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## **Re-introducing GDR Art to Germany: the Kunstfonds in Dresden**

The Kunstfonds in Dresden, part of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen in Dresden, holds one of the most important collections of post-1945 Saxon art, including one of the largest collections of GDR art in the world. The author, herself the director of the Kunstfonds, describes how she balances the precarious tension between practical and political considerations in preserving this artistic tradition. Recently, the Kunstfonds has turned to more creative means of exhibition, including a series of archival shows that allow visitors access to many of the hidden treasures of the collection. It has also commissioned new works by current German artists that purposefully dialogue with GDR art, thereby bringing the former artworks into the living realm of post-*Wende* artistic creation.

In socialist systems, the fine arts played an important role in communicating political and social ideals. They helped citizens to visualise the idealised future of a victorious socialism while also establishing and representing the new political and social order of the German Democratic Republic. Accordingly, during the tenure of the GDR myriad works of art were commissioned or bought by councils, public institutions, political parties, and mass organisations. At the time of the regime's collapse, these works were located not only in state museums and collections but also in the public sphere: in work plants, factories, schools, kindergartens, hospitals, hostels and urban spaces, often as architectural objects integrated into building structures and in squares. The fall of the wall was followed by a complex reorganisation of society and administration which impacted significantly on this artistic stock. Alongside political changes, the responsibility for national property (*Volkseigentum*) and art generally passed to the newly established *Länder* within the boundaries of the former GDR. This left artwork of the former GDR in a precarious position as no firm commitment to the conservation, care, and research of these artworks was ever secured.

This essay considers the fate of this artistic heritage in Saxony (Freistaat Sachsen), which today holds one of the most extensive collections of GDR art in Germany. The Kunstfonds oversees one of the most important collections of art created in post-1945 Saxony and

has two focal points: GDR art and contemporary Saxon art. The collection comprises approximately 25,000 works in all genres of the visual arts, amongst them painting, sculpture, graphic art, applied art, conceptual art, video and installation art, as well as works in public and architectural contexts such as sculptures and murals. The organisation was created by the formation of the Kunstfonds in 1991 from a cache of art assets that remained from the former GDR, including inventories from the Büro für Bildende Kunst located at the Rat des Bezirkes Dresden, the Akademie der Wissenschaft der DDR, and the Büro für architekturbezogene Kunst. Parts of the collection are comprised of artworks formally in the possession of GDR party offices and mass organisations, which were held in trust after 1990. This remarkable pool of GDR art was complemented later by artistic bequests and donations. As a result, the Kunstfonds holds the richest and largest number of works commissioned by and acquisitions of state institutions, GDR parties, and mass organisations outside of the Kunstarchiv Beeskow near Berlin. Since 1992, the collection has been systematically updated with purchases made by the Saxon state. This has resulted in a unique situation in that the collection currently documents a history of Saxon art curation and acquisition that charts a period of over forty years and spans two different political systems.

It is against this background that the current activities of the Kunstfonds must be considered. In addition to the usual activities associated with maintaining and documenting the collection, the Kunstfonds is committed to encouraging and promoting contemporary art in Saxony. Through exhibitions and creative display concepts, little-known examples of GDR and contemporary Saxon art are made available to the public in both formal and informal contexts. In some cases, the revival of GDR art from the Kunstfonds' collection has merged with its current mission to support and disseminate contemporary Saxon art; the GDR holdings themselves have inspired artistic meditations on the GDR, its art, and its post-*Wende* legacy. This essay details some of these efforts being made by Saxon curators on behalf of the long-standing artistic legacy of their state.

### **Practical Challenges to GDR Art Curation**

When the GDR collapsed, a significant number of paintings, sketches, and sculptures were on loan to public spaces where they performed and fulfilled their socialist role in the public sphere. After 1990, many

of these institutions closed, were taken into private ownership, or were simply demolished. This had significant implications for artworks on loan; frequently they were treated as part of the furniture rather than as legitimate aesthetic objects, and were discarded as debris. This happened with no regard to the actual value of the works, which admittedly varied considerably. Works of significant interest were subjected to the same fate as those of lower quality. The documentation of these works was haphazard, often incomplete and sometimes non-existent. This has rendered salvage operations particularly difficult for curators, and the process of tracking down and saving extant works represents a major task for staff at the Kunstfonds. The Kunstfonds launched a project to take stock of existing inventories and records within Saxony in 2002, but with the understanding that many missing works are likely to remain unaccounted for. In the case of works that have survived, conservation is a major concern. Works situated in public and architectural contexts are more visible to the public but they are also more at risk of damage or loss. Saxony's urban environments underwent exhaustive re-developments after 1989, and many artworks were not protected. Preservation efforts were hampered both by the lack of expert discussion concerning both their aesthetic value and their historic significance in the post-*Wende* landscape.

In the GDR, public art was commissioned in Dresden by either the Rat der Stadt or Rat des Bezirkes; the first step in saving this art has involved determining who is responsible for it today. In 2002, the Kunstfonds together with the city of Dresden launched a pilot scheme to list and track murals and sculptures. The scale of the project has proved overwhelming, however, and systematic results have yet to be achieved. Saving works of art embedded in public contexts is a proverbial race against time; urban developments continue at rapid speed while older buildings fall into disrepair and are demolished. The transfer of property from state administration to private ownership has posed further difficulties in accounting for GDR art. Only in rare cases are inventories created, and generally no agreements are put in place to ensure the preservation of artworks.

After the *Bilderstreit* that followed the upheaval of 1989-90, the stores in depots and magazines remained predominantly dormant for much of the 1990s. Public interest in GDR art receded as Germans attempted to leave an unpleasant past behind them. As Jonathan

Osmond notes elsewhere in this volume, the curation of GDR art was a contentious issue, and several exhibitions – most notably the infamous Weimar exhibition of 1999 – became highly controversial.<sup>1</sup> In the aftermath of such treatments of GDR art, analytical attempts to reconsider its artistic legacy and heritage remain difficult. Twenty years after the *Wende*, there is still no continuous academic debate or coherent public consent about its future. The widely varying viewpoints continue to create difficulties for curators who want to engage positively with this body of work; they are compelled either to take on the role of activist or to explore alternative creative ways of incorporating GDR art into exhibition formats and themes.

### **Showing GDR Art: Exploring Alternative Formats in the Kunstfonds**

Key to shaping the general national attitude towards the cultural heritage of the GDR and public perceptions of artworks produced in the state are the reappraisals and investigations undertaken by museums and collections, both of which are constrained by internal structures and working conditions. In this regard, the Kunstfonds faces several challenges. For a long time, its collection was distributed across various locations, few of which met basic requirements for the storage of art, and active curatorial work and research inevitably suffered as result. The acquisition of a new space in 2005 has improved storage facilities and working conditions tremendously, and the collection's archive, which contains documents pertaining both to the collection's history and the provenance of individual pieces, is now accessible for scholarly research. Currently, the Kunstfonds is also engaged in the acquisition of documents and publications from private archives pertaining to the artists represented in the collection, which we hope will become an important source for future research. Networking has also proved pivotal to the success of the collection. Within Germany, the Kunstfonds has developed professional contacts with other museums, foundations, and archives. There has also been a marked rise in foreign interest in GDR art and the Kunstfonds has responded to requests for loans from countries such as Poland, France, and the United States of America. Perhaps most importantly in this context, the Kunstfonds serves as a crucial resource for artists who were active in the GDR; many of those involved in the creation of

public art in the state have depended on the Kunstfonds to determine whether or not their works survived the *Wende*.

**Schaudepot #3. *Weibsbilder*, Kunstfonds, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (2008)**



Unlike other state collections, the Kunstfonds does not possess its own exhibition space and therefore its collection is not as present in the public realm as we would wish. Generally, the Kunstfonds contributes pieces to co-operative exhibitions and projects taking place in other museums. The ability to develop larger-scale independent shows has been limited not only by space but also by the difficulty in procuring financial resources for projects centring on the GDR. Despite such restrictions, however, the Kunstfonds has experimented with alternative exhibition formats, focusing in particular on a modified version of the *Schaudepot* concept. These exhibitions take place in the storeroom of the Kunstfonds and involve works that are held in the storage depots. Accessible by guided tour only, they have become popular with visitors who enjoy the experience of going behind closed doors. The success of the series is also undoubtedly due to its focus on

GDR art, a focus which offers something unrivalled in the region. Avoiding traditional exhibition methods of showcasing a small number of masterpieces, the *Schaudepot* series highlights a broad range of GDR art; recent exhibitions have focused on themes such as travel, construction work and, as illustrated above, women.<sup>2</sup> This approach underscores the fact that there is much to be discovered in the depots, that GDR art was not restricted to the works of a few well-known and widely-exhibited artists.

### **Artistic Hinges: Contemporary Artists and GDR Art**

The Kunstfonds seeks not only to reintroduce GDR art into a wider artistic discourse, it also aims to stimulate creative reconsiderations of its value and place in post-*Wende* Germany. In this context, it has supported a series of innovative artistic projects that engage with the cultural legacy of the GDR, and offer alternative forums for analysing the legacy of Saxony's past. These projects question the public attitude towards GDR art, remind society of its responsibility to confront the past, and offer a translation of the GDR's artistic legacy by incorporating its forms and styles into new artworks. Such creations have become part of the collection and play an important role in defining a twenty-first-century approach to GDR art; these works of art function as joints or hinges between the two emphases of the Kunstfonds – GDR art and contemporary Saxon art – and reflect the daily work of its staff. The following three examples illustrate this engagement between contemporary artists and the art of the GDR.

#### *Rückblick/Re-Viewing* (2003)

The American artist Janet Grau (b. 1964), who has been based in Dresden since 1999, has recently occupied herself with the concept of *Pflege*, embarking on a series of projects that explore its various meanings. With definitions ranging from 'care' to 'maintenance and custody', the term denotes the care for and preservation of objects, cultural assets and traditions, and everyday objects. Her projects deal with the 'theme of the depot and [offer] an interpretation of the past as well as the public sphere, thus addressing questions of cultural identity.'<sup>3</sup> She is interested in concepts of collective memory, in storage habits, and in private obsessions,<sup>4</sup> and explores issues surrounding the care and neglect of cultural treasures in her works.

Grau's *Rückblick/Re-Viewing*, on which she began work in 2003, was inspired by two separate events: her discovery of the substantial assets of the GDR that were kept in storage and away from public reach in Dresden; and the severe flooding of the city in 2002, which necessitated the evacuation of many art warehouses. The multi-part installation is based on video material filmed in the former store rooms of the Kunstfonds. In advance of filming, Grau selected fifteen pictures from the storage depot of the Kunstfonds. These were then shown to thirty participants, each of whom was asked to select a picture to talk about. The participants were given no information about the artworks – no names, affiliations, dates or origins. They were not told which paintings had already been chosen by others, and were given no guidelines as to the form their descriptions should take. The participants were then filmed describing their chosen piece of art while the artwork itself remained obscured from the view of the camera.<sup>5</sup> The person describing the painting was in the centre of the frame while only the backsides of the canvases were partially visible.

As Grau acknowledges this positioning directly and ironically relates to the absence and invisibility of GDR artworks within the post-*Wende* public sphere. And yet, while the images themselves remain hidden, they become reflected in the faces, words, and attitudes of the participants. The result is a series of very personal encounters with and communications about GDR paintings. Some of the participants disregard artistic context entirely and instead search for potential meanings within the images. Others take the opportunity to meditate about themselves, shifting the focus from the artwork itself to the dynamics of viewing art.<sup>6</sup> Instead of debates over political contexts or questions of value, Grau captures intimate, individual encounters with GDR art. Questions of the artworks' quality remain unanswered – that is, 'neither negative nor positive assumptions are made, as has often been the case when works of the Socialist Realism period are shown.'<sup>7</sup> Thus the typically problematic confrontations with art from this period are avoided.

As an American artist, Grau's role is that of an external observer. She does not share the emotional concerns which arise in the debates surrounding the status of Eastern German artworks, and this allows her to offer an outside perspective on the both the art and the period of recent German history.<sup>8</sup> By means of *Rückblick/Re-Viewing*, Grau draws attention to the substantial but dormant stock of the Kunstfonds,

acknowledges the unanswered questions of its heritage, and facilitates its reincorporation into the imaginations of contemporary German audiences.

**Janet Grau, *Rückblick/Re-Viewing* – participant Will Clapp describing his chosen piece of art in the Kunstfonds.**



*Verschwundene Bilder* (Disappeared Pictures, 2005-08)

The young Leipzig photographer Margret Hoppe (b. 1981) takes another approach to the themes of invisibility and oblivion in her work, *Verschwundene Bilder*. A graduate of the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst in Leipzig, Hoppe follows the traces of art in public spaces from the former GDR. Her interest was triggered by the disappearance of this art from public and semi-official spheres, especially those works that once fulfilled political and representative roles.<sup>9</sup> As noted earlier, the enormous changes to the physical landscape of East German cities exposed murals and architecture to a gradual process of destruction and disappearance. Deprived of their original function and importance, many of the buildings in which this



art was located were either closed down, left to decay, or altered via restoration and redevelopment.

**Margret Hoppe, from *Verschwundene Bilder*: ‘Bernhard Heisig, ohne Titel, 1969’, Sgraffito, Gästehaus des Ministerrates der DDR, Leipzig, 400 x 1200 cm, Gästehaus am Park, Leipzig, 2006.**



Hoppe's series documents the different stages of this process of disappearance. Her primary subjects are the empty spaces in rooms and on walls and facades that remained after the removal or painting over of murals, as illustrated above. At times, she also captures the dismantling process itself, using archival materials in the Kunstfonds' depot – where the pictures are often wrapped or packed in boxes – to emphasise the uncertain future of the artworks. Instead of adorning buildings, they now lie dormant in the magazines, waiting to be remembered, rediscovered, and re-evaluated by future generations. Hoppe's photographs bear the absent artists' names, the titles of the original works, and their dates. Her images therefore serve as substitutes for invisible and lost works – after-images of their fate. By re-engaging with this inventory of disappeared pictures, Hoppe keeps them visible and prevents them from retreating into memory. By

questioning current attitudes towards GDR art and the way it is treated, she confronts a part of recent German history.

*Zukunftsversprechen* (Future Promise, 2004-5)

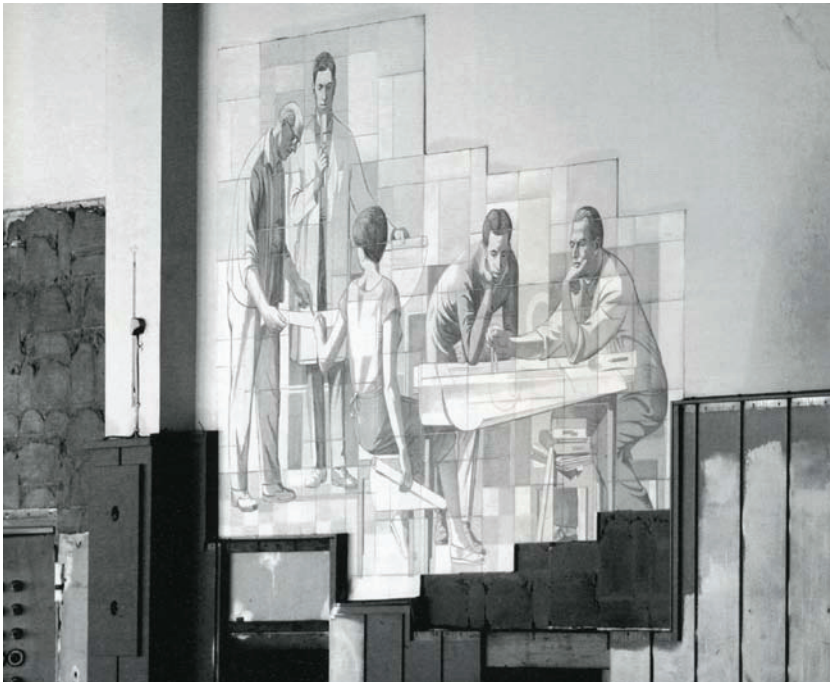
Formed in 1996, the Dresden artists' collective REINIGUNGS-GESELLSCHAFT (RG) engages in artistic practices that both address and react to social processes. Contributors Martin Keil (b. 1968) and Henrick Mayer (b. 1971) 'suchen bei ihren Projekten gezielt Zusammenhänge auf, in denen ihre kritischen Ansätze zu den Themen "Arbeit" und "Gesellschaft" konkrete Anbindung finden. Solche Anknüpfungspunkte ergeben sich in der regel durch Kooperationen.'<sup>10</sup> They work within wide-spread contexts. The research projects of the RG deal with various changes in societal values, especially those influenced by global economisation in all spheres of life.<sup>11</sup> Currently, their focus is on the concept of 'work', a subject of intense discussion in Germany and one most often measured by employment figures. RG have approached the topic in a variety of alternative ways, producing, for example, series of photographs of a job interview and of protest demonstrations. Of particular interest are their three-dimensional models depicting the idea of work, such as their model of a job agency's waiting room in Dresden.<sup>12</sup>

Building on these is their installation, *Zukunftsversprechen*, which has its starting point in the archaeological recovery of a socialist realist mural once located at the canteen of the former VEB Verpackungsmaschinen, a former state-owned factory in Dresden.<sup>13</sup> The Meissen porcelain mural, *Projectierung*, originally formed part of a larger project entitled *Freizeitgestaltung und Projektierung* (1965). The original frieze was created by the Dresden artist Erich Gerlach (1909-2001) in the early 1960s and pictures engineers and workers who are occupied with technical plans and engineering drawings.<sup>14</sup> The mural offers a picture of an idealised socialist working environment, with people of different ages and sexes unified around a table and working harmoniously together. It represents an embodiment of the well-known GDR slogan: 'Arbeite mit, plane mit, regiere mit!'

The starting point for *Zukunftsversprechen* was the excavation of the frieze from the currently deserted and dilapidated factory. This was conceived as a performance act, and the uncovering of the mural from the rubble was filmed. The next step of the artistic project involved researching the mural. The RG closely investigated the

history of the mural, conducting archival research, and documenting the origins of the commission, its sketches, and its historical relation to everyday life in the factory. They even interviewed Gerlach's son and located some of the people who had served as models for the figures in the mural, transcribing their recollections about the process. Ultimately, the recovered and restored mural served as the central focus of the final installation, which took place in the Kunstverein in Kassel in 2004-5. Accompanying the mural was the video footage of the recovery and the historical documentation of its construction and political function.

**Ernst Gerlach, *Projektierung*, Meissner Porzellan, 1965, canteen of the former VEB Verpackungsmaschinen, Dresden**



By confronting the unredeemed 'future promise' that Gerlach's mural promoted, RG called into question future imaginings and utopian ideals: 'Anhand dieses historischen Referenzpunktes wird die Bedeutung von Fortschritts- und Wachstumsdenken thematisiert,' along with the consequences that changes in societal values create.<sup>15</sup>

More than *Rückblick/Re-Viewing* and *Verschwundene Bilder*, the genesis and execution of *Zukunftsversprechen* mirrors the complicated levels of work and responsibility that the Kunstfonds negotiates. It extracts from a mural that is decades old a message that is still of relevance to contemporary society despite the considerable historical (and artistic) changes that have occurred since its conception. The RG provides a contemporary translation of the curatorial activities of post-*Wende* institutions such as the Kunstfonds and proves that socially and politically engaged GDR art is relevant to present-day discussions.

**REINIGUNGSGESELLSCHAFT, *Zukunftsversprechen* (Future Promise, 2004-5)**



### **Conclusion**

The Kunstfonds has a professional commitment to the academic discourse surrounding the GDR's legacy through its conservation and documentation activities. It helps to establish basic standards for the classification and valuation of GDR art by placing it in dialogue with a history of local art that extends into the twenty-first century. On a broader level, the Kunstfonds' mission is to make this cultural heritage accessible to the wider public in order to raise social

awareness and encourage people to engage with their recent history. Exhibitions in the style of the *Schaudepot* and the dialogues with the past that characterise the contemporary installations described in this essay play a crucial role in provoking public discussion and in drawing an active awareness to a vital part of Saxony's artistic legacy. As Sven Hillenkamp observes, '[w]as wir weggepackt haben, weil wir es nicht mehr aufregend fanden, wird wieder aufregend, wenn wir vergessen haben, was es war.'<sup>16</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Kunstsammlung zu Weimar, ed., *Der Weimarer Bilderstreit. Szenen einer Ausstellung. Eine Dokumentation*, Weimar: VDG-Verlag, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Five exhibitions have taken place to date: 'Aufbaubilder', focusing on the rebuilding of Dresden after World War II, 2006; 'Reisebilder' (Travel Images), 2007; 'Weibsbilder' (Female Images), 2008; 'Gruppenbilder' (Group Images), 2009; and 'Arbeitsbilder' (Work Images), 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Steiner and Julia Schäfer, eds, *Janet Grau, Signifikante Signaturen 2004*, Dresden: Standstein, 2004, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> See Barbara Steiner, 'Zwischen Zwangshandlung und kultureller Heldentat', and Julia Schäfer, 'Rückblick/Re-Viewing I 2003', both in: *Janet Grau, Signifikante Signaturen 2004*, pp. 7-8 and 18.

<sup>6</sup> See the leaflet for the 2003 project, Janet Grau: *Rückblick/Re-Viewing*.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Schäfer, 'Rückblick/Re-Viewing I 2003', p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Margret Hoppe, 'Die verschwundenen Bilder/The Disappeared Pictures', in: Stefan Becht and Josefine Raab, eds, *Gute Aussichten. Junge deutsche Fotografie 2007/2008*, Hamburg: Books on Demand, 2007, pp. 16-17; and Margret Hoppe, 'Die verschwundenen Bilder', Exhibition Catalogue, Dresden: Edition Beyer, 2007, pp. 8-9 and 11.

<sup>10</sup> See REINIGUNGSGESELLSCHAFT (RG), *The Future Promise*, Exhibition Catalogue, Kassel: Kasseler Kunstverein, 2004, pp. 4-5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> This factory, which was established in 1963, was taken over by a Cologne-based stock company in 1990. In 1991 the canteen was closed and after temporary use as a production hall the building was abandoned and has been empty since 1996. See: REINIGUNGSGESELLSCHAFT (RG), *The Future Promise*, p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Gerlach studied at the Dresden Academy for Applied Arts from 1927-9 and was a graphic artist at the German Hygiene Museum Dresden. He also worked as an independent artist and was involved in the mural campaign of the Second German Art Exhibition in 1949. Later he realised more murals, amongst them the one in question.

<sup>15</sup> See REINIGUNGSGESELLSCHAFT (RG), *The Future Promise*, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Sven Hillenkamp, 'Flohmarkt der Eitelkeiten', *Die Zeit*, 28 May 2003. Cited in Steiner and Schafer, *Janet Grau, Signifikante Signaturen 2004*, p. 4.