

**Report on the Berlin Program Alumni Panel
at the Thirty-Fourth Annual GSA Conference
Oct. 7 - 10, 2010 in Oakland, California**

The Visual Arts in Cold War Germany and Beyond

The Politics of Reality in East German Art ca. 1958

Heather Mathews, Pacific Lutheran Univ., Dept. of Art History, Berlin Program Fellow 2001-2002

Dealing with the Past in Cold War Berlin: Gallery Block and West Berlin in the 1960s

Rachel Jans, University of Chicago, Dept. of Art History, Berlin Program Fellow 2010-2011

Critical Receptions of (West) German Painting Before and After the Wende

Gregory Williams, Boston University, Art History Dept., Berlin Program Fellow 2004-2005

Gruppe SPUR in “Exile”: International Collaborations in Scandinavia

Lauren Graber, University of Michigan, Dept. of Art History, Berlin Program Fellow 2009-2010

Visual art offers a striking record of the cultural and political shifts that shaped Germany throughout the Cold War and after. This year, the Berlin Program sponsored a panel that examined artistic production and reception in East, West, and post-unification Germany. Together, the participants highlighted the persistent connections between art and politics in Cold War and present-day Germany, but also pushed for a revision of the existing interpretations of those connections.

Heather Mathews' paper focused on the development of Socialist Realism in the German Democratic Republic at the end of the 1950s. Using the Fourth German Art Exhibition as a touchstone, Mathews examined the struggle between artists and politicians to define socialist style and subject matter. In the window between de-Stalinization and the Bitterfelder Weg, artists insisted on a degree of autonomy even as the SED was pushing for a consistent, party-line representation on the Soviet model. The 1958 Dresden exhibition was judged problematic at best and a failure at worst. This was largely because it reflected the differing understandings of the “real” and the contemporary that persisted among GDR artists, and it was an indication of those artists' disconnect from the Party's understanding of socialist life. In the failure of the Fourth Exhibition, Mathews argued, both artists and SED were faced with a reevaluation of realism and reality. In the end, the Fourth German Art Exhibition led to an emphasis on artists' experience among the nation's workers, anticipating the calls to the factories that characterized the Bitterfelder Weg a few years later.

Turning towards the situation in West Germany, Rachel Jans' investigation of the exhibition *Hommage à Berlin* at the Galerie René Block in 1965 revealed a community of artists committed to a critique of the divided status of Berlin after the construction of the Wall. Block, then a young gallerist with a growing presence in the Berlin artworld, brought together artists who now number among Germany's most influential, including Richter, Polke, and Beuys. At the 1965 show, these artists shared a critical understanding of the division of Berlin and of Germany. In her discussion of Sigmar Polke's *Berliner*, Jans read the raster dots that make up the pastry in the image as destabilizing the security and material plenty that are promised by the advertisements Polke parodies. Where Polke's target is consumer culture, KP Brehmer took aim at the west's apparent monopoly on German culture by displaying postcards of local points of interest—many of which stood in the eastern

portion of the city. In Joseph Beuys' work, a text contribution stating "Beuys empfiehlt die Erhöhung der Berliner Mauer um 5 cm (bessere Proportion!)", Jans saw both an aestheticization of the division of the city and a possibility for personal responsibility for that division. In all, the artists gathered by Block reflected a desire for public confrontation of Berlin's role in the Cold War.

From the local as staging ground for international concerns, Lauren Graber shifted attention to radical German artists abroad, examining the exiled Gruppe Spur and its activities in Scandinavia at the turn of the 1960s. Challenging the expectations of art audiences in Munich, Spur was initially part of the Situationist International. As Graber discussed, the group was eventually ejected from the SI for promoting a type of avant-garde practice that was no longer relevant, and not radical enough for the goals of the SI. But the obscenity trial of the group in Munich in 1962 was understood by Scandinavian audiences and supporters as illustrative of conservative or reactionary cultural values in West Germany which, in turn, were understood as a reflection of the persistence of Nazi repression of avant-garde artmaking. Graber demonstrated through a comparison with the SI's 1963 exhibition project "Destruction at RSG-6" that Spur did not share the Situationist criticism of Cold War politics. Graber's description of Spur's activities in Scandinavia revealed artists seemingly torn between a critique of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and a desire for fame through a reconstitution of dadaist anti-art.

Germany's past and the tension between local and national concerns also informed Gregory Williams' discussion. In his investigation of West German painting in the 1980s, Williams noted that the national was at the forefront of interpretations (both in Germany and abroad) of the so-called neo-Expressionist painting of artists like Fetting, Bach, and Salomé, as well as older artists like Baselitz and Lüpertz. In contrast, after the unification of Germany, reception turned to more localized interpretations of these artists, reading them as emerging from smaller contexts and communities. Williams drew on the phenomenon of the New Leipzig School painters as an example of this local focus: Neo Rauch and his younger colleagues have been understood as a product of the unique artistic and political history of Leipzig. Williams' argument here was that painting from Leipzig is not simply a nostalgic rehashing of Socialist Realism. While they may share a base and an education in Leipzig, in fact their work varies widely in style and owes much to international contemporary art, both abstract and figurative. For Williams, linking these artists to the work of the older generation (Heisig, Tübke, and Mattheuer) may be less useful than seeing them as part of a global artworld.

April Eisman offered a synthesis of the four papers that emphasized the role of the political in each case. Eisman's comments served an important role in the context of the panel, providing additional perspective on the situation in East German art and its legacy in the present. For example, she evoked the development of a mature socialist realism in the Bitterfelder Weg, drew out the links between Block's West German artists and their shared histories in the GDR (Polke, Baselitz, Richter), and, most notably, she offered additional context for the New Leipzig painters by examining the history and reception of the original Leipzig School of the 1970s and '80s. In her remarks, Eisman pushed the audience to shift, as the papers did, away from a singular focus on the national towards the development of an international context for German art in the Cold War and after.

Many thanks to the Berlin Program, on behalf of all of the panel's participants, for its support of innovative scholarship and ongoing dialogue among its current and past fellows.

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