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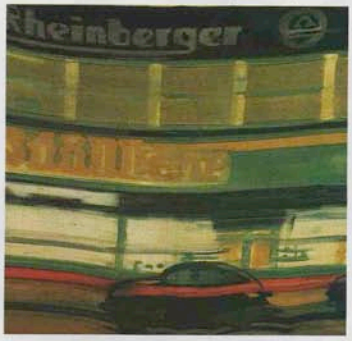
GERMAN ART AFTER THE WALL

Look out, New York and Paris! The reunification of Berlin is going to change the world's art scene



During the past decade West Germany became the most successful national culture in international contemporary art. Two examples of the kind of painting that fueled its rise to power: above, "Passage," by K. H. Hodicke; left, "Lummerbraten," Sigmar Polke.

The name of the present day is Waiting for Berlin. Like it or not, German reunification is about to change the world, hatching a massive power whose center will be the still battered and haunted old capital city. On a visit there near the end of the year of miracles, 1989, I was moved not only by the joyous spectacle of the obscene Wall coming down but by the suddenly poignant sight of remaining World War II bomb ruins, vast empty areas, and shabby neighborhoods (including more or less the whole of gloomy East Berlin). I was moved because the melodramatic cityscape, site of 10,000 spy stories and, more gravely, ground zero for decades of nightmares of nuclear Armageddon, seemed to be holding its breath, awaiting obliteration by another kind of boom.

I was in Berlin as an art critic, having accepted a junket from Lufthansa German Airlines in connection with a show of Berlin art at the High Museum in Atlanta. (Tracing Berlin style from 19th-century high Romanticism to today's rock 'n' roll–flavored Neo-Expressionism, it was a fine show, and a good example of the culture-diplomacy at which the West Germans excel.) To be an art critic amid such colossal turnings of history may seem a small thing, and yes, it is. But an art critic can perhaps give useful testimony about the impending German rise, because already over the past decade West Germany has become the most successful national culture in contemporary art.

Astonishingly, West Germany has gained its artistic eminence without any national center resembling New York or Paris, in a fragmented half-country whose politics is centered in Bonn, finance in Frankfurt, art commerce in Cologne and Düsseldorf and in museums and other public institutions hither and yon. It has done so with lavish public and private investments in culture and with skillfully organized promotional efforts of the sort that had brought me to Berlin, but mostly with a stunning creative efflorescence of individual talents. Today, many—if not most—of the world's best contemporary artists are German, of whom a disproportionate number, interestingly, were born and raised in East Germany.

And now Germans of the east and west, along with the controlling mechanisms of German politics and commerce and culture, are headed for a rendezvous in Berlin, from which the rest of the world will presently be receiving ever stronger emanations of influence of all kinds. This prospect makes the rest of the world legitimately anxious. But if the achievements of recent German art are prophetic, we may expect aesthetic bonuses. To a degree at least faintly recalling Germany's fecundity of philosophers and musicians in the 19th century, the divided nation has given rise to artists of distinctive character and virtually religious, shamanistic appeal, and it's hard to imagine that the crucible of reunification will not yield a new cohort of them.

Joseph Beuys died in 1986, but the gaunt apparition who emerged from the shambles of war—the shot-down Luftwaffe pilot saved from freezing to death in the snow by Tatar tribesmen—still casts a long shadow in German consciousness. He was a charismatic visionary whose "social sculpture" involved every kind of visual medium and invisible idea, invoking a community partly utopian and partly medieval. He had one of the 20th century's great faces, skeletal and kindly beneath an inevitable battered fedora. He produced thousands of odd and lovely objects, notably in his signature materials of felt, animal fat, and lead, but these are essentially souvenirs. His presence was his real work, and the absence produced by his death echoes like a cavern. When last I visited the beautiful Mies van der Rohe-designed National Gallery in Berlin, near the Wall, and beheld its major work by Beuys—a great sprawl of blackboards, like a deck of cards tossed from a giant's hand, bearing spikily scribbled words and diagrams from the master's lectures—it seemed to me to be the spiritual heart of post-post-war Germany.

Other German art heroes are very much alive. Foremost and most controversial is Anselm Kiefer, who, for much of his career since the early 1970s, has been a prophet with honor in almost every land except his own. Widely regarded as the world's most prepossessing artist, with an especially devoted audience in the U.S., Kiefer works in an airplane hangar–sized studio in a small village in the Oden Forest south of Frankfurt, a maverick individualist chronically at odds with powerful dealers, such as Michael Werner, and curators, who at times make German art life seem a West Side Story of murky gang wars. Kiefer's huge, encrusted paintings (the

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TOP: COURTESY HIGH MUSEUM OF ART, ATLANTA. BOTTOM: COURTESY MARY BOONE GALLERY.

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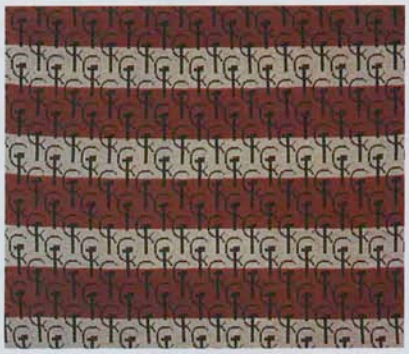
A national melee must be endured before we are going to see any further German shows of the self-confident, scene-mapping kind

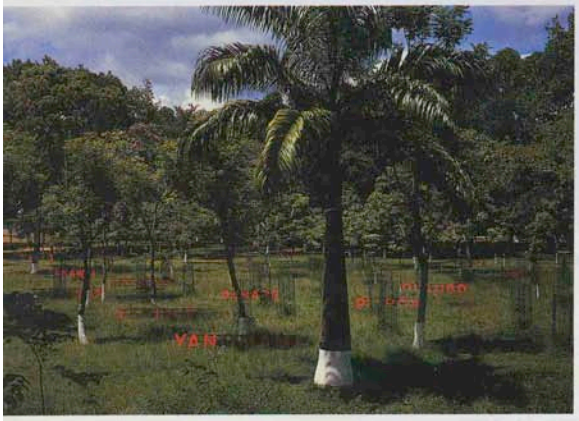
most expensive in history by a living artist, at about half a million apiece brand-new) and heavy book-like objects with mythological themes have touched sore nerves in the German consciousness, including memories of the Nazi past—all, to my mind, with sane and healing skepticism, as well as profound elegance. This erudite artist, marked by American and French influences, seems to me far less worrisome than the Germans who, by self-righteously denouncing him, display an ugly intolerance for unorthodox truths.

Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter, painters who collaborated in 1963 to create a canny German response to American Pop art—reflecting with silky irony on their backgrounds in the Socialist-Realist-dominated east, they called it "Capitalist Realism"—have since gone separate ways of equally intoxicating inventiveness but radically different temperament. Polke is German art's demonic clown, a hip Mephistopheles who has revamped the practice of painting with strange materials, such as patterned fabrics in place of canvas and witches'-brew chemicals in lieu of paint, and whose insolent public persona in the face of conformist German institutions has won him a bizarre respect. In the same way that Beuys before him became a popularly licensed prophet, Polke enjoys a court jester's tacit permission to undermine authority.

Richter is the artist laureate of the German intelligentsia, an austere figure given to a dizzying variety of painting styles: huge and colorful abstractions with a coldly spectacular effect; warm, lovely, small, realist landscapes; and recently, an electrifying series based on blurry news photos of the Baader-Meinhof terrorists who convulsed West Germany in the 1970s. Richter is the priestly embodiment of a deep conflict in German culture between poetic romanticism and a moralistic suspicion of images, a sort of hyper-principled iconoclasm with roots going back to the Protestant Reformation. Romantic in form and purposely starved in content, his pictures are practically perverse exercises in *not* having your cake and *not* eating it, too.



An internationally minded younger generation: right, "Untitled," Rosemarie Trockel; below, installation by Lothar Baumgarten at Parque de Caobos, Caracas, Venezuela.



Then there is a favorite painter of more conservative West Germans, Georg Baselitz, who lives like a baron in a sure-enough castle. Maker of muscular, thickly painted pictures of expressionistic figures that are invariably upside-down—a peculiar motif seen by some as an expression of German postwar anguish and by others as just a facile trademark—Baselitz presents a case opposite to that of Kiefer, as a local lion tepidly received abroad despite mighty promotional efforts on his behalf. Like his colleague Markus Lüpertz, the painter of a meat-and-potatoes Teutonic neo-Cubism, Baselitz may appeal to his countrymen as the world-class conventional modern artist that, through a half-century of disasters, they lacked.

If the above roster of contemporary culture heroes somewhat recalls the cast of a medieval morality play, that's only fitting. Germany is a nation where feudalism persisted well into the 19th century and that, after World War II, even while dazzling the world with its economic performance, returned to a practically pre-Bismarckian politics of scattered powers. Now it is set for another crack at the modern norm of unified statehood, and a world that recalls the catastrophes resulting from previous German efforts in this direction may not be comforted to note the survival of archaic magical qualities in the nation's art culture.

West German art, with its rich interweaving of ideas and institutions, is a lot more than the work of a few towering masters, of course, but no one can predict the consequence of the present grand transition for lesser tendencies and stars. Having seen a show of East German art in Berlin that was almost entirely expressionistic painting, I expect that reunification may give similar work in the west—notably the slashing, hot-colored, agonized pyrotechnics of Neo-Expressionism—a boost at a time when its long vogue since the 1970s has begun to seem badly faded. As an early sign of this, the first-ever retrospective in the east of a contemporary West German recently introduced Neo-Expressionist Rainer Fetting to his fellow Berliners across the crumbling Wall. A new prominence for such painting will tell us that nationalism is riding high.

Likewise informative will be the fate of internationally minded youn-

TOP: COURTESY BARBARA GLADSTONE GALLERY; BOTTOM: COURTESY MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

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ger West German luminaries of sculptural installations, photographic art, and conceptual projects. I have in mind such favorites of the intellectuals as Rebecca Horn, whose elegant machines parody the act of painting by, for instance, drooling paint from high on a wall onto slowly rotating canvases below; Lothar Baumgarten, a neo-Romantic world traveler, whose scientific-mystical projects with Amazonian and North American Indians evoke longings for the redemptiveness of the primitive; Gunter Forg, whose abstract paintings on lead and huge photographs of deserted architectural settings project a mournful, exhausted elegance; and Rosemarie Trockel, a kind of tidier Polke, whose woven pictures and feverish little symbolic drawings invest modes of "women's work" with a rebellious sensibility. Will these paladins of the West German institutional art network, with its leftist and bureaucratic allegiances, suddenly seem insular, even outdated, in the heady, populist new republic?

I suspected as much when viewing a recent exhibition at the Musée d'Art Contemporain in Montreal called *Blickpunkte* ("points of view"), which in many ways seemed typical of an art culture about to be drastically altered. Sponsored by the West German and Canadian governments, with the litany of additional corporate support that regularly marks international shows these days, *Blickpunkte* focused on the more institutionally favored strains in recent German art, proposing a mainstream history from Beuys, Polke, and Richter to the likes of Horn, Baumgarten, Forg, and Trockel. Nowhere in the two-volume catalog of the show, interestingly, was Anselm Kiefer so much as mentioned, a deliberate omission that points to the internal art-politics always rife in Germany. (As an observer from abroad, one learns to take with a grain of salt any German declaration of what's what and who's who over there.) I suspect that quite a national melee must be endured before we see any further German shows of this self-confident, scene-mapping kind, and that when we do, the dramatis personae will be sharply different.

Attending *Blickpunkte* toward the end of its run in January, I was reminded of what flabbergasting times we live in by just how passé seemed an exhibition organized a few short months earlier to reflect what was taken for the cutting edge in art. Reading a catalog essay by German art impresario Wolfgang Max Faust especially startled me. With the anxiety that sensitive Germans often display about foreign opinions of Germany, and that anyone with a memory of past horrors is bound to appreciate, Faust takes explicit comfort, while addressing the question of German national identity, in another writer's remark that "there is no more Germany." "Is this perhaps our good luck?" Faust comments. "Is the lack of a national identity . . . not a positive fact, which by creating uncertainty and discontent permits an escape from wrongheaded involvement with the national?" How plaintive that sounds now! Involvement with the national, "wrongheaded" or otherwise, is the order of the day in Germany. Things are moving too fast for catalogs.

Peter Schjeldahl is the senior art critic for *7 Days* and the author of *Eric Fischl* (Art in America/Stewart, Tabori & Chang).

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