



Art of Two Germanys/Cold War Cultures, installation view. Photo ©2009 Museum Associates/LACMA



Joseph Beuys, Art of Two Germanys/Cold War Cultures, installation view. Photo ©2009 Museum Associates/LACMA



Anselm Kiefer, *Deutschlands Geisteshelden (Germany's Spiritual Heroes)*, 1973, oil and charcoal on burlap, mounted on canvas, 120 7/8 x 268 1/2". The Broad Art Foundation, Santa Monica © 2009 Anselm Kiefer. Photo courtesy The Broad Art Foundation, photo by Douglas M. Parker Studio, Los Angeles

## Art of Two Germanys/Cold War Cultures

**Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin, Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg, and County Museum of Art – Broad Contemporary Art Museum in Los Angeles**

### by Emese Krunak-Hajagos

*Art of Two Germanys* was the first special exhibition to go on view in LACMA's new Renzo Piano designed-building, the Broad Contemporary Art Museum (BCAM). After LACMA, the exhibition travelled to Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg (May 23–September 6, 2009), and Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin (October 3, 2009–January 10, 2010). Curated by Stephanie Barron, Senior Curator of Modern Art, LACMA, and co-curator Dr. Eckhart Gillen, Kulturprojekte Berlin GmbH.

What makes this exhibition remarkable is the staging of the artwork in close connection to its historical, political and everyday background. The show covers Germany's art from the end of World War II until 1990, the reunification of the two Germanys and the end of the Cold War.

Why was this exhibition organized

in Los Angeles? What does this city have to do with German art? As it turns out, more than one might think. Los Angeles' cultural history was formed in part by the many German and Austrian WWII exiles who immigrated here in the 1930s and 1940s, including several of Hollywood's filmmaking industry founders, as well as Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht and Theodor Adorno. The presence of German influence in LA's private library, the Rifkind Collection of German Expressionists, piqued Stephanie Barron's interest in German art, leading to two previous exhibitions: *Degenerate Art: The fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (1991) and *Exiles and Emigres: The Flight of European artists from Hitler* (1997). This new exhibition – organized with co-curator Eckhart Gillen of Kulturprojekte Berlin GmbH – continues the timeline. Gillen lived in East Germany, and was close friends with

many of the participating artists.

This is the first exhibition since the end of the Cold War analyzing German art, featuring about 300 artworks of different medias (paintings, sculptures, photographs, installations, videos, books and other documentaries) from 125 artists. The curators' goal was clearly historical, showing artworks without reducing them to binaries such as East or West, national or international, traditional or experimental – instead, challenging our preconceptions. The exhibition is divided into four chronological sections: 1945-1949 *Mourning, Melancholy and the Search for National Identity*; 1950's *National Aesthetics Defined by the Cold War*; 1960s and 1970s *Working Through and Acting Out*, and 1980s *Blurring Boundaries and the Waning of the Cold War*. Throughout those fifty years, art in East and West Germany was closely linked to each country's political system: communist dictatorship in the East and liberal democracy in the West. After the war each had to face the legacy of Nazism and develop their own distinctive versions of modern and post-modern art.

After the war and Germany's division into four occupational zones,

art played a very important role in outlining the country's new political and cultural identity. As part of "de-nazification" the Allies organized exhibitions, lectures, and concerts, and started magazines, newspapers and radio stations as part of an aesthetic re-education.

Entering the exhibition through a narrow, dark corridor we see a film showing the bombing of Dresden. Beautiful buildings collapse in front of our eyes – all that is left of the Semper Opera is an angel, a lonely survivor guarding the ruins. In the haunting photographs of Richard Peter Sr. (made after the bombing of Dresden, February 14-15, 1945), skeletons covered by ashes are still wearing their Nazi uniforms and a mother desperately tries to save her twins, covering them with her own body. Just a few artists tried to envision the horrors of the Holocaust, among them Hans Grundig in his painting *To the Victims of Fascism* (second version, 1947) where, in front of a burning sky, black crows are feeding on the victims of the camps. Most artists found the terrors of the Holocaust incomprehensible or chose to ignore them. Trying to return to normal life, Werner Heldt painted a happier cityscape on a door (*Door*, 1946) with lipstick because art supplies were hard to come by.

In 1949 the division of Germany into two different political systems started a political and ideological debate between East and West, which at times became charged and confrontational. Walter Ulbricht, the president of the German Democratic Republic, followed the Soviet example by stating that abstract art was an expression of the capitalist downfall (1951). On the other side of the border in the Federal Republic of Germany ideologists, considered realism the style of "unfreedom." The official style – abstract informal art – suggested a new beginning with absolute artistic autonomy; the lack of ideology became the supreme ideology. Citizens approached life pragmatically, adopting

an attitude of defence against communism.

By showing the art of the 1950s from East and West in the same room, the curators suggest a dialog between the two divides. On one side of the room large canvases, in the style of Socialist Realism, depict the reconstruction of East Berlin, where happy hero workers are building a better future (Heinz Löffler, *Construction of the Stalinallee*, 1953). This style used to be dismissed as state-sponsored propaganda, but was actually recreated worldwide. A good example of it is William McElcheran's relief, *Cross Section* at the Dundas subway station in Toronto. In contrast, the other walls are covered by abstract compositions, among them informal pieces from Emil Schumacher and Gerhard Hoemme. In the middle of the room, as an artistic bridge, there is a table covered by Dresden artist Hermann Glöckner's magical semi-abstract sculptures, created in secret, from everyday objects

such as matchboxes, teacups and broken eyeglasses. Glöckner, who died in 1987 at the age of 98, never had an official exhibition in his lifetime and is a good example of passive resistance and artistic bravery. Among the many unknown artists represented in this show, Glöckner's work in particular became a sensation. At the beginning of the 1960s the "economic miracle" provided prosperity in the West, as we can see in video footage showing overstocked supermarkets and new cars – the outcome of the Marshall Plan. This section of the exhibition addresses all our senses. From the Zero Group represented by Heinz Mack there is an amazing, large kinetic composition *Relief Wall* (1960) that makes the viewer dizzy with its moving disks and reflected, colored light. Next we are engulfed by an intense chocolate smell from Dieter Roth's *240 Chocolate Lions* (1969) arranged on a rolling cart as a symbol of the West's wealth and decadence, now spoiling. It must have



Georg Baselitz, *Picture for the Fathers*, 1965, courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York and Berlin. Copyright 2009 Georg Baselitz

been hard to enjoy plenty, knowing that fellow Germans in the East suffered from shortages. The style known as Capitalist Realism, a kind of German pop art, is represented by Günther Uecker's nail-covered *Chair and TV* (1963). Nam June Paik's assemblage titled *Cuba* focuses on the increasing influence of political manipulation, while Roth's *Literature Sausage*, made from German writers' cut-up works and fat, focuses on the cultural. Wolf Vostel's *décollages* (a technique in which the artist applies many layers, one over the other, before ripping pieces off to reveal a final image), such as *Coca Cola and Lipstick Bomb* are examples of fluxus. Sigmar Polke: *The Fifties* (1963-1969) is a group of paintings mimicking famous artists' styles such as Picasso and popular subjects from East and West, to illustrate that politically controlled art could only produce kitsch.

In 1956, the Hungarian revolution against the communist regime instilled fear in the East German leaders and they imposed more restrictions. By 1960, 3.5 million people had left East Germany, and to stop this exodus, the Berlin Wall was erected in 1961. The Wall not only divided the nation, but also created "estrangement and disorientation – from the past, from history, even from one's former self" (Sabine Eckmann, Catalogue Pg. 85). The recent film *The Lives of Others* (directed by Florian von Henz, 2006) gives an account of the Stasi methods of destroying the East German intellectuals by alienating, humiliating and often forcing them into exile or suicide. Artists of the Leipzig School like Werner Tübke escaped into a kind of romantic realism, following the style of historical German painters. In the *Reminiscences of Schultze III. JD* (1965) Tübke surrounds the faceless Nazi judge with images from Bosch's *Hell and Heaven*, but unfortunately the context gets lost in the artistic finery. In the 1963 Auschwitz trials, Adolf Eichmann and some low-level Nazi leaders had to face justice, as portrayed



Werner Tübke, *Lebenserinnerungen des Dr. Jur. Schulze III, JD*, (Reminiscences of Schulze III, JD), 1965, tempera on canvas on wood, 74 x 47-5/8", Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie. ©2009 Werner Tübke Estate/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY/IVG bild-Kunst, Bonn Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, NY (ART181718), by Joerg P. Anders, Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin

in the film *The Reader* (2008), and the German nation had to wake from its self-induced amnesia. As a reaction,

Georg Baselitz created a new, dramatic figurative style as exemplified in *Picture for the Fathers* (1965), which shows a

young girl over rubbish, tendrils, bleeding stumps and other body parts. Gerhard Richter used family photographs to deal with the past. His *Uncle Rudi* (1965) stands in full uniform with the optimistic smile of a soldier sure of victory. He left for a "total war" but fell in battle and never came back. *Uncle Rudi* represents all the fathers and sons sent to war, showing that most German families had at least one Nazi in it. In another example, Anselm Kiefer took photographs of himself making the gesture of the Hitler salute in several of the Nazi-occupied territories (*Occupations Series* 1969-1975). He later said he didn't identify with Hitler but felt he had to "re-enact what they did just a little bit in order to understand the madness." Such a terror can never be fully understood, for as Adorno wrote: "[a] wrong life cannot be lived rightly." Anselm Kiefer expresses the younger generations' frustration in searching for their national identity in *Germany's Spiritual Heroes* (1973) listing many outstanding historic figures and artists (Wagner, Nietzsche, Beuys, Adorno, etc.) on whose example the new German nation could be built.

In A.R. Penck's *Passage* (1963) a stick figure is crossing over a narrow bridge engulfed in flames while a fire burns in the background. The man seems to go willingly into this situation, showing that one must face the abyss of history regardless of the outcome. In the West, Jörg Immendorff created a big, crazy historical disco in his *Café Deutschland* series (1977-78), where he mixed the stylistic elements of Dada, expressionism, realism and comics, as well as ideological symbols such as the imperial eagle, the swastika, the hammer and sickle, and the German flag. In the first painting, Immendorff is breaking through the wall in order to reconnect with his friend Penck in the East, showing that walls can be broken down in people's minds.

One night while I was curating a Hungarian exhibition in East Berlin, my host took me up the Fernsehturm, the

tower on Alexanderplatz. At the top of the tower I asked him, "Which part is East Berlin and which is West?" He said, "Just look at the lights; where they shine it is West Berlin, and where the darkness begins is East." It struck me as a devastating truth.

The artists who signed the *Pandemonium I. Manifesto* (1962) turned against consumer society and wanted to blur the boundary between art and life. Joseph Beuys became an iconic artist, one of the first body artists, who offered his body as a means of salvation. He was very active



Gerhard Richter, *Uncle Rudi*, 1965, oil on canvas, 34.25 x 19.6". Památník Lidice/Lidice Memorial ©2009 Gerhard Richter, courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, photo courtesy Památník Lidice/Lidice Memorial

socially in the Free University in Düsseldorf, as well as participating in demonstrations as we can see in his life-size portrait *We Are the Revolution* (1972). It consists of a glass case filled with the swept-up debris of a May Day demonstration, suggesting that a new Germany must be built, even on the ruins of the present one.

The social unrest and terrorism of

the 1970s made life in West Germany very difficult. In 1977, the Red Army Faction abducted and murdered Hanns-Martin Schleyer, a businessman and former SS officer. This sudden resurfacing of violence and brutality filled the citizens with terror. The media coverage of terrorism became part of everyday life, as Jürgen Klauke illustrates in his wall-sized bulletin board covered by portraits of masked terrorists cut out from newspapers. It was no longer clear who were the good guys, since the police methods were scary too, as documented in Katharina Sieverding's *Battlefield Germany* (1978), a large-size reproduction of a photographic negative of the government's anti terrorism unit.

In the 1980s Soviet power started to wane and artists could express themselves more freely in the East. The video performances of the Autoperforationists, in which they talk about the death of the self; poke each other, as well as the bodies of dead animals; hurt and bandage themselves; and then end up in a drunken stupor, seems meaningless at some points. It was hard to know what to do with freedom after such a long time of repression. Georg Harold's sculpture of a vacuum cleaner, titled *Laocoon*, shows his hopeless attempts to escape from the East. Via Lewandowsky's huge print *Frozen Limbs Break Easily* (1988) symbolizes the whole yet divided Germany with a two-headed monster whose one leg is bound, while the other remains free.

In 1989 people could escape from East Germany through Hungary. On November 9, 1989, the Wall was peacefully removed, ending the Cold War and reunifying the two Germans. Now that 20 years have passed since reunification, it is interesting to see Anselm Kiefer's installation *Palm Sunday* (2007) presently displayed at the Art Gallery of Ontario as it refers to the past. It opens with Adorno's quote, stating that poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, that "hope and resurrection can arise out of death and destruction."