

DE-ARRANGED PLACES: EAST GERMAN ART IN THE MUSEUMS OF UNIFIED GERMANY

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In this article on identity politics and museums in Germany after unification I will describe a controversial exhibit in Weimar, entitled "The Rise and Fall of Modernism." This exhibit took place in 1999, when Weimar performed as "Cultural Capital of Europe." The small Thuringian town with a million visitors per year then attracted seven million. The exhibit consisted of three parts covering the beginning of the twentieth century, the period from 1933 to 1945, and the time between the end of the war and unification. It was the third part, entitled "Official/Unofficial: The Art of the GDR," that caused controversy.¹

A couple of artists wanted to withdraw their paintings from the show.² A fistfight even erupted between two artists and the curator! Another artist sued and the art show became an issue to be dealt with in two courts.³ "The Rise and Fall of the Modern" found enormous attention not only in the regional press but also in the major German tabloids, newspapers, and weeklies.⁴ Even the *New York Times* reported on it (Cohen 1999). Strangely enough, the Weimar exhibit was compared to "defamation (...) in the Nazi time,"⁵ seen as "a 'scandalous relapse' into the Cold War era,"⁶ and understood as "an expression of the West German victor's mentality."⁷

I will describe this show and analyze the debate it spurred by challenging Carol Duncan's concept of the museum as a ritual of citizenship (1991). I want to focus on one particular display, which refers to another place—a place that had been de-arranged after unification: the "*Palast der Republik*" in Berlin.

The Palace of the Republic housed the East German Parliament and functioned, at the same time, as a popular cultural and gastronomical center, where people went to a concert, ate out or danced. After unification, the building was closed down. Then a seemingly endless debate ensued whether it should be torn down or reconstructed and re-opened. An Association in favor of the preservation of the *Palast der Republik* was founded. The webpage of this initiative shows images of the building (see figure 1) and its interior, which we may use for illustration purposes.⁸

The Palace of the Republic provided also space for an art gallery. The images on the web include a

photograph of visitors in front of Zitzmann's "Song of the Worldyouth"⁹ (See figure 2). After the building was closed, the paintings had been transferred to the archive of the German Historical Museum. In the Weimar exhibit, these paintings were once again on display.

I will investigate "how contests for the possession of identity become embedded in museum displays."¹⁰ The display of the paintings from the Palace of the Republic, as I will argue, instigated the debate. This display will allow us to study the moment when memory turns into history, on which Pierre Nora elaborates in his essay "*Les Lieux de Memoire*" (1989). Thus, by analyzing the public's reaction to this show we glean a better understanding of the "New Germany."

The problems of the Weimar exhibit were, as it seemed, all embodied in a circular wall, called "The Panorama" (Aufstieg und Fall III). This wall surrounded the center space of the exhibition hall containing paintings from GDR art collections.¹¹ The title page of a regional city magazine, *Weimar Kultur Journal*, visualizes the nervous debate (See figure 3). This magazine cover shows two identical views of the wall in question, two copies of the same picture, both enlarged to the same size. They were digitally manipulated in different ways: In one of the pictures, the wall is left blank and appears as a white background behind the paintings; in the other one, the gray plastic film and the beams of the spotlights are visible but the fields within the frames of the artworks are left blank.¹² According to the sentence of the first court, the lighting and the hanging—neither by collection, motif, or style nor chronologically—were intolerable.¹³ Further, the material used as covering for the exhibition walls, a gray plastic film, also used for trash bags, was deemed to devalue the paintings.¹⁴

When I saw the exhibit, I found the design and display of the rest of the exhibition not any less questionable. To understand this exhibit and the debate it initiated, which indeed uncovers politically significant sensitivities in Germany ten years after the fall of the wall, we have to go beyond court sentences and press reviews and focus on the exhibit's spatial setting.

Weimar, home to Schiller and Goethe, founding place of the first German Republic, and

the town in walking distance from the concentration camp Buchenwald,¹⁵ is itself a politically vexing place. A tour of the exhibit started at a classic site, the castle,¹⁶ since 1923 a museum.¹⁷ It continued on two levels of a huge hall, which, planned as "*Halle der Volksgemeinschaft*," was part of the "*Gauforum*," a complex designed by Hitler's architect Giesler.¹⁸ Since 1967, this hall has been covered with a lamella façade and divided into stories to be used as a depot and as office space.¹⁹ The cultural implications of these different locations and the visitors' obligatory procession through them help explain the extreme reactions to the show.

Carol Duncan and others have compared a visit to a museum to a ritual, a transitory experience (1991:90-2). According to Duncan, the curator prescribes a narrative and the visitor pays, more or less consciously, attention to it. In the case of "*Rise and Fall of Modernism*," however, we realize the limits of Duncan's ideal visitor. This show forces us to consider the question of agency and to study the visitor's story without reading the curator's script.

In the castle, the visitors see modern art and read about its dramatic temporariness in Weimar. They learn, for example, that in 1930, when the Nazis came to power in Thuringia, the museum director was ordered to replace the vanguard paintings by Feininger, Klee, and Kandinsky by works classified as "German art."

As you may remember, Carol Duncan sees the Louvre as a "prototype" (1991:89-90) of a national art museum inviting to a ritual of citizenship. Not unlike the Louvre, Weimar's art gallery, which originally displayed a grand duke's collection and was housed in his residence, is a secular temple defining local and national identity. This exhibit's narrative reinforced German pity for and shame about the past and, at the same time, reclaimed the paintings expelled by the Nazis as part of the legitimate Weimar and German heritage. Part II, "*Die Kunst dem Volke*," "Art to the People—The collection Adolf Hitler," however, discontinued the lesson in local history (Petrópoulos 1996:181-6). Shown, without any comment, were 120 paintings, a selection from Hitler's private collection.²⁰ The catalogue emphasizes that these paintings were available to the public for the first time in such large numbers.²¹

But the pictures gave the appearance that they had been in this place forever. The display alluded to an art depot, although an actual storage would look quite different. Slanted boards allowed the works to rest against them. Rather than seeing

these pictures exposed to the scrutiny of daylight, the visitor was drawn in to share their space, a rather disturbing experience. The heavily debated Part III, "Official/Unofficial- The Art of the GDR" could only be reached over a ramp. Once in the hall, visitors were shunted through a makeshift gallery with low ceilings. Once inside, visitors learned about the reintroduction of Bauhaus ideas in Weimar's college of art and the modifications of these ideas according to political decisions in the late 1940s.

Then visitors were released into GDR art. As far as the eye could see—monumental paintings on the right. Small formats, documentary photographs, were lined up in a neon-light showcase set into the wall on the left (See figure 4).

Unlike Hitler's pictures, which kept their prestigious frames, these canvases were deprived of their original trimming and framed in heavy strips of cheap, unfinished wood. The large paintings, some of them triptychs, sit on the concrete floor, leaning against the wall. Vent's "*People at the Beach*,"²² Heisig's "*Ikarus*,"²³ and Neubert's "*Yesterday and Today*"²⁴ and all the other paintings had been exhibited in the "*Palast der Republik*." But here they were not really exhibited. Neither do they look as if they are being stored. Rather, they appeared as if they had just been taken down. This is the very point of transition. The visitors did not want to repeat a historical mistake! Is that not exactly what the curator's dramaturgy prescribed at this point? By now, the visitors have passed "*The Curve*," as this section is called, and are dismissed into the rotunda. They should be prepared, finally, to recognize the banality of the pictures, painted at the behest of the Party and the State. They should be ready, finally, to share the curator's idea of "three styles of the Anti-Modern of the 20th century: the academic-conservative art (...), the image production of the National Socialism (...) [and] the Socialist Realism" (Preiß 1999:10).

But the visitors finally refuse to follow the curator's narrative trajectory! They may even want to say something! They write entries into the guest-book.²⁵ Journalists from all parts of Germany portrayed the curator as an arrogant Wessi and engaged in protecting the GDR artists. Artists, whose works were displayed, tried to detach themselves from the show. The Academy of Art and the Artists' Association took action against the show. Thuringian politicians hurried to distance themselves from this project of the Cultural Capital. Even the President of the German Parliament, Wolfgang Thierse, raised his voice in protest.

Let us not forget the visitors who did not engage in such public actions: When they entered the rotunda, they realized that there was only one small triangular section that was left to be toured. This section, called "The Wedge," contained mostly abstract paintings representing, as announced in the title, the "Unofficial." Knowing that they have almost made it to the end, the visitors could take time to walk along the wall or sit down and look around the rotunda. They might have tried to figure out if there was any plan to the hanging, compare the paintings and, as trained consumers, pick and choose the paintings that "are actually not so bad," as they might have said.

To conclude: The visitors had been reminded that expressionist and other modern artists' works had been removed without rousing considerable protest. Then they had an unexpectedly intimate encounter with Hitler's favorite pictures. With these exhibition experiences still on their minds, how could they not be subliminally affected by the confrontation with pictures that were sitting on the floor? As witnesses, they were made to partake in the process of "taking down" paintings by GDR artists. Of course, a "taking down" had never occurred in *this* place. One of the press articles even mentioned that the exhibition walls would not even have been strong enough to support the heavy paintings.²⁶ Whether deliberately or not, the positioning of the paintings evoked memories of the place from which they had in fact been removed. This particular section of the multi-purpose hall thus re-placed the Gallery in the Palace of the Republic and other places that are, physically or symbolically, no longer accessible. A de-arrangement was enacted in Weimar,²⁷ not through the paintings from the Palace that were on display, but rather through the humiliating gesture of their presentation. Thus, a *lieu de memoire* generated the public outcry. Rather than the widely questioned Panorama wall, it was the compressed historical self-concept of the audience as possible redeemers or resistance fighters that aroused a public debate, which led to unusual alliances. This explains why the exhibit was interpreted simultaneously as a second Degenerate Art show, as a repetition of Cold War propaganda, and as an act typical for the West German victors!

Discussions of GDR art and its presentation in the press scratched only the surface of post-wall semantics, leaving buried sensitive issues. Issues such as the relation of post-wall Germans to the Nazi past and the actual question of agency, responsibility, and the role of the spectator became, a year later, central features in the debate

on a ban of the Nationaldemocratic Party and on other measures against the increase of racist and violent crimes in Germany. I see the Berlin rally on November 9, 2000, which drew enormous public attention in Germany, and was covered in the US news as well, in this context.

Acknowledgement

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Endnotes

¹ The original title in German was "Offiziell/Inoffiziell – Die Kunst der DDR."

² A couple of weeks after its opening, more than thirty works that had been in the show were not longer on display. (See "Kai Uwe Schierz. Weimar"). One of the lenders to the exhibit, a Leipzig bank, was successful in pulling out a piece. The "Leipziger Sparkasse" withdrew their painting "Schuld der Mitte II," a work by Hans Hendrik Grimmling. (See "Wut über den Wessi").

³ The sentence of the first trial in front of the *Landgericht*, the communal court in Erfurt, was announced on June 17, 1999. The second trial, which ended with a settlement, took place at the *Oberlandesgericht*, Thürigina's state court, in Jena on July 28, 1999.

⁴ Most of the German papers I checked reported on this exhibit more than once. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine*

Zeitung published at least four articles dealing with this exhibit, the *Tagesspiegel* at least five, and another daily newspaper in Berlin, the *Berliner Zeitung*, informed readers in at least eight articles on this exhibit.

⁵ Winfried Bullinger, an expert on artists' copy right and the attorney of the suing artist, hired by the artists' association *Bund Bildender Künstler*, was cited in *BILD* June 1, 1999: "Diffamierungen solchen Kalibers gab's zuletzt in der Nazi-Zeit. (See "Skandal-Ausstellung in Weimar").

⁶ This statement by the Vice President of the Academy of the Arts Berlin-Brandenburg was cited in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (see "Cafes Deutschland") as well as in other newspapers.

⁷ This statement by the painter Wolfgang Matteuer was also cited in several newspapers, for example, in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (see "Cafes Deutschland") and in the *New York Times* (see in "Exhibiting the Art of History's Dustbin").

⁸ Webpage of the *Vereins zur Erhaltung des Palastes der Republik e.V.*, <http://kultur-netz.de/pdr/pdr115.htm>. By January 30, 2000.

⁹ Lothar Zitzmann, *Song of the Worldyouth* 1975, oil on plywood, around 1975, 288x552 cm, Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin.

¹⁰ See Jane Nadelman-Klein's call for papers for the workshop "Arranging Places: Regions, Nations, and Museums in Europe at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in San Francisco, November 18, 2000..

¹¹ The paintings were loans from the documentation center Burg Beeskow, a depot for artworks which had belonged to dissolved GDR enterprises and from five GDR art collections. These five collections included the Weimar Art Collection, Saxony's Art Fund, The German History Museum in Berlin, which inherited the GDR Museum for History, and the collection of the Combine Maxhütte near Saalfeld. See "Aufstieg und Fall der Moderne" III: 3-4.

¹² The photograph of this title page, entitled "A Rise and Fall in Weimar," was taken by Jörg Behrens. The visualization for this title was prepared by Klaus Nerlich. (*Weimar Kultur Journal. Zeitschrift für Weimar, Erfurt, Jena, Apolda*, Vol. 8, No 7, 1999.)

¹³ See the court's sentence "Urteil in dem einstweiligen Verfügungsverfahren der Künstlerin Ellena Olson gegen die Stadt Weimar, Kunstsammlungen zu Weimar und Weimar 1999 Kulturstadt Europas GmbH wegen Urheberrechtsverletzung, verkündet am 17.08.1999. Landgericht Erfurt 3 u O 16/95: 8.

¹⁴ The following titles of newspaper articles take up this comparison: "Exhibiting the Art of History's Dustbin," "Weimar, die Kunst und der Schrott," and "Kulturkampf mit Müllhaufen."

¹⁵ Schley 1999

¹⁶ The ground of the castle was a feudal residence for 1000 years. (See Hootz 1968: 405). A former castle, called Wilhelmsburg, built in 1651, burnt down in 1774. (See Dehio 1991:314) Goethe organized the reconstruction. In its present appearance the castle was re-constructed between 1790 and 1803, from 1835 to 1840, and in 1913 and 1914. (Salzmann and Zühlke 1971:100).

¹⁷ This municipal art collection is called "Kunstsammlungen zu Weimar." The castle hosts part of the collection and its administration.

¹⁸ Weimar was the only *NS-Gauhauptstadt* -capitol of a National Socialist administrative region - where a structure of this kind was actually realized. Rather than a central planning, it was the high ambition of Thuringia's Reichsstatthalter Fritz Sauckel, residing in Weimar, which is seen as decisive for the realization of the construction project. (See Ehrlich, John and Ulbricht 1999: 29). In the 1990s, the *Gauforum* became a postcard motif to promote Weimar as Cultural-Capitol-of-Europe. (See Loos 1995:333).

¹⁹ It had remained an incomplete, non-destructible, and unused skeleton with a hoarding façade until 1967, when it was turned into a depot, office and production space. (See Loos 1995: 345). Schalck-Golodkowski's enterprise stored commodities from the West in this hall. Therefore, the building was under special observation by the state's security police. (See Wirth 1999:47).

²⁰ Whereas in the catalogue (1999:407) and in his booklet (1999:45) Preiß states that this presentation of Hitler's collection contained 140 paintings, in the exhibition brochure the number is given as 120 paintings. (See "Aufstieg und Fall der Moderne" II:1)

²¹ Preiß (1999:407) further explains that the works of better technical quality were chosen for the show, that the Landscapes because they were too dull and banal were underrepresented, and that pieces showing Nazi emblems, for the most part in U.S. archives, could be neglected here, since they would not really represent the essential style of National Socialist art.

²² Hans Vent, *People at the Beach* [orig.: *Menschen am Strand*], oil on plywood, 1976, 280x552 cm, Federal Republic of Germany (permanent loan), former Palace of the Republic, East Berlin

²³ Bernhard Heisig, *Icarus* [orig.: *Ikarus*], oil on plywood, 1975, 280x540 cm, Federal Republic of Germany (permanent loan), former Palace of the Republic, East Berlin

²⁴ Willi Neubert, *Yesterday and Today* [orig.: *Gestern und Heute*], mixed technique on plywood, 1975, 280x345 cm, Federal Republic of Germany (permanent loan), former Palace of the Republic, East Berlin

²⁵ The unusual number of guest-book entries is mentioned in an article in the newspaper *Tagesspiegel* (see "Umstrittene Weimarer Ausstellung") and in an article in *Die Welt* [on-line] (see Berg "Kunst neben Agitations-Kleckereien" <http://www.welt.de/daten/1999/05/25/0525ku66895.htm>. By June 4, 1999). Not even a month after its

opening, 20.000 visitors had seen the exhibit and 166 entries had been left in the guest-book. (See Stadler, "Wer die gelbe Karte zeigt").

²⁶ While the critique concentrates on the display in the rotunda, this part is hardly mentioned in the press. An exception is an article in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (See Knapp, "An die Wand gestellt"). One of the articles *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* mentioned that these paintings could not be hung, because the panels ordered for this display would not hold their weight. See (See Stadler, "Wer die gelbe Karte zeigt").

²⁷ Or, to use a comparison in the field of art, a presentation of variations of the anti-modern became a happening challenging the visitors' indulgence.

Illustrations

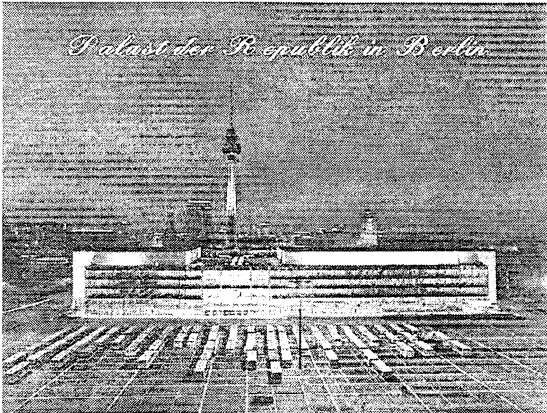


Figure 1 View of the Palast der Republik by night. Homepage of the Vereins zur Erhaltung des Palastes der Republik e.V., <http://kultur-netz.de/palast.htm> By January 30, 2000. Reproduced by permission of kultur-netz.de.



Figure 2 View of the Gallery in the Palast of the Republik, showing visitors in front of Song of the Worldyouth, a painting by Lothar Zitzmann (oil on plywood, around 1975, 288x552 cm, Deutsches Historisches Museum). Homepage of the Vereins zur Erhaltung des Palastes der Republik e.V., <http://kultur-netz.de/palast.htm> By January 30, 2000. Reproduced by permission of kultur-netz.de.

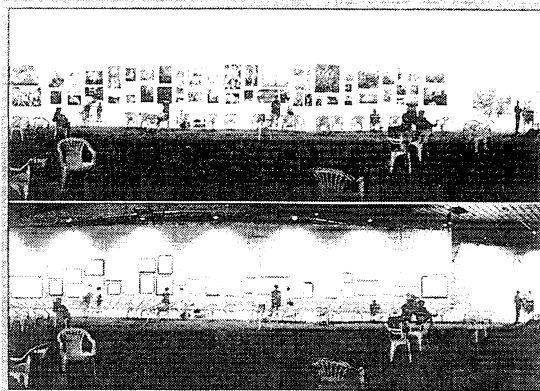


Figure 3 Images of the title page of Weimar Kultur Journal. Zeitschrift für Weimar, Erfurt, Jena, Apolda, Vol. 8, No 7, 1999. The photographs were taken by Jörg Behrens. The visualization for this title was prepared by Klaus Nerlich. Reproduced by permission of Jörg Behrens, Weimar Kultur Journal.

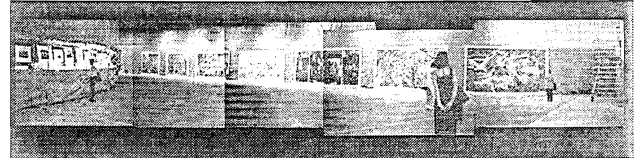


Figure 4 Collage of snapshots by the author, taken in Part III "Offiziell/Inoffiziell – Die Kunst der DDR" of the exhibit "Aufstieg und Fall der Moderne" of the Kunstsammlungen zu Weimar in Weimar in 1999

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