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Art of Two Germanys/Cold War Cultures. Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin (DHM), October 3, 2009 – January 10, 2010. Curated by Stephanie Barron, LACMA, and Eckhart Gillen, Kulturprojekte Berlin GmbH.

There was an awful lot of retrospective activity going on in Germany this summer—and, given that this is *Germany*, that's really saying something. My *Time Out* travel guide contained a short article about the politics of memorialisation in Berlin, which I read while seated on one of the concrete blocks that make up Peter Eisenmann's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* (1998-2005) near Potsdamer Platz. In addition to listing the many memorial *faits accomplis*, there was also talk of future projects, to be realised 'if they can find space.' And while retrospection and the complicated feelings that come with it is practically demanded by the city's architectural features, this year's anniversaries—the fall of the Berlin Wall (20 years) and the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany (60 years)—were special occasions to look back: in relief, regret, anger, and as often as not, in confusion.

Comprised of some 300 objects made between 1945 and 1990 and divided into four chronological sections, *Art of Two Germanys/Cold War Cultures* attempts to tell two stories at once, without reducing them to one, disrupting familiar narratives of East vs. West, while resisting the temptation to put another in their place – admittedly, not an easy task. I saw the show in Nuremberg (between stops in Los Angeles and Berlin) at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, whose entranceway is lined with rows of columns on which are inscribed the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (made 1989-93, by the Israeli sculptor Dani Karavan), a fittingly meditative prelude to the overwhelming timeline that opened the show. Running from 1945 to 1990, it was intended to provide visitors with the necessary historical background in the style and speed appropriate to the Wikipedia age. Nevertheless, the sheer number of historical facts had a disorienting effect, which is—let's face it—probably the best state in which to

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actually understand something of the art of the period, sensitive as it was to political events.

Works from the exhibition's first section, 1945-1949, revived pre-war expressionist styles that had been excluded by the fascist aesthetic programme. They also embraced abstraction, despite the tension between the doctrine of autonomous, transcendent abstraction and the need to represent the bleakness of contemporary reality. But, by going backwards as a way of going forwards, artists were doing things that had already been done. The resulting works, such as Hannah Höch's *Mourning Women* and Ernst Wilhelm Nay's *Daughter of Hecate I* (both 1945)—despite their use of expressionist and abstract vocabularies—seem strangely placid, as though these are not living artworks themselves, but exercises in the *making* of a certain kind of art, and thus a statement about potential freedoms rediscovered. But what the art of the immediate post-war period in both eastern and western zones shows, is that energy was channeled in another direction: not so much toward creating new, original, innovative work that could compete in quality and influence with either the earlier German avant-gardes or with emerging American formalism, but rather toward simply holding on, moving on, creating in any way possible. That anything was produced in 1945 *at all* is deeply moving, even today, because it makes plain the profound need for culture. Art is not made despite the trauma, destruction, horror, the loss of humanity, nor simply because of it, but *through it*, on its way from somewhere to somewhere else, moving historically, against all odds. And, perhaps, at a certain moment, when just enough people have ceased bombing, torturing, burning, killing in ways endlessly inventive and increasingly effective, a critical mass of absence is generated, and someone, somewhere, picks up a palette and brush.

Photographs of the immediate post-war period, like Richard Peter, Sr.'s documents of Dresden after the bombing of February 13 and 14, 1945, tear us violently away from debates of aesthetic principle and back into the most unreal

of realities: zero hour (*Stunde Null*). In some pictures the corpses appear continuous with the rubble, in closer shots, decaying bodies still seem, just barely, to hold expressions and gestures of resignation, despair or scorn. There are other visual tokens of Germany's loss, striking but extremely modest given the post-war reality: the bombed urban landscape a field of tattered architectural skeletons, the blank expressions of everyday citizens (a blankness intensified by the form of the ID photos, made in 1948 by Karl Heinz Mai). Photographers also inevitably discovered sculptural traces of the Third Reich's self-aggrandisement among the rubble, the lesson of Ozymandias compactly delivered by modern military means, rather than with the passage of time.

The second section, entitled 'Inventing Autonomy with the Cold War' shows the many directions German art took in the 1950s. In the liberal West, formalism became a sign of both anti-Nazi and anti-Communist aesthetics, with Abstract Expressionism making an appearance at the second *documenta* (1959). In the East, the line of socialist realism moved from hard to soft and back again, with artists finding ingenious ways of incorporating the demands of cultural administrators to create art that was both innovative and compliant (Werner Tübke), or clashing openly with authorities (Willi Sitte). Despite differences, exchange between East and West remained fluid until the Berlin Wall went up in 1961. In this connection, I found it interesting that the wall text for individual works listed only the artist's name, not where she/he was born or active, leaving me at a bit of a loss for interpreting the differences between East/West developments. Sometimes, works were immediately identifiable as products of the GDR, for example, Otto Nagel's socialist-realist "Young Bricklayer (Apprentice Wolfgang Plath)" (1953) (although the worker's white costume, hat, and frontal pose stubbornly reminds me of Watteau's *Gilles*). But most of the time, artists' affiliations were unclear. As an experiment, I asked a few German visitors whether Gerhard Altenbourg was an East- or West-German artist, and they were as ignorant as I. (Altenbourg, an artist of unclassifiable style, who mixed representational and abstract, surrealist and expressionist elements, was

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active in the GDR and died in Meissen.) Whether the ordering of works and lack of notation was a deliberate ambiguity on the part of the curators or simply a confusing oversight I couldn't determine. Either way it points to that age-old dialectical problem of telling two stories as one, without doing violence to their differences either by declaring those differences absolute or non-existent. In any case, in this exhibition, to narrativise the in-between with perfect clarity would have been impossible.

The third section, dealing with the 1960s and 70s, is the most complex, and while being literate in neo-avangardism helped me here, so did the timeline mentioned earlier. Those decades saw repeated moments of rapprochement between the two Germanys alternating with moments of extreme tension. In 1961, the Berlin Wall was erected, terminating hopes for reunification. At the same time, there were conflicts *within* each state, with West German leftist resistance to rearmament and capitalism on one side, and on the other, censorship and economic restructuring. The West German artists gained international recognition, while in the GDR the artistic community became increasingly isolated.

For this reason while we are already familiar the splendid, imposing canvases of Gerhard Richter, Anselm Kiefer, Georg Baselitz and others, as well as the mystical-practical gestures of Joseph Beuys, the modest constructions of the Dresden artist Hermann Glöckner come as a counterpoint, even as a revelation. These humble artifacts, lovingly made from matchboxes, bits of wood, wire and old papers, in seclusion at his live-in studio, are only now enjoying their first exhibition. Here is a tin teapot from circa 1900, its bottom cut off and its cylinder stretched out to form an undulating plane. Set on its edge, its handle and spout both face the same side, like an ad-hoc shield for a very small, domestic warrior, or—suggestively—a section of a wall on small scale. There is a cubic construct of pillboxes, arranged in a chequered pattern of alternating heights, end to end, so that the red ink forms a solid band around its middle. And over here, a stack of

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five pieces of firewood, unevenly cut. Despite the modesty of these little assemblages, they show an active, creative intelligence, a way of seeing the potential for creation in even the most pedestrian materials. It's as if these functional objects were just waiting for Glöckner's attention, to release them from their slavery to utility, reconfiguring them in such a way that would finally let me speak. Indeed, they tell secrets, but their voices are very, very small.

Finally, the show concludes with the art of the 80s, with the Neue Wilden, postmodernism and neo-expressionism. Though this work has been maligned by certain postmodern apologists as a "return" to figuration, painterly gesture, and authorial intent, it is helpful to revisit it in a specifically German context. While expressionism continued to provide a source of inspiration for a younger generation of artists, they also confronted the legacies of performance and conceptual art, and enduring taboos on Nazi imagery.

Here again, lesser known artists emerge triumphant from the shadows of the international masters of Düsseldorf. East German Sibylle Bergmann's photographs of grand Communist monuments (one of which is on the catalogue's cover) find a balance between humour, nostalgia and critique. In one, a statue of Engels hangs face-down from a rope, awaiting transportation; in another, a sculptural pair are severed from the chests up. The image of such large, stocky figures in spatio-temporal flux captures some of the uncertainty of the 80s. We can't tell whether these statues are being dismantled or erected. Bergmann's intimate fashion photographs were also on display this summer at c/o Berlin, and their lasting power as portraits of an age and the nameless individuals who lived it should be enough to rescue her from relative international obscurity.

The ongoing attempt to understand Germany's twentieth-century history is not merely a case of naval-gazing on the part of a country that has had to find ways of becoming nation without the unifying benefits of nationalism. It is a global project involving the perspectives of many international players, not the least of

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which is the energetic entertainment industry. Kate Winslet's notorious comment on *Extras* ('I've noticed that if you do a film about the Holocaust, [you're] guaranteed an Oscar') went from a cynical joke of questionable taste to a depressing self-fulfilling prophecy, when she was later named Best Actress for her role as a former concentration camp guard in the film version of *The Reader*. For better or worse, the problem of Germany represents an ongoing drama of political and philosophical dimensions that reach as far and wide as modernity itself. My deliberate use of the term 'drama' should not be taken as a trivialisation of the reality of the Holocaust or the Cold War; in fact, I intend the opposite: to draw attention to the complex cultural efforts that go into making sense of history. These efforts dress the stage, create heroes, villains, and sometimes, catharsis.

That said, the exhibition *Art of Two Germanys/Cold War Cultures*, to its curators' credit, doesn't really do any of those things. Despite the exhibition's broad thematic concerns, the curators Stephanie Barron of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Eckhart Gillen, from Kulturprojekte Berlin, have successfully navigated the two main dangers that seem to attach themselves to a project of this kind, that is, the dual impulse to celebrate and criticise. One way the curators accomplish this is to present an enormous diversity of works, and to include several who are all but unknown. The exhibition revels in discoveries. If we assume we understand the art of divided Germany, the curators seem to suggest, we'll never really understand it.

It is interesting, in this context, to compare *Art of Two Germanys/Cold War Cultures* to another recent German art retrospective, *60 Jahre. 60 Werke* (May 1 – June 14 at the Martin Gropius-Bau, Berlin). This latter exhibition, beautifully installed and populated with work after work of fantastic quality and art historical significance, could have been subtitled 'Germany's greatest hits'. But, this being Germany, *60 Jahre. 60 Werke* rather than escaping criticism, actually invited it by excluding from the selection any hint of East-German artistic presence. 'The GDR remains a black hole' ran a headline in *Die Presse*. Siegfried Gohr, one of

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the exhibition's co-curators, published a defense in *Die Zeit*, claiming that the art of the former GDR would be better housed in a museum of *history* than a museum of *art*. The decision to exclude East German artists from a show on West German art may have been technically correct if not politically enlightened (the GDR was absorbed into the West German state, adopting its constitution in 1989, a unidirectional process to which I heard the word 'annexed' applied by several German acquaintances). Still, Gohr's inflammatory op-ed seemed, in some quarters, merely to supply further evidence to support the initial accusations of reactionary cultural myopia.

Barron and Gillen's efforts, then, are welcome, because while the Second World War and the Holocaust have received sufficient treatment to carve out a way of moving forward without leaving the past behind, the division of Germany during the Cold War endures today in uncomfortable and perhaps even unjust ways. The economic, demographic and cultural symptoms were visible this past June to Nicholas Kulish, a *New York Times* foreign correspondent who criticised the positive picture painted by the German government. Kulish claimed that the so-called 'closing gap' between the Federal Republic and former GDR is actually 'a leveling down rather than up' due to the economic slow-down in the West as a result of the global recession. In the Eastern states, unemployment remains high, fertility low, and the population is declining. In this context the failure or refusal on the part of West German cultural authorities to recognise the former GDR's artistic history is frustrating and anachronistic. Rather than being stuck in the past what we need rather is distance from it, in order to get a better—or maybe, for now, just a different—perspective, somewhere between straightforward celebration and censure.

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