

**Berlin Program Alumni Panel  
at the 28th Annual GSA Conference  
Washington, D.C., Oct. 6-10, 2004**

**Negotiated Identities: The Struggle to Define German and  
Immigrant Identities in the Twentieth Century**

**Friday, Oct. 8, 2004**

Moderator: Rita Chin, University of Michigan, Berlin Program Fellow 1995-1996

Commentator: Kimberly Redding, Carroll College, Berlin Program Fellow 1997-1998

**Jewish Anti-Nazi Resistance and its Relation to Jewish Identity during the Third Reich**

John Cox, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Berlin Program Fellow 2001-2002

**Life before *documenta*: The Deutscher Künstlerbund and the Struggle for Artistic Autonomy in  
West Germany**

Heather E. Mathews, University of Texas at Austin, Berlin Program Fellow 2001-2002

**Monumental Art or Monumental Propaganda? How East German Artists Negotiated for  
Autonomy in Public Memory Projects**

Jon Berndt Olson, Texas Tech University, Berlin Program Fellow 1999-2000

The three papers in this interdisciplinary panel all examined instances in which individuals, groups and governments engaged in a mutually-informing process of negotiating both collective identity and public expression. Although the subjects varied in terms of historical context, they shared themes and raised a number of interrelated questions.

John Cox examined the Herbert Baum groups of Berlin in the 1930s and early 40s. He problematized the groups' collective self identity, which blurred socio-political categories and challenged the notion that Jewishness and communism were mutually exclusive. The young activists also constructed their own ideas about communism; rather than accepting Muscovite interpretations, the groups' members read and discussed political and literary tracts from a much wider variety of authors, including, for example, the denounced and dismissed Trotsky. Cox pointed to the evolving nature of identity, using interrogation reports and oral histories to demonstrate groups members' increasingly conscious espousal of their Jewish identity. While many had considered themselves secularized, even distanced from their Jewish heritage in the early 1930s, the Nazi state's incessant focus on their Jewishness, combined with the increasingly harsh persecution (including the conscription of many of these Jewish-communist youth as forced laborers), resulted in at least some members rediscovering and/or embracing cultural and/or religious aspects of the Jewish faith. Interestingly, surviving members of the groups again de-emphasized their Jewishness during the post-war era.

Although Jon Olson shifted the historical setting to the artistic community in the GDR, his paper focused on a similar theme: individuals asserting autonomy against the will of an authoritarian

government. In this paper, Jon Olson examined three examples of how artists and SED cultural authorities negotiated questions of artistic license, national cultural identity, and the creation of national historical memory. Jon Olson's three case studies included negotiations concerning the form as well as placement of the Marx Engels monument near the Palast der Republik, Werner Tübke's panorama painting, "Early Bourgeois Revolution" in Bad Frankenhausen, and the Ernst Thälmann memorial in Berlin-Prenzlauer Berg. In all three instances, the state was willing to cede a certain degree of artistic freedom, but ultimately reserved control over placement and interpretation of the works. In the first two cases, the commissioned artists accepted the compromise. In the third case, however, negotiations broke down, and Ulbricht/Honecker – on a trip to Moscow – personally awarded the Ernst Thälmann commission to a Soviet artist. The artistic community resented this unilateral selection of a non-German artist to commemorate one of the nation's most prominent figures. Political leaders, according to Jon Olson, saw the scale and form of Soviet-style monumentalism as a more fitting tribute to the leader who had also been their colleague.

Heather Mathews also problematized relations between artistic and governmental bodies in her paper examining the Künstlerbund's efforts to revive German art and reform West German cultural policies in the early 1950s. The Bund drew on turn-of-the-century roots to promote pluralism and stake out a place for German artists in the postwar international community. The Bund condemned Nazi censorship and uniformity, instead encouraging experimentation and pluralism. At the same time, the Bund encouraged the state to push German audiences beyond figurative portrayals, arguing that Nazi-era art had both ceded creativity to the state and in fact promoted reactive/conservative values. Through its lobbying efforts, the Künstlerbund paved the way for the *documenta* exhibits of the early 1950s, which served to reassert West German artists' role as accepted and progressive participants in the international artistic community.

Kimberly Redding began her comments by articulating common themes of the three papers and questioning the ways each authors limited their discussions of identity construction. All three analyses, she noted, set a small, politically vulnerable group of idealists/individualists in negotiation with a relatively young state determined to reshape national identity so as to assert/maintain its own legitimacy as representative of the German people. Despite the pragmatic necessity of the state's position, the papers all sympathized with the dissenting/challenging groups, all of which found spaces in which to assert collective identities and engage the public.

Redding's questions challenged presenters to engage other factors shaping their subjects' identity and collective expression. She noted, for example, that the Herbert Baum groups might have found counterparts not only in communist and Jewish resistance movements, but also in other youth groups, yet we learned nothing about how the Herbert Baum groups saw themselves in relation to these other generation-specific expressions of identity.

Similarly, Redding asked Jon Olson to engage the complex identities of artists in the GDR, suggesting that their political loyalties, personal commitments and prior experiences would have also shaped their ability and willingness to successfully negotiate with the SED state. Redding also questioned the political and pragmatic motivations of the Künstlerbund, challenging Mathews to "unpack" the artists' notions of creative pluralism, as well as their broad critiques of Nazi-era art.

In a second set of questions, Redding asked the panelists to problematize the role of the state in shaping and defining collective identity. She noted that while the papers presented dynamic

images of the youth groups and artistic communities, none considered fully the enormity of the tasks facing the respective governments - to reform national identity and to reinterpret history to enhance governmental legitimacy.

Finally, Redding raised several broader questions, pointing out that all three papers demonstrate both individual and cultural efforts at Vergangenheitsbewältigung and the tension between creative license and public standards. She also noted that while public opinion mattered in all three societies, the panelists had yet to engage how conceptualisations of “the public” shape identity construction.

The subsequent discussion focused primarily on the cultural and political contexts in which the Herbert Baum groups and the Künstlerbund developed. It became clear that the Baum groups’ unique identity has continued to perplex scholars and politicians alike during the postwar era, resulting in what is typically only a selective commemoration of members’ collective identities by each successor state. Asked about the Kuenstlerbund’s work in the GDR, Mathews explained that while the Bund initially recruited East German members and actively promoted their work, growing barriers to intra-German art exhibits in the early 1950s greatly limited cooperation and communication between East and West German artists.

Mathews also clarified the rather limited ties between local Kunstvereine and the larger Bund; while the Kunstvereine more often supported local artists and initiatives, the Bund sought to influence cultural policies at the state and federal level. The panelists also responded to a number of individual comments and questions as the session concluded.

*Report by Kimberly Redding  
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