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THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

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FACULTY OF FINE ART

DEPARTMENT OF PRINTMAKING

ILLUSTRATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis topic emerged from two trips I made to East Germany during 1988 and the subsequent desire to understand the background, evolution and use of images there. My first visit I made with a mind so open I was not even aware of my own preconceptions; these only raised their heads when I tried to distil and comprehend what I had seen and learnt there. Below is a list of questions I wrote down after that first visit

- Is the attitude in East Germany towards fine art generally different?
- How is art taught in the D.D.R.?
- To what extent is the effect dictated by its content?
- Censorship imbues an image with strength yet because of its invisibility a censored image does not exist. In the west practically any image is permitted especially within the fine art context and is thus absorbed into the system and bereft of power. Do the two methods of control lead to the same point?
- How much more vital are the less emotive, less evocative images of art within a non capitalist culture?

-In what ways would the collective identity of the East differ to that of the West in terms of image saturation on one hand and comparative image bereftness on the other?

-How much of an opiate is this image plethōra; how much more are people thrown back on themselves and their own resources without it?

With the benefit of hindsight this list seems incomplete, naive, wrong in some cases and beside the point in others. What is interesting about it however is that it brings to light some of the West's preconceptions about the Eastern bloc. For instance I think we tend to visualise it as

generally simpler and with less contradictions and that it has a more clearly defined purpose. In a sense this is true of somewhere like the DDR which is a relatively young entity. There has been little time for *MAZES* of developments to evolve but on the other hand the state has grown extremely quickly. A lot of what was true thirty years ago no longer exists for some people but is still true for others - not just in terms of state policy but in the way people think.

An illustration of this is the question: "Is the attitude towards art generally different?" The answer being yes and no. The first factor in this is the passing of Stalinism during which time art was a very tightly defined image system. The second is the state's adopted role of provider of all things material and spiritual; appreciation of the arts has been actively encouraged. The third is the dual event of the opening of the state socialist tenet "the principle of clarity",^{to} a much broader interpretation; and the evolution of a new bourgeoisie of intelligentsia. Thus art has become less accessible and has regained some of its former elitism while at the same time there is a widespread tradition of the appreciation of art.

Another misconception which I think is commonly held in the West is that of the relationship between censorship and art as the essence of freedom. Again the reality would seem to be far more complex than romantic notions of the

artist as defender of the spirit of individualism against an anonymous and hostile state. I feel this myth is one of the most fondly preserved in the West because it gives the making of art a vitality and importance it generally lacks in a "free" society.

The above are but two of many misapprehensions I had about East Germany and rather than exhaustively detailing before and after changes of opinion I will attempt to outline the evolution and role of the arts and image usage within state socialism followed by a more direct look at the DDR itself. One effect of trying to come to terms with state socialism is that it has in a sense led me to look over the wall from the other side and attempt to gain an understanding of the role of art and image systems in the West within the present climate of post industrial capitalism. The following chapters will attempt to outline generally the evolution of the role of the image within state socialism, draw some comparisons between patterns that are emerging, or have emerged, in East and West, and describe some elements of current image making and usage within the DDR.

CHAPTER 1

When considering state socialism perhaps the most important thing to realise in terms of art is its radical shift in social context. With the adoption or "liberation" of art by the state it ceased forever to be a commodity, or a semi independent mode of expression, or a costly adornment to one sort of hierarchy or another. It moved from the periphery, something not essential to everyday life, to the centre; as the state undertook to care for both the physical and the spiritual needs of its people so art became a protected thing. An anthropological certainty that art is intrinsic to man developed. To quote Victor Bergin on Matthew Arnold:

"With the decline of religion only art can provide the spiritual cement which will keep the crumbling edifice of the status quo society from collapsing".^{1.}

Although this quotation is out of context when applied to state socialism it rings true in that art is not something that is contained by the state but has been embraced and put to work for the revolution in its capacity as spiritual guide. This development can, from a contemporary Western viewpoint, be seen as explicitly anti artistic since the prerequisite of all subject matter in this context is that it will act as propaganda to strengthen society. the interpretation of this has however become increasingly broad over the years.

The obvious way to split the history of the DDR or any Soviet satellite state is between Stalinist and post-Stalinist although, Stalinism remained as policy in some places longer than others. For East Germany the watershed year was 1971.

During the Stalinist years all art had to move directly from the state to the people. Artists were expected to fight overtly against any remnants of the old order and strive to proclaim the new. A simple style was necessary for a simple message; "The state is within us", and all images had to be an exact reproduction of the state's self portrait. Art was not supposed to be demanding but as didactic, snappy and quickly absorbed as Western advertising. It was not intended to be enlightening but reassuring and invigorating, both reiterating the omnipotence of the state and reminding that it is the one way forward to glory and salvation. All art that did not concern itself with this was considered meaningless.

This style was of course socialist realism, (Until they became firmly established, the culture of all Soviet satellites was in effect Russian culture) which emerged from the aftermath of the Russian revolution, after the brief flourishing of the arts in Russia was extinguished as the resistance of those who did not want doctrines was gradually weakened and the anarchists were expelled by their former comrades, the authoritarians. Within the doctrine of expediency, "For the revolution, complete freedom; against the revolution, nothing", there was no room for intellectual independence.(2)

The word realism would at first seem to be somewhat misplaced since the exploration of reality is by definition alien to directed art. However what is alien is the exploration of a variety of realities; because the extension of this is that no particular reality is any more real than any other. Socialist realism embraces the single direction of the projected reality of socialism. One step on from this, when it has become taken as read that socialism is the reality then the word "socialist" is no more than a reminder and the phrase

becomes not so much a demand for a type of thinking as the description of a condition: Reality has become directed.

Under Stalinism the artist created a particular kind of work or else that work did not exist. Thus as soon as his or her art mirrored reality it became part of that reality. In art historical terms the state artist has a new function; that of social planner. Their work must emphasise and embody the secure consciousness of existence, the individual's organic interdependence with the whole of society and articulate the inner harmonies within that society. The task of the state artist is not merely to reflect reality but to shape it. To quote Marx:

"The task is not just to understand the world but to change it".

And since this is his function his/her links with the rest of the population must be as intimate as possible.

Two common preconceptions held in the West concern censorship and the figure of the dissident. Certainly in the Stalinist phase censorship was a surveillance mechanism of the state used to suppress anything that ran contrary to the overall plan, and was characterised by paranoia and insecurity on the part of that state. Nowadays active censorship is used to silence opposition only rarely; its role has become much more subtle: To quote Michlos Haraszoti from the book "THE VELVET PRISON":

"The change in institutions and people's minds is irreversable. Our new culture is made up neither of forced labour, nor of a cunning fight for freedom with secret pieces of real art characterised by intellectual sabotage and far sighted compliance; the institutions and the people belong to each other. True artistic inspiration is not free from constraints but is it free anywhere? The

copyright of state socialism has its own aesthetic much of which it has learnt from the very artists it desires to control"(3)

What he is saying here is that because the hegemony of the state has remained unthreatened for decades the state has grown more secure. It therefore feels more able to allow leeway in the production of culture in the knowledge that its producers are firmly assured in their belief that the state is a permanent reality. Once this has been achieved then censorship is not only an instrument of punishment but also one of sustenance; the skeleton of the culture and not the skin.

"If one was to eavesdrop on the conversation of artists and writers.....one would be surprised to hear the satisfaction with which they tell each other about their "misadventures" with the state. For censorship is the final glaze that the state applies to the work of art before approving its release to the public."(4)

It is the instrument with which a new culture has been created. Once the state is taken for granted then all work produced will be part of it and a point will arrive where the tools of dissidence will be obsolete.

This increased confidence of the state in the assimilation of its subjects has made the traditional dissident rarer since one only achieves such fame through the recognition of the state when one is selected for educational purposes. They are left over from a background that promised democracy, individualism and critical thought. The price of their freedom is alienation.

In what has been termed the "soft phase" of state socialism similarities start to appear in the way art is produced under state socialism and the way it is produced under corporate capitalism. For instance a corporation will only buy that work which in some way benefits its image and is not subversive to its aims and policies. If an artist is commissioned to produce a piece of work for a bank for example she/he knows that if she/he produces something offensive then the patronage will be withdrawn. The larger a corporation the more like a microcosm of state socialism it becomes. What is it that guarantees that the employees of "Twentieth Century Fox" will turn out films that serve the interests of the entire company? Is this process of creative compromise and self correction self censorship or the recognition of necessity?

In the post Stalinist era the demand for overt political performance on the part of the image makers was lessened. Not particularly because of concessions or a policy of liberalisation but because now the primary message has been assimilated there is room for the state to provide for other of the spiritual needs of its people. Original discontent over Stalinist didacticism came about not because artists felt the need to make anti socialist or apolitical art but because the dogma was starting to indicate a lack of trust and enforced adherence to one mode of image, if anything, less credible. Thus it is becoming possible not only to make politically neutral art ~~But Also to~~ level criticism at the establishment where nostalgia has led it to retain facets of Stalinism.

It is interesting to note that as the content of art is becoming more open it seems it is being allowed to slip back a little towards its former elitist status. One of the central tenets of state socialist art is the "principle of clarity" Its function; "to co-ordinate the service of the people with the practice of the service of the state"(5). This has remained the same but what has changed is to whom the work must be clear; in that it must be proof of the state's integration with society, is always an example of socially useful activity, and must have an officially acceptable interpretation. Under Stalinism the least sensitive group provided the standard of clarity; now it is the state's experts who do so. This could be seen to tie in with the growth of a new middle class comprised of the intelligentsia (meaning in Eastern bloc terms anyone whose work requires third level education). The early years of the DDR was a time of great social mobility. While maintaining the image of populism the new generation of intelligentsia are for the most part tending to be the

offspring of the first generation. It is these people who comprise the main audience of what might be termed "post socialist realism".

None of this is to say that the state is relinquishing control of the production of art. Since art has been nationalised it all belongs to the State and there are restrictions on sale, performance, distribution, (access to photocopiers is rigidly controlled) and even control over who makes it. The methods employed for this control hinge mainly on the art education system and the availability of artists' licenses. Under state socialism the number of art school places and the amount of art produced have greatly increased but so have the number of uses art has been put to. Entrance to a state art school is not based entirely on talent but also on achievement in certain academic areas such as Marxism and a willingness to learn the system. Politics have at least to be neutral. The directors and tutors are appointed by the state and History and Marxist philosophy are taught throughout the courses. Graduation entitles you to two things: An Artist's permit and entry into the Artists' Association. Without a permit it is difficult to have the time to make art because it is frowned upon not to be gainfully employed. Persistent non-employment earns the categorisation of "Asoziale". This means a police record and some supervision of your activities. Without membership of the Artists' Association it is very difficult to exhibit work. Thus the state is able to exercise tight control over who makes what images.

There are still limits to the repertoire of the modern state artist. A slightly peculiar example of this is the difficulty of gaining sanction for work of mixed genre or media. This is due to the structure of the bureaucracy that oversees the arts with a separate ministry for each art form. Each ministry claims that the proposed piece has no historical precedent.

Another area of art deemed unsuitable for state socialism is what is termed solipsistic art. This is such work as uses other art as its sole point of reference as has occurred in the west with the decline of modernism.

Within state socialism art has always to "mean" something. As is evidenced by the East German shows at the Venice Biennale it is of a highly literary character and executed at a high academic standard. (This latter would seem to be due to the teaching methods in the art schools). (See Illustrations) Literalness fits in well with the principle of clarity; the aesthetic consensus remains orientated towards content. Greater freedom of form has meant that stylistic method is no longer reconciled with the explicit demands of the state but with the implicit needs of the content of a work. To quote Haraszoti: "The message is all important! It is as if some sort of guilty conscience forces each artistic medium towards a common reductionist language. This is a kind of fear of original sin, of the selfishness of solipsistic art. Arts' literary character is a badge of good intention."(6)

As the ground rules for a liberated art are more firmly established so previously taboo topics have reappeared such as the existential, psychological, and sexual aspects of the individual. This tolerance has in effect nationalised

all sides of the consciousness even the unhappy ones. Since nothing can be exhibited without the state's approval the state is in effect the co-author in everything. This scenario negates all techniques that might have been used for alienating effect. So long as a piece of art does not preclude the possibility that the planners of the common good might ultimately succeed (in which case the work would remain invisible) it is further proof of assimilation of state artist and audience. It indicates a commonality that underlines the state tending to the needs of its people and falls into line with the logic that the more things are allowable the less there is that can be subversive.

In the West there is a strong tradition that true art is only possible when created within an atmosphere of total aesthetic freedom. This relatively recent notion has its roots in the evolution of bourgeois civilisation due to the industrial revolution. Only with the creation of a relatively independent source of finance was there room for such concepts of art as a recognised symbol of the protest of individual consciousness, questioning the order of the world.

Thus the growth and prevalence of art in Eastern bloc countries has been seen by many as a hopeful sign; that by its nature dictatorship oppresses the intellect and that all art, because of its supposed relationship with freedom, is in some way a conspiracy on the part of that intellect, fighting back. Perhaps also in the west there is a romantic attraction to this idea of art. It goes a long way to de-marginalise the making of art bringing it from something carried out in an elitist ghetto, achieving little, saying little, with practically no influence, to a role as the defender of autonomy and freedom.

Art has in fact returned to its more traditional role of state servant; not only however is the artist the servant of the state, he is also involved in the planning of that state. By embracing the state as the way forward to a better society the artist has exchanged the dignity of solitary thought for the dignity of public attention; the excitement of irresponsibility for the pathos of responsibility. When art was liberated and given to the masses whose interests were represented by the party art could no longer be regarded as the province of the artist. The party entered art but by the same token artists entered the party. In exchange for faith they have been given the task of organising the emotional life of the state. Relatively powerless in a concomitant freemarket economy, they move to the heart of things, providing for the people and organising their unity, working directly for a Utopia.

FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER 1

1. Victor Bergin: " Something about Photography theory "

from THE NEW ART HISTORY pp44-45

2. Michlos Haraszoti: THE VELVET PRISON

p.67

3. Ibid. p.97

4. Ibid. p.7

5. Ibid. p.124

6. Ibid. p.107

CHAPTER 11

Perhaps the main aspiration of the artist/revolutionaries of 1917 was the hope of a rejuvenation of art - a chance to start again from year 1 with a freshness, vitality and hope that was only possible through this new freedom, new cohesion of mankind. As has been noted however the authoritarian demand of the new hierarchy negated this. The following is an outline of some current cultural thought related to the West with the intention of suggesting certain parallels that are emerging as the two camps continue to evolve.

In his essay NEW LAMPS FOR OLD Tom Gretton suggests that in the West art is no more than the articulation of an hegemonic culture. Similar to its role in the Eastern bloc it is no more than a mouthpiece, an employee of the state - the only difference being that the East is perfectly candid about its view of the role of art whereas in the West the modernist period and the importance placed on the activities of the avant garde has led to the concept of art as an arena of independent critical thought that can only truly exist if it is accorded total freedom.

Gretton says that what makes up the body "ART" is arrived at by a more or less openly acknowledged selection on the basis of aesthetic criteria; and that these criteria are always bonded to an historical situation and are not as is generally supposed timeless. They tend to reduce everything to no more than maintainers of the notion "art" with most art histories tending to circumvent or subvert the question: Is it art?

He goes on to say that art is the name of a social relationship, firstly between people and objects but mostly between people and people. It is a socially constructed category. It is ideological in that it helps to maintain existing social categories. Any critical attempt to subvert this is most likely only to reinforce the dominant culture.

This view minimises the importance of the avant garde in the disruption of the category "art" and its aim of forcing itself and their spectators to rethink not only the context of art but also its relationship to a wider social structure. In Marxist terms, where the flow of determinations is generally seen as from the economic to the cultural, this is an unlikely view anyhow, because of the way art is produced and reproduced it is unlikely that there will be any great changes in this flow.

"The fundamental way in which art is an operative category is that it both reinforces and disguises our sense of alienation, our sense that to be in charge of our own destinies is inappropriate"(1)

At the same time it is identified with self determining production and as a marginalised activity, less important, less real, than the production of practical commodities and thus even than craft and design. The public image of the artist has been most successfully constituted as Bohemianism or something akin. Art production is seen as something of a fetish under capitalism and not as a self defining social activity, which within the ideology of bourgeois individualism should be the logical goal of everyone;

"What after all would be the effect on society if we all set about defining how we worked, what we worked upon, how what we did was to be used and understood".(2)

This marginalisation has been intensified by the elitism that has come to be attached to art. For example its relationship with power and money. John Berger's remarks on Grainsborough's painting in "Ways of Seeing" are highly illustrative of this; He says that the figures in oil paintings tend to look down on the spectator and they depict things with the implication that the spectator does not share them - as in the example of the portrait of Mrs Siddons: "power, luck, beauty, and money". Another example is the intellectual solipsism of late modernism which has given art a further aura of incomprehensibility.

"..... the modernist insistence on the essential meaninglessness at the centre of artistic practice came actually to mean less and less. From being a statement of existential despair it degenerated into an empty self pitying but sensationalist mannerism. From being concerned with nothingness, it became nothing. The repudiation of mimesis and the escalating demands for new experience beyond traditional limits inevitably loosened the connections between artistic discourse and everyday life. Art became an abstraction, something of meaning only to its practitioners."(3)

Furthermore any statistics of the gallery using habits of Western society could serve as foundation for an argument that art has become no more than an affectation of the bourgeoisie.

The "specialness" attributed to art and artists helps to guarantee the ordinariness and naturalness of the day to day business of capitalism: Art functions to reproduce social superiority. Knowledge or possession of works of art is a mark of distinction. Since works of art are taken to embody timeless values an understanding of them is taken as confirming the intrinsic worth and thus the right to social dominance of the comprehending beholder. Also because sympathy with works of art gives vicarious access to the world of self determining and self defining activity this gives the spectator the status/illusion of being one that defines.

Failure or refusal to do this operates hegemonically:

"If understanding art is seen as good then failure to understand is humiliating. Learning to understand in as much as it involves accepting authority, reinforces subordination for one's own good, and in particular reinforces the notion that cultural authorities articulate not particular forms of social hierarchy but eternal values, the values of aesthetic worth."(4)

Equally if rejection of art is based on cultural or economic deprivation or a tradition of that then this too hides the mechanisms of that exclusion and is also a manifestation of cultural dominance.

"All art is a social formation of hegemonic power".(5)

Its ideological power derives from the mystification of the process of making - and the granting of a special status to it. State socialism has retained this mystification for the purposes of adding weight to its voice and in a very overt way has put art to work. In the west socialist realism has widely been regarded as an inferior art form, more akin to applied art, but simple style was essential to ensure the clarity of its message. At the same time socialist realism was still art and served to mystify the state. The encouragement to appreciate the art of the state could be seen almost as an invitation to ascend to a higher plane of activity.

At this point an analogy could be drawn with photography. One element of this link would be that they both have to "mean". As has already been noted one of the basic tenets of art produced under state socialism is that it must conform to a principle of clarity. Similarly the majority of forms of photographic practice contribute to the production, reproduction, dissemination of the everyday meanings of the framework within which we act. Like state socialist art photography is not an autonomous discipline; it is rather an emphasis within a general history and theory of ideas.

To quote Victor Bergin on Foucault:

"Photography inserts itself into the network of what Foucault calls the capillary action of power through its contribution to the nexus of desire and representation which includes for example the question of who and or what is represented and how."(6)

If one asks the question "How is this different to other forms?" then one is returned to some of the elements that separate socialist realism from other art forms; amount of the image field controlled, illusion or declaration of reality and the extent of its role within propaganda.

Until the linguistic based research of the 1950's photography was thought of as a language as shown in such publications as Picture Post, but in much the same way as state socialist art it has no codes that are unique to it.

To return to the use and status of art in the West, Tom Gretton employs an analogy with religion. He suggests that as within a study of religion it is impossible to define saintliness so it is impossible to define artliness within a study of art. This is interesting when compared with state socialism where in effect the state has taken the place of god and art has become the food of the soul. The artliness of art has been co-opted to add a sheen of mysticism and timeliness to the state. Gretton suggests that within Western art history nearly all approaches leave the essence of individuality or creativity unscathed pushing it outside time and making it a transcendental value. Thus since all state socialist art is in a sense the state, the state too becomes transcendental.

Further on he asserts that when looking at images methods of analyses

employing theories of reflection are inadequate:

"Works of art are said to reflect the values, ideals, beliefs and ideologies of a particular social group, nation or even age, or to reflect social processes or social realities of one sort or another".(7)

He goes on to say that all the ingredients that make up culture (Fine art being one of these much more so I believe in the East than in the West) should be seen as constituting and constructing value systems, beliefs and ideologies.

Since the history of state socialism is so relatively short and the history of the nations involved so very young it is much easier to see where one state of affairs ends and the other begins. It could be argued that the Stalinist phase in the DDR is the reflectionist period when the cultural system was totally passive to the needs of that state and was nothing but an articulation propaganda device of those needs and aims - while in the present more developed phase of assimilation when the state has some sense of security any image produced within that framework will serve to reinforce it and thus constitute it.

Gretton suggests that cultural form is the space in which people come to understand the circumstances in which they live. Stalinism could then be seen as a time where this notion was taken to its logical conclusion and that space was rigidly controlled to allow only a very select number of possible modes of comprehension and once the world had been comprehended in these terms by the people or more importantly the image makers then there became room for leeway since the validity of the state had become an underlying principle - a seed that had been planted and in due course germinated.

FOOTNOTES:CHAPTER 11

1. Tom Gretton, "New Lamps for Old" from THE NEW ART HISTORY

PP 65-66

2. Ibid. p66

3. Thomas Lawson, "Last Exit Painting" from ART AFTER MODERNISM

p156

4. Gretton, p6 >

5. Ibid., p68

6. Victor Bergin, "Something about Photography Theory" from

THE NEW ART HISTORY p53

7. Gretton, p72

CHAPTER 111

In a broader context some theories relating to the effect of mass culture in the West are worth looking at as possible pointers to further parallels.

"The phenomenon of universalisation while being an advancement of mankind at the same time constitutes a sort of subtle destruction, not only of traditional cultures.....but also of the creative nucleus of great cultures, that nucleus on the basis of which we interpret life....."

We have the feeling that this single world civilisation at the same time exerts a sort of attrition or wearing away at the expense of the cultural resources which have made the great civilisations of the past.....

This threat is expressed.....by the spreading before our eyes of a mediocre civilisation." - Paul Ricoeur, HISTORY AND TRUTH (1)

This universalisation could be taken to correlate with notions of the process of assimilation in the Eastern bloc. Baudrillard talks of the logical conclusion of Western culture as a point where:

"All opposition is nullified, all history dissolved, difference neutralised and the possibility of any figuration of alternate actuality erased".(2)

He sees television as the paradigm of this, collapsing any distinction between receiver and sender or between the medium and the real. All principles of disorder are excluded. His perfect circuit of viewer-TV subsists on a single formalised plane solely as an index of the non-working of power and of the illusory essence of signification:

"Signs and commodities become liquified to a point where the fugitive or nomadic is no longer created. Television facilitates their reduction to flux and facilitates their control in more easily managed channels."

He sees advertising as a medium that is no longer baroque or utopian but a total invader with omnipresent visibility in terms of enterprises, brands, and social interlocutors. The public space, street, monument, market etc, is on the decline; public life is becoming monopolised. He uses the Forum des Halles as an example of how advertising has started to organise the very architecture: "This is not actually geared to consumption but is proposed as an anticipated demonstration of the operation of culture, commodities, mass movement and social flux".(3)

In his view the loss of public space is concurring with the loss of private space through the infiltration of television; - so one is no longer spectacle and the other no longer a secret.

This whole scenario he has termed an "ecstasy of communication" making all representation meaningless.

Another commentator on mass media society, Frederic Jamieson, has suggested that individualism as such is dying; that the old "autonomous individual" is a thing of the past; that perhaps it existed in the heyday of the nuclear family and the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie, but now in the age of corporate capitalism, the "organisation man", mass media and the demographic explosion, nobody has a private unique world to express anymore, as did Proust, for example.

Perhaps, Jamieson says, even this notion was only ever a myth brought about to persuade people of their freedom.

This ties in, perhaps inversely, with criticisms leveled at state socialism for its much more abrupt abolition of autonomy followed by gradual relaxation of control as assimilation on the part of its population becomes more assured.

In terms of the arts the belief in the death of individualism could be attributed to the theory that only a limited number of different combinations of style, and the potential for uniqueness, are possible, and have been used up because of modern society's restless search for novelty.

Many current films hearken back to earlier cultural forms - not as straight history movies but as nostalgia for those forms. For example, Star Wars hearkens back to Flash Gordon, or Raiders of the Lost Ark to a specific kind of adventure story of the 1930's.

On a purely subjective level East Germany had the same kind of nostalgia pull for me. Perhaps this has to do with the manifestation of this particular post modernist sensibility in my own head: "Like a movie?", that this is the way of seeing I have learnt from a society that is becoming less and less capable of achieving aesthetic representation of its current experience? More and more what we wind up with as a means of defining the present or the past are the cultural stereotypes of that past we have been given.

Jamieson suggests that this phenomenon is putting our historical past more and more out of reach, much in the same way that the historical past has been placed out of reach by the expedient definition of that past by the state. It is interesting that due to the present thaw of Glasnost some areas have been reconsidered in such magazines as the Russian periodical SPUTNIK. Since SPUTNIK's re-evaluation did not fit in with current DDR policy concerning its past it was banned.

Making a comparison with Lacan's thinking on schizophrenia - as an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinued material signifiers that have no coherence and thus no consistent link, with time filled, because of this, with far more intense experiences, because their present is not merely part of a larger set of projects forcing us to focus our perception; he suggests that the new rhythm of post-war society; vastly increased consumption, planned obsolescence, rapid fashion and styling changes, preoccupation with novelty, mass penetration of advertising and television, has had the effect of destroying any sense of history, of rendering contemporary society incapable of retaining its own past, and condemning it to a peripheral dislocated present that obliterates traditions of the kind that all earlier social formations have had to preserve. The example he cites is how fast the media exhausts news and how much Kennedy and Nixon are figures of the distant past. He suggests that the very agents of information are also the mechanisms of historical amnesia.

A correlation can be made here between a directed culture that can pick and choose what is true and what is not true, reinventing history in order to strengthen its foundation, and a supposedly free culture arriving at a situation where history is practically meaningless with the consequence that if its history does not strengthen the foundations it does not weaken them either.

The features of post modernism outlined above, the transformation of reality into images, the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents, and the inability to look backwards without using previous cultural manifestations from that past as reference points all suggest the approach (if we have not arrived already) of a point where all art or artefacts can do no more than replicate or reinforce the existing social fabric: that of the logic of consumer capitalism. Thus perhaps the same assimilation into working for the good of the state while under the illusion of acting through free choice, as is apparent in the present form of state socialism, has occurred.

FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER 111

1. Paul Ricoeur, "History and Truth", from

UNIVERSAL CIVILISATION AND NATIONAL CULTURES pp276 - 277

2. Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication" from

POSTMODERN CULTURE p129

3. Ibid., p130

CHAPTER 1V

Moving from the general to the specific the following is an attempt to outline some aspects of the current state of the arts in the DDR. As one gets more and more involved in various, perhaps slightly far flung theories concerning universalisation and the death of the individual it becomes easier and easier to generalise, put things into boxes, and dismiss whole societies as having succumbed to one kind of conditioning or another. Part of the experience of going to East Germany was the transformation of a mythical, unpersonal, unreal place, into somewhere real with real people working hard for things they sincerely believed in.

In terms of research I soon found that I had to abandon any notions about methodical lines of inquiry that I held. Because such approaches could only be based on my preconceptions, they were greeted with with cynicism and unhelpfulness. As a visiting Westerner you are causing potential offence just by what you are; someone who is free to come and go, a romantic liberal attracted by the exoticism of the harshness of the Eastern Bloc. There is a term for Western visitors: "Butterfly"; brightly dressed, impossible to pin down, and only ever able to gain a superficial view of things.

Thus the only course open was to float and absorb, asking only those questions that fitted the atmosphere of the moment. This is not as random as it sounds; while being initially sceptical, the East Germans were also anxious to explain what it was like to live there, but in their own terms and not fitting in to someone else's preconceived pattern. Situated at the meeting point of two opposing propaganda systems and having access to both of them, East Berlin has got used to decades of facade: The face that the West presents to the East, the face that the East presents to the West, the face of the West that the East presents to the East, etc. East Berlin is a city that has become preoccupied with misinformation and misrepresentation.

In the summer of 1988 thirteen East German artists were exhibited in the Neues Kunstquartier, Wedding, West Berlin. This show was intended as a survey of the country's contemporary art scene, showcasing work that had not previously been seen in the West. One West German art journal described the show's reception as one of "bewilderment and suspicion".⁽¹⁾ What the show consisted of however was very similar to the recent DDR Venice Biennale shows; beautifully crafted oil on canvas, heavy historical and literary references - for example the gigantic classical paintings of Werner Tübke. Also the boat crossings, anxious faces of Rolf Handlen, the circus depictions of Angela Hampel, and an array of what could be considered typical Germanic depictions - grotesque faces with swollen lips and empty eyes - grossness, decadence, fallacy. (see illustration).

This exhibition was no survey but a selection of the very elite of DDR art; the work of the state professionals (Werner Tabke is the head of the Dresden art school) - selected with the intention of giving a specific *IMPRESSION* to the West and as such is only one element in a far more complex picture.

I met two East german painters now living in West Berlin; Helmut Dill and Sighart Pohl. Dill was imprisoned twice and then finally expelled to the West after exhibiting works that were of a political nature; a painting of the damage of the pollution in Dresden and a painting about a political prisoner. He remarked that "Art is a mouthpiece of ideology and the restrictions I experience here in the West are similar to the DDR in the sense of what work gets shown. Work here (the West) is often pure speculation and there is no room for the individual. In the DDR the style of the art is free but there are still limitations placed upon themes. Also you are still seen as ideologically subversive if you are not using socialist realism ". His reaction to the art school system was that he did not mind producing propaganda because it helped him to learn his skill. He is a dedicated socialist but condemns the militarism of the DDR.

Sighart Pohl, who is a landscape painter, spent ten years trying to obtain short term visas to visit exhibitions in the West. This persistence led to blacklisting and he was subsequently prohibited from visiting any Eastern bloc country. He was taken off a train bound for Prague where he was taking part in an exhibition, imprisoned, then later sent to the West.

His reason for wanting to go was that he finds it essential for an artist to see things in their real environment as he feels painting is more than pure representation.

On a different note is Wolfgang Mask, a professional painter living in East Berlin and nephew of the printmaker and painter Toni Mau. His view was that it was natural for an artist to take part in society and contribute to the fellowship with his/her skill and that any curtailment of artistic freedom caused by this contribution is the artist's duty to forsake.

Due to an apparent relaxation of the censorship laws and an easing of the 1970's habit of sending artists who became influential with their oppositional work to the West on a one way ticket, an avant garde has started to emerge. It is for the most part a semi underground phenomenon, existing on the fringes of society with many of its participants dissident and unemployed - a status unheard of and unable to exist within a socialist society. There is no discernable structure though the work whether it be visual or performing art, is political, critical, and about their own situation. Their main venue of activity is the church : the only institution with some autonomy from the state.

Torstan Schilling, an underground actor and poet from East Berlin, describes the difference between being an "alternative" (as he put it) in the West and an "alternative" in the East as "the difference between being put in a rubber cell and being put in a strait jacket".

His view of Western social democracy as being a form of organisation that is rapidly falling into the fascistic mode of the individual being alone responsible for his economic survival; thus the strait jacket.

One notable thing about the underground artists I met in East Germany was the level of their conviction, energy and enthusiasm. This was described by Schilling as: "The separation from a strong and dominant father is more traumatic and can leave you with a strong conviction and a need for independence which is painful to achieve but more necessary and crucial than a separation from a less strong authority." This, he says, is the reason for a lot of the work having a strong self expressive content but still a conservative form.

This returns us to notions of the ineffectiveness of the avant garde. What this scenario underlines is the importance of what they are doing for themselves at the time, rather than wondering about long term effects and delusions of their own importance.

As an alternative to the church as a venue, "Eigen (your own) Art" was set up by T.Schilling and Judy Lubke in 1988. Based in Leipzig it has managed to scan a wide area of East European art that would not otherwise have been exhibited. It exists without any state funding drawing most of its resources from the sale of what it terms "maps". These are limited edition books of prints; one from every artist who has exhibited in the gallery during the past year.

This would indicate a relaxation of the state's view concerning sale of work, although judging by the maps we were shown works that explicitly negates the state is avoided. Judy Lubke seems someone who has much more interest in the survival of an autonomous space than a romantic ~~Kami~~Kazee gesture.

I visited the gallery last November during its third anniversary celebrations. A West German TV crew was ^{there} to film an opening; they had just been invited by the state to organise an exhibition of work to be shown in Vienna this summer. Official sanction seems to have brought mixed benefits; on one hand the gallery's survival is assured, on the other it has been co-opted for the public relations uses of the state as another showcase of the continued growth of tolerance in the DDR. (see illustrations)

With Schilling I visited a Napoleonic monument in Leipzig and a town about 30km from there; Bitterweld. Both these he felt would tell me something about the uses art and culture have been put to in the DDR.

Bitterweld and its environs is one of the traditional industrial heartlands of the old Germany. After the war the UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) surveyed Bitterweld and found it unsafe for human habitation. We got off the train on a grey Sunday afternoon, empty streets, dark stained buildings, dusty air with an acid/ammonial taint that made the gums tingle and left a taste similar to copper sulphate in the mouth. From the station the houses quickly gave way to warehouses and stockyards then to vast rambling rusting chemical plants, interspersed with railway sidings and patches of half bleached, half blackened grass and scrub.

Trails of vividly coloured smoke hung low in the air.

The point about Bitterweld is this; for generations it has been notorious for pollution, bad air, and industrial disease. However, as one of the major sources of chemicals it was essential to the country's economy. The state solution was to deploy its artists into the production of a propaganda campaign known as the Bitterfelderweg or "The Bitterfeld Road"; the message being that to live and work there was the ultimate gesture for the revolution. Artists were sent to work in the factories so as to gain background knowledge with which to make art in the spirit of the Bitterfelderweg. The examples of this . . . still extant in the town were vast iron, wallmounted, pieces; in style somewhere between futurism and constructivism, intended as hymns to industry and productivity. I am told that in the '50s and early '60s huge posters and murals depicting the glorious, vital, workers of the Bitterweld were commonplace. I asked who worked here now; "Poles", I was told with a shrug of the shoulders. Thus economics is perhaps the stronger of the two methods of recruitment.

We waited in the station concourse for a train back to Brrlin. Above the doorway to the platforms shone a lonely neon; "freiheit" (Freedom) it said (see illustrations).

Within state policies a desire to cultivate a sense of history as a further stabilising force is discernible. With the old order went the old history, but certain artefacts were retained and reinvested with a new meaning.

On the outskirts of Leipzig is a huge mausoleum-like edifice decorated with massive brooding knights resting on their swords. This was built after the defeat of Napoleon on that spot by combined German, Russian and English forces. Its original intention would seem to have been as a tribute to the glory of Prussian/Saxonian military might, there being no indication that anyone else besides the Germans and Napoleon were involved. However since the foundation of the DDR it has become a recommended tourist attraction (When we were there we met two busloads of Russian tourists). It is now a symbol of the age old friendship between Russia and Germany. (see illustrations)

As a way of summarising I would like to look briefly at two further uses of public space by the state. Throughout the DDR an image mode borrowed from consumer society is employed. Neon is used as a symbol of power and progress, hinting perhaps at a certain self consciousness on the part of the DDR with regard to the proximity of West Germany. (Everyone has a glamourised notion of the West). However since there is nothing to advertise the neons are often completely abstract in form; series of geometric shapes, sequentially arranged or single uncontextualised words emblazoned; (like the "Freiheit" neon in Bitterfeld for example).

This displacement of a Western norm of society to a different arena would seem to underline exactly what the message from neon, and perhaps all advertising is: The promise of or assertion of a better way of life expressed in order to maintain the hegemony.

A further analogy could be drawn between the extensive use of murals within state socialism and the advertising billboard of the West. Not only are murals a popular art form accessible to everyone; just as *WITH BILLBOARDS IN THE WEST, EVERYONE IS ACCESSIBLE TO THEM*. Both are icon like, both are large enough to offer an alternative path, almost a magic door into a different, better reality. In both the ideals of the respective Utopias are made to hover, mirage like on the edges of perception. Their indoctrination is through osmosis, a perpetual background flicker; a subliminal refrain that is quickly taken as inevitable. They do not have to be recognised for what they actually portray more than once, henceforth seen at an angle as they usually are, they become abstract reminders of a message already received.

Perhaps, however, the two media function in opposite ways; the billboard, with its extensive use of the photograph has the illusion of truth, of a slice of time abstracted and encapsulated - within the image are real people - and their reality validates the message transmitted. Used within advertising the underlying message is always that this could be you.

On the other hand state socialism has opted more for the mystical power of the painted image. The message is not so much this could be you as, "we the state have come down to be among you".

CONCLUSION

In this essay I have moved from a generalised theoretical look at the relationship between art and state socialism to an attempt to suggest parallels emerging between the East and the post industrial West, to a seemingly contradictory section documenting some direct experiences of East Germany. I am confronted with a gap between theory and practice.

It is perversely comforting to sit back and theorise about the way things are going, to argue that any image produced will ultimately be reinforcing to the existing framework, to talk about assimilation, indoctrination and the effect on the world of the spread of centralisation and corporatism. What is difficult to do is to relate this to real experience and real people.

I find it impossible to wrap things up into a neat package; all that occurs to me are more questions, more contradictions. On one hand the institution "art" is no more than an image system that is always co-opted by the ascendant hegemony.

To quote Haraszoti:

"Susan Santag in her essay 'The Aesthetics of Silence' described a number of constraints on artists that led to silence, but she omitted one, the escape from the political option".

On the other art the activity is a vital thing, a means of achieving a degree of autonomy and self expression. To return to the remarks of T%orstan Schilling: "The seperation from a strong and dominant father is more traumatic....but more neccessary and more crucial than a separation from a less strong authority." Art can and does function as a means of gaining autonomy and self realisation, at least for those who make it.

Perhaps the one common link between all social systems is their aspirations to permanency, their adversity to change; change being ultimately destructive^{to} any structure. The modernist ideals of art as the innovator and herald of change would explain why, for instance, state socialism has been so methodical in its co-option of art. The chances are that the work of the present DDR underground will prove to be no more than further grist in the mill of the state, but does that negate all immediate value?

FOOTNOTES

Susan Santag, "The Aesthetics of Silence" from A SUSAN ~~S~~ONTAG READER

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ILLUSTRATIONS

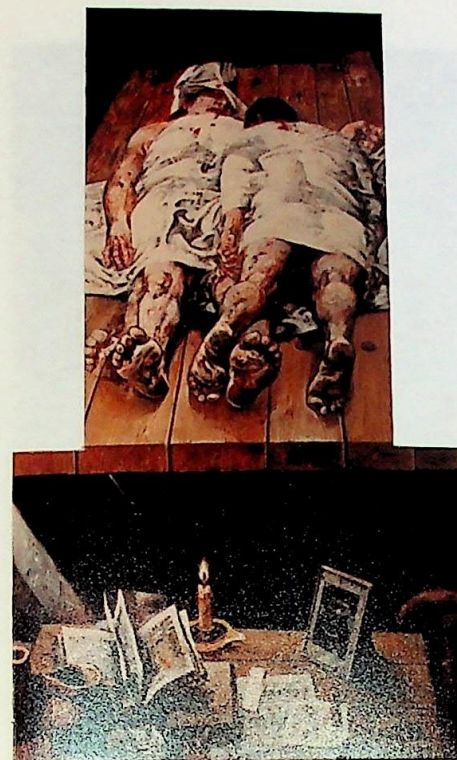
1. WORK OF EAST GERMAN STATE ARTISTS

2. WORK FROM "EIGEN-ART"

3. BITTERWELD

4. THE NAPOLEONIC MONUMENT: LEIPZIG

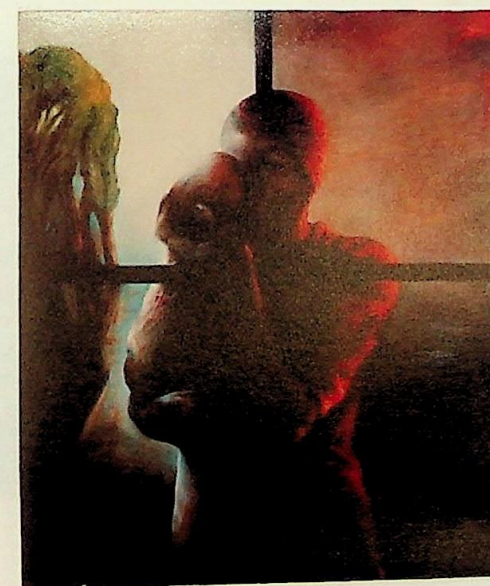
1.



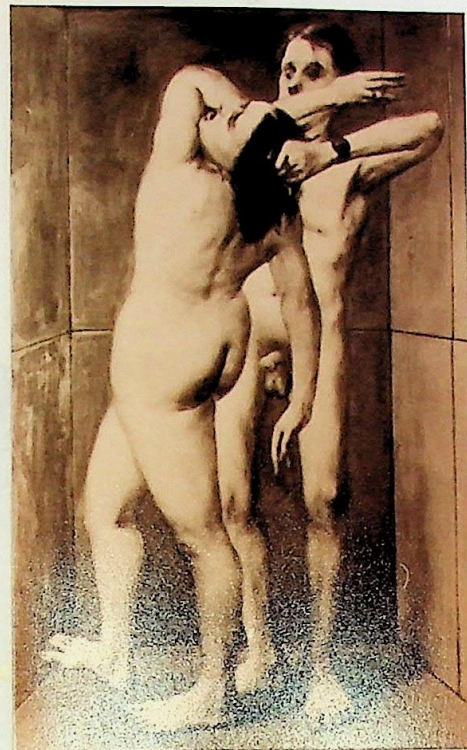
WILLE SITTE :
THEY ONLY WANTED TO TEACH HOW TO READ AND WRITE .



CLEMENS GROSZER :
THE DIABLO PLAYER



HEIDRUN HEGEWALD :
MOTHER WITH CHILD .



WOLFGANG PEUKER: WALLS



WERNER TÜBKE:
GREAT DEPOSITION FROM THE CROSS.

2.

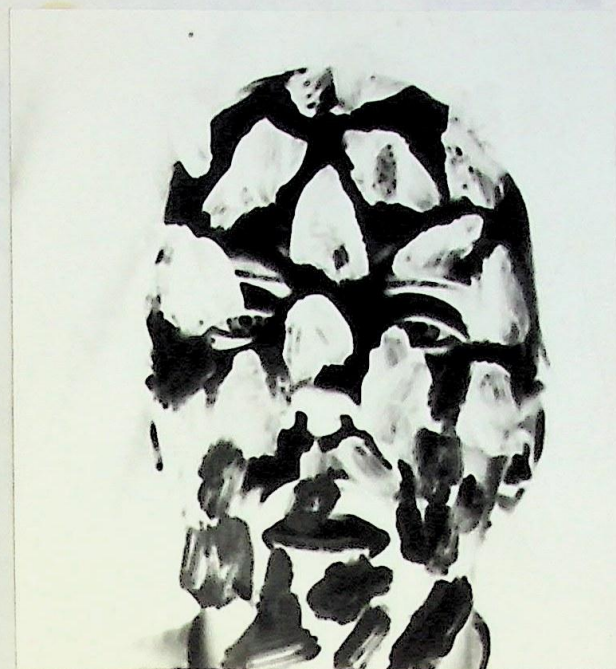
WORK FROM THE EIGEN-ART.











23.7.86 '26 cr/4

IMAGES FROM BITTERWELD.



BILLBOARD POSTER





4.

NAPOLÉONIC MONUMENT: LEIPZIG.





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