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‘GDR on the Pacific’: (Re)presenting East Germany in Los Angeles

This essay details how archives and museums shape historiography and stresses the role that politics play in the arena of global curation. The author, director of the Wende Museum, explores Los Angeles’ position as an alternative space for the re-evaluation of East German art. He traces the city’s historical relationship with Germany, and focusing on the activities of both LACMA and the Wende Museum examines the extent to which Los Angeles’ attempts to interpret the legacy of the Cold War can challenge the deep-seated historical divides that impact on the reception of East German culture nearly twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In January 2009, Stephanie Barron, senior curator of modern art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), together with the aid of art historian Eckhart Gillen of the Kunstprojekte-Berlin, launched the exhibition ‘Art of Two Germanys/Cold War Cultures’. Building on the success of Barron’s earlier German-themed LACMA exhibitions, this was the inaugural event of the brand new, palm-tree-lined Broad Contemporary Art Museum building, designed by architect Renzo Piano. Barron and Gillen featured artwork from both the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic and placed the images on equal footing, allowing them to share wall space in the same gallery halls. At first glance, an exhibition that compares and contrasts art from the two Germanys might be deemed an unusual choice for the inaugural event in a new $56 million institution in Los Angeles. Given, however, LACMA’s extensive collection of German art and the presence in the city of an audience accustomed to being challenged with German art, the decision was subjected to little scrutiny by the Los Angeles public. Responses in German curatorial circles were markedly different; the exhibition’s juxtaposition of East and West German art gave rise to considerable commentary and critique. While the design of the exhibition was a point of interest in the United States, with American journalists expressing surprise that quality art had been produced in the GDR, it became a major story in Germany, where East German art had long been dismissed and denigrated.

The reception and instrumentalisation of twentieth-century German art within Germany has been heavily influenced by contemporary
politics, and the collapse of the GDR offered yet another opportunity for a reassessment of its legacy. The debates and arguments over the past – specifically regarding what the GDR means – have often coalesced within the realm of culture, including here the iconography, art, architecture, and everyday material culture associated with the former East Germany. The tone is rarely neutral. Charges of neo-colonialism, for example, were levied against the unified German government for attempting to replace the East German Ampelmännchen (GDR traffic-light signals) with their West German counterparts, which sport a distinctly different design. Similarly heated public protests have erupted over the destruction of significant GDR architectural landmarks, most notably the Palast der Republik. Within the curatorial world, institutions and individuals that deal in or collect East German art objects are often dismissed as being engaged in uncritical Ostalgie.

As keepers and interpreters of culture, museums have emerged as central subjects of these debates, whether passively, through their validation of particular normative perspectives, or actively, as in the case of several museum exhibitions that have subsequently drawn ire and rebuke. Such issues are by no means confined to public gallery halls; they also determine activities in the private backrooms of curatorial institutions. German museums have become involved in the process of reclassifying large portions of East German art as historical material, prioritising their historical value while simultaneously denying their status as ‘art’. As a result, tens of thousands of paintings have been relocated to warehouses or Kunstdepots in Brandenburg, Saxony, and Saxony-Anhalt over the last twenty years.

As these limited examples demonstrate, museums – be they focused on art, culture, or history – impose, reflect, and shape cultural value and are therefore inescapably political entities. In deciding what and how to exhibit, they determine what is worthy of preserving, what is excluded, and what is dismissed as kitsch. Such decisions are influenced by a range of factors that include economic, cultural and emotional considerations. While problematic negotiations of the past are not limited to Germany, the region perhaps presents a special case. Victimisation and repression are central components of German identity, a trope that has re-emerged in recent narratives of the GDR. There has been a spate of recent memorials built to commemorate victims of communism, for example, while grant-making organi-