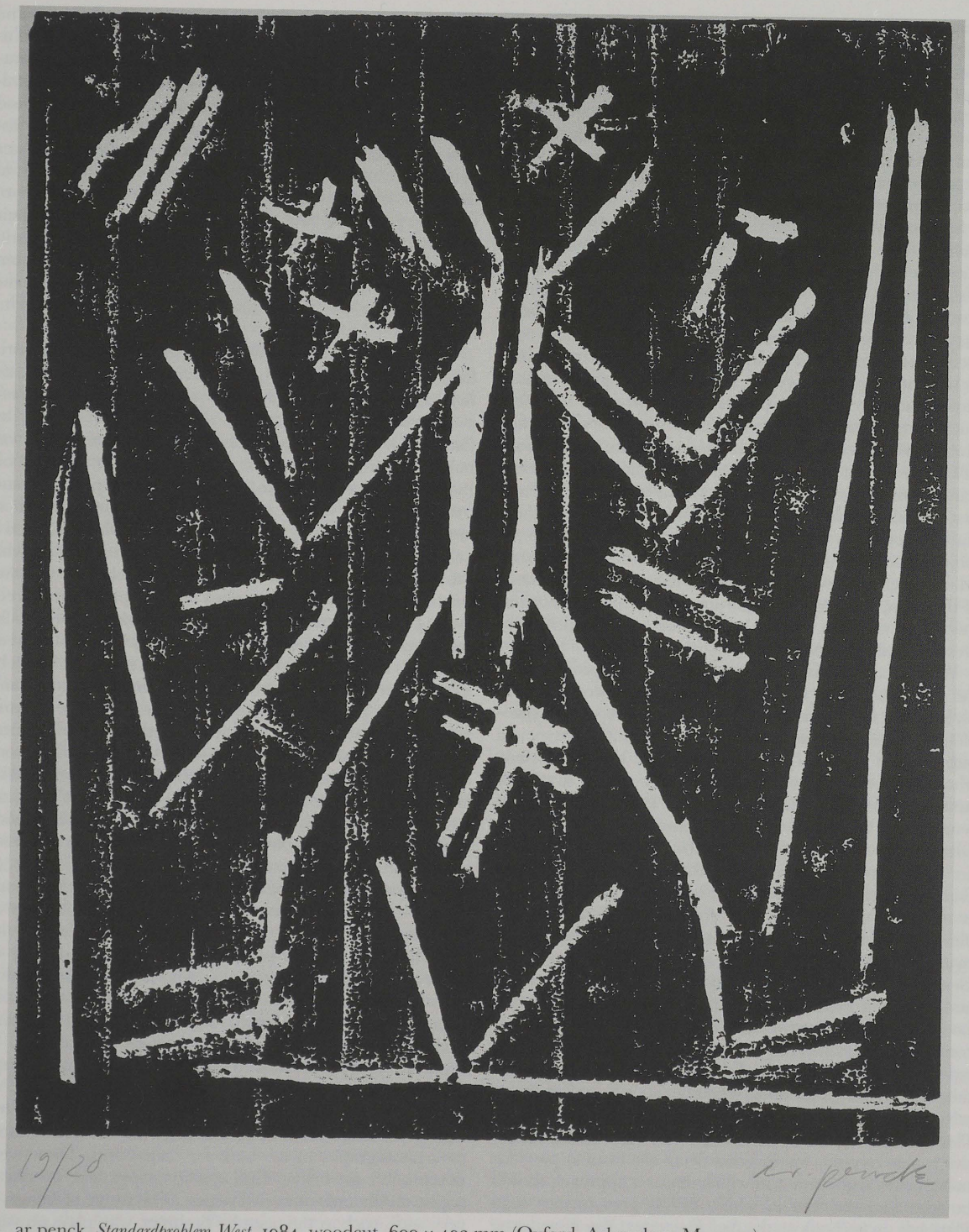
After the collapse of the Third Reich, possibilities abounded to renew cultural life, driven mostly by artists who were seen as degenerates during the Nazi regime, but who continued their work. Many artists active at the Bauhaus, or in other institutions and areas of Germany, either moved to the United States and continued their career overseas, or died in the 1940s. There was still a group of artists active in Germany, however, who tried to build up a visual arts scene in all four sectors of the country. Of course, the Allies also partly drove this, showing contemporary or recent painting and the art of their own countries, especially in the three Western sectors. Artists in the West and the East responded quickly to these developments and transformed their ideas into a form that suited them, which then provided the starting point for processes that were unique and particular to the two German states. Although after 1949 the four sectors were divided into two separate countries, each still struggled with the devastation of World War II. At first this did not affect cultural life very much, but, partly due to the Cold War, artistic developments soon became separate as well. Whereas the Western scene had a more international approach oriented towards the United States, and partly

France, the political situation in the East defined other requirements for art, and quickly and enduringly excluded or marginalized many visual artists. Some of those artists, or their work, became known only after reunification in 1990.

The essay by Reinhold Heller ('Two and One: Observations on the Graphic Arts in the Two Germanies, 1945–1990'), focusses on this point of cultural development, and also on the relationship and particular dividing points of post-war Germany. In great detail, Heller gives an overview of the various connections and changing perception of specific printmaking in parts of the country. Many important steps of this process were firstly thought to be unifying, such as the few contributions of Western artists to the first and second 'Deutsche Kunstausstellungen' in 1946 and 1949, as well as those of Eastern artists on the first Documenta, organized by Werner Haftmann in 1955. As Heller shows very clearly, however, the positions in East and West had already started to be less permeable. Various debates in both parts of Germany, such as the one on formalism in the East in the second half of the 1940s, or the polemic in the West started by Hans Sedlmayr and his book on the *Verlust der Mitte*, marked these different positions. From then on, and mainly after the border was closed and the Berlin Wall had been erected, the direction of printmaking in East and West



78. Georg Baselitz, *Grosser Kopf*, 1966, woodcut, 475 × 404 mm (Photo courtesy Anthony d'Offay Gallery).



79. ar penck, *Standardproblem West*, 1984, woodcut, 600 × 492 mm (Oxford, Ashmolean Museum).

changed. One important result of Heller's chapter is not only to show how little was known or understood about printmaking on the other side of the Wall, but also how much research and interpretation still has to be done to get a clear picture of all the different aspects of printmaking in the two Germanies at that time. Although extremely rich and detailed, it is self-evident that in a rather short essay not all aspects can be discussed, and that its aim is primarily to give a much needed overview.

Subsequent subjects and the wide range of essays and interviews in the catalogue could hardly have been introduced better than by Heller's essay. The second essay, by Nina Zimmer, deals with the prominent question of Abstraction and the figurative tradition in Western Germany from 1945, and the group SPUR in the late 1950s. She states correctly that after the war Abstraction was the preferred artistic direction for the American administration, partly to promote American Abstract Expressionism, whereas the West Europeans (Britain and France) tried to integrate a more figurative understanding as an alternative to pure Abstraction. SPUR attempted to present a counterweight to their understanding of a more figurative approach, but the problem is first to understand the term Abstraction itself and its inherent connotations for its putative opposite, figurative or 'objective art', which changed its meaning during this period. Zimmer analyses very carefully the etymological history of the term, showing the importance of early discussions in the 1920s and 1930s as a background for a similar debate in Germany after World War II.

Without a discussion of the theory developed in France in the 1920s and 1930s, the process in Germany would probably not have taken place, or at least would have taken a completely different direction. The key figure, as Zimmer points out, was the German painter and printer Hans Platschek, who survived World War II but was exiled to South America. Platschek then moved to Paris in 1953 and returned to Germany two years later, introducing to the German scene discussions about Abstraction and figurative art as understood in France. Although the discussion in France concerning the Nouvelle Figuration later took another direction, the basis for the German Neue Figuration lies directly in the French discussion at the beginning of the 1950s. *Art informel* had not yet spread in influence across Germany; though K. H. Sonderborg, Emil Schumacher and Platschek, represented by the Munich gallery Van der Loo, had all been part of *Informel*, Platschek was only partly responsible in establishing the basis for further development, especially in a new approach to figuration. This was later fully achieved by a group of young artists who called themselves SPUR, lived in Munich and had close contact with Platschek. The great achievement of Zimmer's essay is that she is able to point out in great detail the links to previous movements, the manner in which the new approach should be seen and the way in which SPUR goes further than Platschek, in his book on the *New Figurations* (*Neue Figurationen*, Munich 1959). SPUR attempted to link the process of artistic creation and the importance of material for the appearance into a new approach for painting and printmaking, leaving behind the restrictions defined by the *Informel*. The leading figure of this group was H. P. Zimmer, who tried to find a theoretical basis for the relation of space and figuration. At the same time, Horst Antes tried to achieve a similar goal in Karlsruhe. Hence, the members of SPUR and Antes are the only artists in Germany who at this time discussed Platschek's ideas of figuration. These ideas later became an important foundation for a few printmakers in the 1960s and afterwards, although the greater number of German printmakers in the figurative tradition found their theoretical basis in the history of German art before World War II. In a short paragraph, probably far too brief to examine this wide field adequately, Nina Zimmer points to the new figurative style in the former GDR as an alternative to Socialist Realism.

The next two essays of the catalogue deal with one portfolio each, the first by Dorothea Dietrich, called *Grafik des Kapitalistischen Realismus* (*The Graphic Art of Capitalist Realism*), published by René Block in 1968, and the second, by Patricia G. Berman, called *Art Scene Düsseldorf*, which was published three years later in 1971. Along with the essay on Block is an interview by Anja Chávez with the publisher and curator himself, who is considered to be one of the most important in Germany after World War II. Block founded a gallery in Berlin in 1964 and had his first great success with the Fluxus movement in Germany. In the interview, however, some of Chávez's questions are just plain uninspired, leaving the impression that she was out of her league in talking to such an intelligent and important dealer. To his credit, Block's answers are brilliant and reveal many of the problems of German avant-garde visual culture in the 1960s and 1970s. It is a pity that the interviewing was so poor, because with better questions, and singly rather than several at once, Chávez could have gained more insight into Block's personal experience in the centre of the West German scene and its links to other international movements. Especially when seen against the analysis of *The Graphic Art of Capitalist Realism* portfolio, it becomes obvious that much more could have been gleaned from an interview with Block.

The Graphic Art of Capitalist Realism consists of a title-page by Block, in which he used an advertisement for brandy as the basis for an altered text relating to the content of the portfolio itself, thereby placing the screenprints directly in the context of connoisseurship, mastery, or long-lasting traditions. Block had asked K. P. Brehmer, K. H. Hödicke, Konrad Lueg, Wolf Vostell, Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter to contribute one screenprint each, adding up to seven sheets. The aim was to explore the mechanics of capitalist visual culture, and the crossover from publicity or graphic design for advertisements to what was considered high art. Except for Block's title-page, all the contributors used photography as the basis for their prints. These were not printed on heavy, high quality paper, but on cheap paper, cardboard, or even Perspex. The range of images is very wide, such as the print by Brehmer, who plays on various levels with the concept of an advertisement and its relation to German or Western society in the late 1960s. In fact, the language of advertisements and the reliance of West

German society on consuming goods and services are considered throughout the entire portfolio. Detailed and careful analysis uncover the various layers of these prints, even though Dietrich barely touches on the making of them, because she is more interested in unveiling the political and sociological foundations.

The second essay, dealing with the portfolio *Art Scene Düsseldorf*, portrays a specific moment. The underlying idea was not to present, as in most cases, various artists linked to a publisher or a gallery, but the artists working in Düsseldorf. In the beginning of the 1970s this city was considered to be one of the most interesting in Germany. The aim of the portfolio was to give an overview of Düsseldorf's lively art scene – Fluxus, Op Art, the group ZERO, monochrome painting and kinetic art – with contributions by Josef Beuys, Gotthard Graubner, Karl Gestner, Erwin Heerich, Konrad Klapheck, Ferdinand Kriwet, Heinz Mack, Adolf Luther and Blinky Palermo showing the wide range of artistic movements and techniques. It was quite different from other portfolios at this time. In comparison to the first portfolio, even though Berman does not have the same depth of material to produce a deep analysis, she is able to show the direct context of the portfolio and its roots in an increasing cultural consciousness in the Rhineland. Berman analyses more the single contributions, whereas Dietrich tries to discuss in greater detail the various sheets in their relation to one another, and not only in their social connotation or relation to society.

The final contribution in the catalogue is another interview. Again Chávez prepared the questions, which were put by Claus Löser to two members of the Galerie oben in Chemnitz (formerly also known as Karl-Marx-Stadt), Gunar Barthel and Tobias Tezner. This time, however, the interview reveals much more than the one with Block. This is partly because Löser knows the situation much better and reacted more appropriately, which led to a lively presentation of the history, problems and specific character of this unusual and exceptional gallery in the former GDR. Its historical roots go back to a cooperative of artists founded in 1954 to sell pictures, which in the 1970s became a gallery. Galerie oben was the only independent gallery for contemporary art in East Germany, and although always under threat of closure, it was able to stay open and to keep running. The interview discusses the history of the gallery, its relation to other artists in Western Germany, or to artists who formerly lived in East Germany but emigrated in the 1960s or later, such as Gerhard Richter, Georg Baselitz (fig. 78), Gotthard Graubner or A. R. Penck, and it opens up interesting aspects of German visual culture.

Overall, the catalogue is a milestone in the critical appreciation of printmaking from the two Germanies between the end of World War II and the fall of the Berlin Wall. A few points have to be made, however, which slightly diminish its usefulness. The main problem is that following the position set by Heller, most of the essays focus mainly on art from the 1950s to the early 1970s. Although many works from the 1980s are depicted, and their technical details given in the last section, they are not examined in greater depth. Omitting the rather unfortunate interview with Block would have allowed space for a third analysis, for example of 'erste concentrationen', where artists originally coming from the East such as Baselitz, Penck or Lüpertz, although already partly living for some years in the West, confronted their colleagues from the West, such as Höckelmann, Immendorff and Kirkeby, in their approach to printmaking. Incomprehensibly, this extremely important portfolio was not analysed, although some prints are shown in the catalogue section and were obviously part of the exhibition. Furthermore, other portfolios shown in the final section are mentioned in Heller's essay, and one realizes that they deserved much deeper reflection than was given them.

Many more prints could also have been chosen. The process of selecting works for such a wide-ranging show is admittedly very difficult, but few prints in the exhibition would have better demonstrated its aims than the woodcut by Penck, *Standardproblem West* (fig. 79), which was missing in the show. Of course, not all relevant work can be exhibited in such a limited show, and one should probably be thankful that from this excellent starting point further discussion will have to take place. Prints dating from the later 1970s and most of the 1980s are especially in need of this. Moreover, the two artistic scenes in the East and West at this time, their approaches to printmaking and their relation and references to each other remain unclear. The prints illustrated in the catalogue are not brought into a wider discussion, as is undertaken for the 1950s and 1960s, and the analysis for these later works will therefore have to be carried out elsewhere. The arts scene in the 1980s and following the fall of the Wall in the 1990s was a time of radical change and new orientation in both parts of Germany. Consequently, the discussion and appreciation of East German art in West Germany and the rôle of Western collectors remain in this respect unfortunately undervalued. It might well be that another show could be mounted, concentrating just on these two decades. The great advantage would be that the prints could not only be set in a context according to their historical background, but that their techniques and specific changes could also be analysed.

The other great and regrettable shortcoming is that no bibliography was compiled, and nor is the literature given for the various prints in the catalogue. With a slightly different layout in the catalogue section, and omitting duplicate information for every print, it would have been possible to provide this valuable source material. Again and again, readers will have to find the information for themselves, and probably miss the crucial or rare publication. One hopes that the next exhibition catalogue on German printmaking of the second half of the twentieth century will include the normal bibliographical apparatus. Even so, despite the number of criticisms, the huge benefit and historical achievement of Heller's idea and publication is that for the first time somebody has opened up the discussion on this interesting aspect of printmaking. It has become clear, however, how much research still remains to be done in this field, and also how many opportunities for interesting exhibitions are to be found in it. Let's hope that somebody will soon take the ball and set it rolling again.