

Edited by Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen & Jacob Wamberg

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Totalitarian Art and Modernity

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5 WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO ERNST BARLACH? East German Political Monuments and the Art of Resistance

KRISTINE NIELSEN

INTRODUCTION

The twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Wall spurred a flurry of renewed interest in East German art, as shown most notably in the travelling international exhibition *Art of Two Germanys/Cold War Cultures*, in 2009-10.¹ This exhibition, curated by Stephanie Barron of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Eckhart Gillen of Kulturprojekte Berlin, examined the diverging artistic paths in East and West Germany and the artists' responses to the historical events of their time. The cover of its extensive exhibition catalogue and the banners promoting the show depict the making and installation of East Berlin's Marx and Engels monument. Formally and metaphorically, the photographs of the incomplete and transitional stages of the monument come to symbolise the cut between two Germanys, subsequently shaping a 'division of identity' (ill. 5.1).²



5.1. Banner for the exhibit *Art of Two Germanys/Cold War Cultures* outside the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2009). Photo: Kristine Nielsen.

Since *Art of Two Germanys* focused on both private and commissioned political art of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the exhibition brings to view contradictions that emerge when art linked to the East German regime and mass organisations is inserted into a canon of art defined according to Western parameters. In fact, the inclusion of commissioned political projects points to the ways in which the current art historical reception of East German art necessitates, at times and paradoxically, the effacement of a particular modernist tradition from which this art also draws its artistic inspiration. The current omission relates specifically to its official acceptance by the East German regime. Thus, this paper examines how two post-1989 institutions, in legislature and art respectively, have positioned two East German artworks within a new aesthetic framework by eschewing reference to the works' modernist source, in this case the art of the Expressionist sculptor Ernst Barlach.

This is not to say that Barlach, Käthe Kollwitz, Max Beckmann and other Weimar artists are not consistently listed as artistic influences in contemporary histories of East German art. Rather, the designation of that source is made selectively in accordance with an aesthetic goal that seeks to save East German images for Western art history. The first case examines a Berlin Senate Monument Committee report issued in 1993, which prevents a political monument by probably the most admired of all East German sculptors, Fritz Cremer: the Spain Fighter memorial in Berlin (1968, ill. 5.2), also known as Spain Fighter (*Spanienkämpfer*), from being destroyed or dismantled by designating it an artwork. Nominating the monument as such, according to the report's definition of art, requires that the committee forgo research into Cremer's artistic influence, namely Barlach's sculpture *The Avenger* (ill. 5.3). The second case explored in this paper involves the 2009-10 exhibition of the two photographs of the Marx and Engels monument used on the cover of the catalogue and the banners for *Art of Two Germanys*, as captured by the East German photographer Sibylle Bergemann in 1984-86 (ills. 5.5 and 5.6). In a similar fashion, various authors efface or ironise the trope of Barlach that underlies Bergemann's photograph of the installation of the monument. This displacement leads to the assurance of Bergemann's position as a subversive artist readily inserted into Western art history. The current institutional reception of Cremer's monument and Bergemann's photographs of the Marx and Engels monument manages to reframe them as an art of resistance to the East

German regime, an interpretation made possible precisely by ‘forgetting’ the East German appropriation and official acceptance of the art of Barlach after the late 1960s.

The integration of East German images into an inherently Western conception of art history clashes most vehemently with the shamelessly heroic political monuments of the former East German regime. These monuments led the Berlin Senate to set up a politically independent Senate Monument Committee in 1992-3 to evaluate East Berlin’s public memorials so as to determine which objects to preserve, modify or destroy. The criterion for the committee’s judgment was that a given memorial meet one of four specifications: it had to possess historical, scholarly or artistic value, or hold significance for the urban space on which it was sited. It is especially the assessment of artistic value that emerges as pertinent for the concerns of this paper, consequently requiring an initial investigation into the historical foundation for the conceptualisation of a public monument in East and West Germany.

CLASHING FORMS OF COMMEMORATION IN EAST AND WEST GERMANY, 1945-89

While one of the causes for the controversy about the East German political monuments after 1989 concerned the clashing concept of a monument’s proper function (e.g. should a political memorial serve to glorify or mourn a person or event?), another reason for the conflict involved contrasting notions of German identity and the proper image of the ‘nation’. If the idea of a nation is like a theatrical stage occupied by characters that reflect a preferred national identity, unwanted characters will eventually taint that performance. Thus, even when the legislation and administration surrounding the handling of GDR monuments after 1989 were fragmented and dispersed among local governments, departments, offices, districts and municipalities, one can discern how Germans on both the left and the right strove for an ideal and authoritative image of the state to guide the way.³ Berlin’s gigantic Lenin monument, dismantled in 1991-92, was one of the significant characters disrupting the stage performance, demonstrating as a result the crucial role of images in the culture of politics.

Indeed, in the years following World War II, West and East Germany developed markedly different ways of employing state imagery because of their distinct constructions of German memory.⁴

The Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) was at odds about the right way to handle a troubling national legacy, and so deliberately avoided too many political icons and symbols that might remind viewers of the recent National Socialist past. The response to the heroic monuments erected by the Nazi regime was a subsequent and general distrust of any type of glorification represented in political images. The result was that no heroic monuments, military parades or aggressive visual confirmations of a German identity were erected or performed after 1945. After forty years with limited monument production, memorials began to emerge more forcefully in West Germany in the 1980s, reflecting on German shame as the 'culprit nation'.⁵ However, theoretical reflections on monuments were already surfacing in the 1960s and 70s, alongside changing definitions of sculpture in art, involving an expansion of its field that admitted many kinds of structures such as architecture.⁶ Artists often negated the classical monument of victory through oppositional gestures, invoking ideas of the ephemeral, the non-decorative, the aniconic, the 'counter' and the 'negative-form' monument.⁷

In Western scholarship the distinction between the memorial ('Mahnmal' or 'Gedenkstätte') and the monument ('Denkmal') gained critical attention in the 1980s. Conceptually, the 'memorial' tends to commemorate tragedy and address victims of war, such as The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.⁸ The term 'monument', on the other hand, may describe statuary that glorifies an achievement or person. While these two terms are often used interchangeably and commemorative sites can serve both purposes simultaneously, a clear distinction remains in the preferred form of dedication in united Germany.⁹ The numerous recent public commemorations in Berlin function as mournful 'memorials' dedicated to victims, such as the infamous Holocaust Memorial ('Holocaust-Mahnmal') completed in 2005, officially entitled the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe ('Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas').¹⁰

In the GDR, fascism was negated or displaced as a character belonging to West Germany.¹¹ East German authorities initiated an approach to the staging of images which conceptually contrasted with, yet formally paralleled that of the National Socialists. In East Berlin, street names were thoroughly modified to reflect the iconoclastic inversion, using the names of communist heroes to replace the names and icons of Nazism. Initially, the East German state held

marches on national holidays, but slowly the celebrations and ceremonies became increasingly formalised displays, the leadership believing that this visualisation would influence or, at the very least, impress the spectators. The inauguration ceremonies for public monuments in the GDR were in many ways the ultimate visual claim for power. By the 1980s, the veneration of socialist heroes in public monuments had become one of the main agendas of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party (SED).¹² They were in all respects icons of official culture, and little weighed heavier in the state's cultural politics than its political statues.¹³ These official monuments were a way for the GDR to legitimise its existence and leave its mark on the urban landscape in the various cities across East Germany.¹⁴

After the creation of the East German state in 1949, the SED leadership projected grand visions onto the capital of Berlin. According to the Third Party Congress of the SED, in 1950, the plan for the rebuilding of the capital was to create a city centre for ceremonies and demonstrations, where the city's great monuments and architecture would be given a central position.¹⁵ Where the original conception of East Berlin's Thälmann monument, honouring the German antifascist Ernst Thälmann, involved the confrontation with Hitler's former Reich chancellery on Wilhelmstrasse; the original idea behind the Marx and Engels monument (ill. 5.4) was that it would iconoclastically replace the dismantled equestrian statue of Wilhelm I, formerly situated in front of Frederick I's royal city palace on Unter den Linden. In 1950, the main square in front of the royal palace was renamed 'Marx-Engels-Platz' and, later that year, the leader Walter Ulbricht, aided by Erich Honecker, who would become Ulbricht's successor, began the complete destruction of the ruins of the Prussian city palace. To manifest their victory, the first great mass demonstration of the state took place on the new square the following year.¹⁶ The destruction of the old images would occur, then, simultaneously with the production of new images of which the state monuments played a crucial part.

While other parties did exist, the SED governed the state single-handedly. This meant that in the visual arts, a rigid hierarchy controlled the decision-making on public monuments. In the 1980s, the SED leadership began refashioning the state's image of an East German heritage, as made evident by the re-introduction of the Prussian past. In 1983, the equestrian statue of Friedrich II was re-locat-

ed on Unter den Linden in East Berlin and inserted into the political memory of an East German state. But despite a re-conceptualisation of historical representation in the GDR, combined with changing attitudes toward the visual arts, several structural aspects of official monument production changed little in the forty years of the state's existence.¹⁷

Firstly, the guidelines of the cultural politics remained fundamentally the same and in agreement with the procedures of the Soviet Union. Secondly, as stated, all cultural activities were planned by the Politburo and Central Committee of the SED and followed a rigid hierarchy. Thirdly, the state's cultural politics were to be legible and visible at all times in state monuments, as no separation of culture and politics was desired.¹⁸ Lastly, the language of cultural-political speeches and writings always entailed a limited and pre-established terminology.¹⁹ The focus on a set terminology in speeches was particularly notable in the formal address at inaugural ceremonies for political monuments.²⁰

The function of the political monuments in the GDR followed a standardised script for honouring heroes over victims, and it is precisely this triumphant character that clashed most forcefully with West German conceptions of the public monument. Even GDR memorials to the fallen victims of fascism contained an element of the victorious, since the memorial would honour individuals and groups because they fought for a better (communist) future.²¹ The death of a hero (the communist leader Thälmann, for instance) involved his transformation into an icon that served as the future hope for the state. The Nazi concentration camps became especially important as sites for monuments that commemorated the victims of fascism, but also honoured future heroes for their brave resistance. Such monuments functioned as an East German gesture of triumph conveying hope for the future. Thus, both before and after the collapse of the GDR, Western-minded viewers disapproved of the SED regime's victorious state monuments. West Germans distrusted the authoritarian monument with its one-way form of communication; while the socialist monuments were perceived as ridiculous impositions, both aesthetically and politically.

The self-importance given to the veneration of the political monuments by the SED leadership makes their post-1989 condemnation as embarrassing and perverse appear almost destined to happen. Yet, the evaluation of the political monuments of the GDR was a his-

torically necessary process after 1989, and the ethics of their visibility and presence in museum exhibitions and the urban landscape became primary concerns. The East German regime's objective in the animation of its tradition, as imbedded in a political monument, was to affirm the commemorative value of the nation's heritage, even if the animated components highlighted particular aspects over others. From the view of the East German state and Party, the GDR's state monument represented the nation's true legacy. For the state and Party, there were no myths involved. In contrast, in the West, the function of a state monument commemorating the past must be truthful to the historical facts rather than faithful to a legacy. History, as privileged in the West, concerns the recording and preserving of facts; whereas heritage aims to secure value.²² Consequently, the function of an historical monument in the West is to memorialise an event with respect to the known facts, concerned as it is with historical accuracy. The objective of the East German state monument was to embed a past event with value so as to enrich that experience. Competing claims for German history and the conception of an authoritative image provoked Berliners in the early 1990s. They sought people seeking to correct what they perceived as myths depicted in many of the East German political monuments and so expose the false ideas represented in them. It is the very concept of truth as represented by a monument that comes to view in the handling of Cremer's Spain Fighter.

ART AS TRUTH? FRITZ CREMER'S SPAIN FIGHTER

In the spring of 1992, the Berlin Senate established a politically independent committee with the purpose of examining the over 400 commemorative symbols – statues, tablets, stones, plaques, busts and stelae – erected in East Berlin after 1945. Berlin's Senator for City Development and the Senator for Cultural Affairs selected the members of the committee based on their expertise regarding Berlin's monuments. The participants (six from former East Berlin, four from West Berlin) were art historians, curators, artists, architects, historians, district politicians, urban planners and monument conservators. In the winter of 1993, the committee issued its report. The determination of a monument's historical value was the committee's primary criterion for the evaluation of East Berlin's political monuments, judged on the basis of the monument's representation of history as well as the authenticity of its location. Any falsification



5.2. Fritz Cremer, Monument to the German Participants in the Spanish Civil War (1968), bronze. Berlin. Photo: Kristine Nielsen.

of an historical event merited the image's or plaque's destruction or removal from the urban landscape. Most ambiguous of all of their criteria was the evaluation of a monument as worthy of protection because of its artistic value, and among the monuments recommended for preservation because of their artistic merit was Cremer's Spain Fighter (ill. 5.2). The committee's designation of a monument as 'art' was one of the safest ways to protect its existence in Berlin's urban landscape, and much is at stake, then, in a monument meeting the aesthetic standard. The 1993 committee report views art as a sphere in which artists are free to create works without ties in 'ridiculous detail' to commissions.²³ In the GDR, the report notes, the demand was that artists adopt political subjects uncritically for the sake of socialism, an approach that was 'fatal'.²⁴ The GDR monuments are 'predominantly without great artistic significance', argues the report, adding that, '[t]he committee sees therefore no reason to pre-

serve every monument'.²⁵ There is an ethical necessity involved in the report's dismissal of aesthetic significance. As a valuable object, art raises the cultural and historical importance of the period in which it was produced. It would be morally unsound to promote the remains of a culture controlled by a dictatorship, which censored the visual arts and imposed its own strict cultural politics on artists. In this sense, the report relies on the notion that false political content destroys aesthetic form. The issue is that of ethics inextricably bound to the politics of memory in present-day Germany, for one cannot *not* be astutely critical of the cultural remains of a former dictatorship comprising part of recent German history.

The status of the GDR artist before 1989 was an important consideration in the report's criterion concerning artistic value. Was the artist well respected among other artists and the intelligentsia in East Germany? Did the sculptor exhibit a degree of independence and resistance, despite the rigid cultural politics of the SED regime? One example of an East Berlin political monument that the report designates as art is, as mentioned, Cremer's Monument to the German Participants in the Spanish Civil War. The commissioners of this monument were the municipality of East Berlin and the Committee of Antifascist Resistance Fighters, and Cremer's task was to commemorate the German volunteers fighting with the International Brigades against fascism in Spain, during the years 1936–39, with the German communist volunteers losing the battle to the fascists.

The Senate Monument Committee report concludes that Cremer's monument holds artistic merit and should be preserved for that reason. They recommended, however, that the text plate next to the monument be removed or modified with a critical commentary.²⁶ This decision to preserve the monument yet censor the accompanying text plate raises the question as to why one component of the monument was acceptable while another was not. The crucial difference between image and word in this case lies, according to the committee report, in their respective interpretation of the historical events surrounding the German International Brigades and their defeat by the Spanish Nationalists.

The founding myth of the GDR, as aptly illustrated by the textual plate, conveyed that the death of heroes serves the future of the nation as a triumphant state. The communists who volunteered in the International Brigades were incorporated into the GDR's found-

ing myth, in which the state's political victory against fascists was made to appear imminent. Defeat would be overcome, for the Spain Fighters were the heroes of the nation, and they led the way for GDR citizens toward future victory. Consequently, when the text plate next to Cremer's monument states 'The model for our youth in our Socialist fatherland', the Senate Monument Committee designates these words a 'falsification of history'. The false message of the textual plate was that of communist victory, despite the facts of the actual events which culminated in loss. In contrast, the committee interprets Cremer's statue quite differently, seeing in it the symbolic futility of the resistance fighters. The soldier balances on one knee with his fist paradoxically obstructing his own view. The weight of the monument is heaviest at the front, hence signalling the soldier's eventual fall.²⁷ In an artistically skilled manner, Cremer's image symbolises the tragedy of the events, argues the report, whereby Cremer's memorial remains historically accurate.

The historical accuracy and by extension artistic value of the image becomes a precarious argument, however, when one takes into consideration Cremer's own interpretation of his monument as stated in 1971:

I happily took over the commission. This memorial is a symbol of our high regard for the legacy of the fight of the Spanish people and the International Brigades. The fighter is invincible; rising from the trenches with extreme energy, ready to attack. Even if he must yield to the superiority for a while, his force, the force of the proletarian internationalism, remains unbroken!²⁸

Cremer expressed how his statue moves forward symbolically, conveying the continued fight and victory over fascism. He had hoped that his monument would evoke in viewers a readiness to fight for the cause: 'The fight is not over. It carries on', says Cremer about his monument in 1968.²⁹

Does Cremer's soldier symbolise the loss of balance and eventual fall of the International Brigades, as argued by the Senate Monument Committee in 1993? Or does he signify forward movement, the forcefulness and invincibility of the antifascists, as conveyed by the artist in 1971? Does the Spain fighter's fist obstruct his view, or does it formally stress the preference for a frontal view of the sculpture so that the strength of his clenched fist would be visually maximised? The symbol of the clenched fist had strong political resonance in the GDR, linked as it was to Thälmann. Indeed, Cremer

was initially inspired by pictures of a soldier from the Thälmann Battalion of the International Brigades surging from the trenches.³⁰

One might also argue for a third interpretation of the monument: Cremer was playfully operating with a semantic ambivalence allowing for both interpretations, his official account of his Spain Fighter monument being disingenuous in order to hide his real pictorial message from his political commissioners. The problem with this reading is that it would be completely out of character for an artist infamous for speaking his mind freely, at inopportune moments and without fear of the consequences, much to the annoyance of the GDR leadership. Cremer was a consistent taboo-breaker.³¹ He never hid his contempt for the colossal monuments to Lenin and Thälmann, or the absurdity of persistently hiring Soviet artists for German artworks.³² Even if the GDR department of agitation and propaganda had censored his words for the 1971 booklet in which the citation appears, the artist's intentions are difficult to misconstrue. The image commemorates, according to Cremer, the rising and unconquerable force of the antifascists. His artistic intentions were most likely in full accordance with the textual plate labelled by the committee as unworthy of monument protection because of its falsification of history.

The Berlin Senate financed the restoration of Cremer's monument in 1992, and the original text plate was later removed and replaced by a plate stating only the historical facts: 'Memorial to the German International Brigades, Spain, 1936-1939'. Cremer's sculpture is, then, an artwork according to the Senate Monument Committee because it is viewed as a mournful memorial rather than a victorious monument, skillfully portraying 'a doomed fight rather than glorified heroism'.³³

THE EAST GERMAN APPROPRIATION OF BARLACH

Cremer's Spain Fighter was inspired by Barlach's *The Avenger* from 1914 (ill. 5.3).³⁴ Barlach had considered his avenger, an unstoppable force and a righteous depiction of defence in war.³⁵ The sculpture had also expressed Barlach's nationalist sentiments at the onset of World War I, thus emerging as an exception in Barlach's artistic oeuvre, which predominantly operates with the conviction that art and politics do not mix: 'Nothing can be more certain than that art is not subject to the strictures of a political view of the world'.³⁶ If one interprets *The Avenger* as being concerned with an abstraction deal-



5.3. Ernst Barlach, *The Avenger* (1914), later cast, bronze. Güstrow, Ernst Barlach Stiftung.

ing with a ‘transcendental act’ or ‘force of nature’ fighting for justice, then one can more readily accept the content and form of the sculpture as a relevant source for Cremer’s monument, argues Cremer’s biographer Gerd Brüne. He finds the same symbolic character in Cremer’s Spain Fighter, as evidenced by the soldier holding a sword rather than a rifle.³⁷ But Cremer’s stylistic appropriation of Barlach’s sculpture must also be understood within a larger history of East German art that transforms Barlach into a trope with stakes in both art and politics.

While Barlach was most active in the first two decades of the 20th century, he retained his popularity to a degree during the early years of the Third Reich. The Nazi authorities (especially Goebbels) did not initially question his artistic abilities, and nor did they criticise the formal language of his sculptures. Instead, it was the content of his art that the regime soon criticised as un-German and ‘destructive modernism’.³⁸ The problem with the content of much of Barlach’s art was its apolitical stance in relation to fascism, harbouring an emotionalism, individualism and sense of mourning that was difficult to integrate into the victorious nature of Nazi art.³⁹ As an avid defender of the autonomy of artistic creation, Barlach refused to explicitly convey an aestheticisation of politics which was vital to the

apparent success of the Nazi regime. By 1936, two years before his death, Barlach was under constant scrutiny by the authorities and many of his bronze sculptures had been dismantled or melted down.

After World War II, art exhibitions in the East funded by the SED regime included works by Die Brücke as well as Kollwits and Ernst Barlach, yet these were now reframed as politically active artists and incorporated into a longstanding socio-critical tradition of Realism.⁴⁰ In the work of Kollwits and Barlach, East German artists and art historians found a reference to the German proletarian art of the 1920s; and Expressionism consequently allowed East German artists to make a compromise between the artists' desired artistic autonomy and an attempt to satisfy the cultural politics of the SED leadership.⁴¹ Despite the SED Party's official negation of Barlach in 1951, because he expressed an unacceptable 'subjective emotionality' in a social realm where art's purpose was to be in the service of science, artists and art historians found ways to negotiate the line between modernist art and the political system nevertheless. By the mid 1960s, Expressionism had become an acceptable visual language to the SED leadership, once again conceptualised as a legitimate socialist art that rejected bourgeois society. In 1967/68, then, when Fritz Cremer produced his Spain Fighter monument, the art of the Expressionists was a favorite visual quote among contemporary East German artists and art historians, allowing Cremer to address an artistic tradition of modern art and, at the same time, politically assert the humane ideas of socialism, the GDR's heritage, and the triumph of justice to come. Because Barlach's *The Avenger* supports Cremer's intention to depict a heroic fighter surging from the trenches, the acceptance of Cremer's monument as a 'work of art' by the Senate Monument Committee in 1993 necessitates a 'forgetting' of the role of Ernst Barlach as an artistic source.

SIBYLLE BERGEMANN'S MARX AND ENGELS MONUMENT

The negotiations between a modernist tradition and Party guidelines for art continued in the 1970s and 80s, a period when the political elite permitted a greater variety in the visual arts. The 1986 Marx and Engels monument in Berlin serves as an example of such negotiations (ill. 5.4). Commissioned by the Central Committee of the SED and guided by the East German sculptor Ludwig Engelhardt, the monument ensemble on the Marx and Engels Forum echoes

several styles, including the art of Barlach as well as the Constructivists, at least conceptually, a Moscow-Berlin artistic connection prior to Stalin's programme of Socialist Realism.⁴² While using Expressionism and Constructivism, the artists of the Marx and Engels Forum managed to please and adhere to the ideology and cultural-political preferences of Party officials in the 1980s through the installation's content, which narrates the global struggle of the proletariat towards revolution as led by the science of Marxism-Leninism.⁴³

Rather than considering the modernist influences in the Marx and Engels installation, the reception of this state monument after the collapse of the GDR preferred a different and curiously teleological representation, seeing it as a symbol of the last and futile phase of GDR history.⁴⁴ An essay by Eugen Blume and Roland März in the catalogue for the 2003 exhibition *Kunst in der DDR*, held at the New National Gallery in Berlin, turns the Marx and Engels monument into the image of the state's collapse.⁴⁵ They accuse the makers of the Marx and Engels installation of 'false deification' of the his-



5.4. Ludwig Engelhardt, Marx and Engels monument (1986), bronze. Berlin. Photo: Kristine Nielsen.

torical persona of Marx and Engels, and in an effort to illustrate this point they refer to the series of images by Bergemann. Bergemann had followed the creation and installation of Engelhardt's Marx and Engels monument and captured various moments during its production and installation in Berlin.⁴⁶ Blume and März argue that her photographs disavow the statue and its 'ridiculous' and 'propagandistic' form.⁴⁷ The interpretation of Bergemann's photographs of the Marx and Engels monument in the exhibit *Art of Two Germanys / Cold War Cultures* is more refined but still noticeably rooted in the idea of her disavowal of the regime's programme. Indeed, her photographs come to represent the art exhibition as a whole – not only on the cover of the catalogue, but also on the banners outside the museum promoting the show. The catalogue cover pictures Bergemann's 1984 photograph of the Marx and Engels monument as a plaster cast where the upper bodies of Marx and Engels were still unfinished and unassembled, creating an eerie incompleteness or ghost-like presence because the identity of the two men remains unknown. The museum banners, on the other hand, show Bergemann's 1986 photograph of the sculpture of Engels as it is being installed on the square with a rope around its torso, thus seemingly dangling from the air and formally dividing the picture plane into two halves (ill. 5.1).

Bergemann's framed photographs were included in the *Art of Two Germanys* exhibition in a gallery room dedicated to the artistic and social criticism of the 1980s in East and West Germany. This room, entitled '1980-1989 Manic Normality in Germany', argued rather ambiguously that the preservation of routines took on a 'manic character' during this decade. The theme of the gallery also aimed to show how the SED regime slowly permitted more public criticism, which became a catalyst for change eventually leading to the end of the Cold War. Thus, Bergemann's two photographs, comprising the frontispiece for the exhibit as a whole, come to represent social and artistic criticism before the collapse of the GDR. In the catalogue one reads that:

Sibylle Bergemann's photographs reveal another insidious side of the GDR, through her use of the uncanny. In one picture of the installation of the Marx-Engels monument in Berlin, Engels appears to hang facedown from a noose. In another shot showing a construction site in Gummelin, the figures look like human bodies cut cleanly in half. Without knowledge of the dates these

photographs were taken, one could readily presume that they are documents of Communist monuments being dismantled. But more importantly, the division of identity that they suggest still resonates today.⁴⁸

The monument's inception looks prophetically to its potential demolition, while the curators use the images to refer metaphorically to the two Germanys. What remains unexplored is the message of Bergemann's images before this recent interpretation. Would an examination of pre-1989 relations justify the conclusions that her photographs are a disavowal of the SED's propaganda art, as the exhibition *Kunst in der DDR* argued? Would it confirm the 'insidious' message about the GDR in her photographs, as claimed by *Art of Two Germanys*?

Bergemann, a fashion photographer, was commissioned by the Ministry of Culture of the GDR to document the creation of the Marx and Engels monument, from the winter of 1975 until its installation on the Forum in the spring of 1986. The Ministry of Culture used some of her early photographs from her collection on the monument-in-progress for their public exhibition about the Marx and Engels



5.5. Sibylle Bergemann, *Untitled (Gummlin)* (May 1984), photograph. © Sibylle Bergemann/Ostkreuz.



5.6. Sibylle Bergemann, *Untitled (Berlin)* (February 1986), photograph. © Sibylle Bergemann/Ostkreuz.

Forum in 1983.⁴⁹ In the 1984 photograph of plaster casts of Marx and Engels, *Untitled (Gummlin)*, showing only the lower parts of their bodies, they are fixed with strings to the board on which they stand (ill. 5.5). Because their cast, unfinished bodies are abruptly cut at the waist, the clouds behind them seem to hide their upper bodies, making it appear as if their heads are in the clouds. The sky was often used as the appropriate background for officially sanctioned monuments in the GDR, as it implied monumentality and a connection with the divine. Bergemann's image could be suggesting that if the strings were not holding the statues of Marx and Engels to the ground, these gods would rise to the heavens. Bergemann's own 1993 interpretation would appear to be in alignment with such a reading, for the theme of the divine reappears when some of her photographs were reprinted in the journal *Daidalos*. Bergemann entitles her photograph of Marx and Engels with their heads in the clouds 'Götterklein' ('Morsels of Gods').⁵⁰ Rather than being brought to the ground, Marx and Engels are elevated metaphorically to the skies in Bergemann's picture of the plaster casts of Marx and Engels.



5.7. Ernst Barlach, *The Güstrow Memorial* (1927), bronze. Güstrow, Cathedral.

Bergemann's photograph from February 1986, *Untitled (Berlin)*, capturing the moment that the bronze cast of Engels is being installed on the Forum, depicts the stiff and horizontally lifted bronze body of Engels hanging from a the rope of a crane (ill. 5.6). But is Engels hanging 'face down from a noose' (as *Art of Two Germanys* claims) if one takes into consideration that Bergemann's image is a visual reference to Barlach's bronze figure of a floating angel, the Güstrow Memorial from 1927? (ill. 5.7)⁵¹ Barlach's statue hung in the Cathedral of Güstrow suspended from the ceiling. His commissioned memorial commemorated the 234 members of the congregation killed in World War I, but he memorialised it in such a way as to stress the tragedy of the event while ignoring any message of heroic duty or service to the nation. Consequently, his memorial conveyed a non-patriotic sentiment which was considered unacceptable to many, especially the National Socialists.⁵² The bronze statue was confiscated by the Nazis in 1937 and melted down in the early 1940s. Like Barlach's angel, Bergemann's figure of Engels ('Engel' in German means angel) appears elevated above the earth and below

the heavens. In 1986, Bergemann's image of Engels in a tilted position, floating in mid-air, suggested the communist hero's affinity with the divine. The implication is that Bergemann quoted Barlach in order to endow the figure of Engels with the aura and sacredness of Barlach's no longer existent angel, thus in a sense resurrecting a legacy.

The GDR writer Heiner Müller's book of poetry, *Ein Gespenst verlässt Europa* from 1990, includes Bergemann's photos of the Marx and Engels statues reproduced at the end of the book. The book's title is a reference to the very first line of *The Communist Manifesto*, 'A spectre is haunting Europe', only Müller modifies the line to 'A spectre leaves Europe'.⁵³ Müller's 1990 juxtaposition of his critical poetry and Bergemann's photographs of the Marx and Engels monument recast her photographs as images that clarify Müller's words. Because of the poetry's political emphasis, Bergemann's images come to be read as satire of the SED regime, or even a 'parody' of Barlach's angel, according to the East German film director Peter Voigt in 1990. Voigt was also commissioned by the regime to assist in the production of the monument installations on the Marx and Engels Forum during the 1980s.⁵⁴ But to what extent did Bergemann 'parody' Barlach's angel in 1986, and what would such a parody entail, taking into account the immense respect that East German artists held for Barlach?

Indeed, did Bergemann possess the same political interests as Müller and express that agenda in her photographs before 1989? Müller's political interests were exposed as far from clear when, in 1992, the Stasi files were opened to the public. It became known rather than merely suspected that Müller, like other GDR writers, had collaborated with the Stasi. Müller had worked in support of the SED regime, while simultaneously claiming his resistance. The regime had given him gifts in exchange for conformist literature, which included some criticism of the regime, yet maintained the political system nonetheless. While other writers expressed their disappointment in Müller, his own reaction to the charges remained ambivalent. My point in reviving a twenty-year old controversy is not to judge Müller once again or even Bergemann for the compromises they may or may not have made, but to question why it has become pivotal for current artistic exhibitions to claim Bergemann as a subversive artist when the evidence of her practice before 1989 could just as easily suggest otherwise.

SAVING EAST GERMAN IMAGES FOR ART

In many ways, the stakes involved in the current re-appropriation of Bergemann's photographs concern the definition of art. The view on art as necessarily autonomous believes that true art can only be produced with the artist's freedom to express his or her creativity without political restraints and guidelines. By representing Bergemann as a dissident, then, *Kunst in der DDR* had a particular mission in mind. Focusing primarily on paintings, the catalogue and exhibition portrays the category of the visual arts as a sphere where there is no place for commissioned political projects.⁵⁵ Despite its more diplomatic approach to commissioned GDR works, *Art of Two Germanys/Cold War Cultures* remains nonetheless dedicated, however subtly expressed, to the idea that good art is independent of a political commissioner and resistant to an oppressive political regime.

Describing a GDR photographer employed by the Party as sincerely aligning herself with the cultural politics of the SED regime in the 1980s would seem to unnecessarily complicate her status as an artist today. Indeed, few living artists who were active in the GDR would announce their compliance with or belief in the political goals of the former regime, as they wish to forget and dissociate themselves from the past. This belies the fact that well-respected East German artists were often proud of their state political commissions. There was never a shortage of GDR artists more than willing to undertake a politically motivated commission by the state or Party.⁵⁶ The goals of artists in the GDR were more compliant and sympathetic to various aspects of the politics in the GDR than current historiography tends to admit. The recent trend in the reception of East German art thus imposes a discursive form onto the visual arts which seeks to save artists for Western art history by placing them in the category of subversive GDR artists. The result is that the history of art of East Germany is being re-written as a history of and tribute to resistance. The interpretive development in the historiography of Barlach toward political affiliation provides an ironic twist to the events, when taking into consideration that Barlach himself was an avid defender of the autonomy of artistic creation. The trope of Barlach, which allowed East German artists a space of freedom to address a modernist tradition of autonomous art, is now too easily associated with its apparent opposite, with antifascism and the cultural policies of the SED regime.

NOTES

- 1 *Art of Two Germanys: Cold War Cultures*, Los Angeles County Museum, Los Angeles, 2009; Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg, 2009; Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, 2009–10.
- 2 Stephanie Barron and Sabine Eckmann (eds.), *Art of Two Germanys: Cold War Cultures* (exh. cat.), Los Angeles County Museum et al., pp. 344–45.
- 3 With regard to German concerns, Jürgen Habermas argues against nationalism and the ‘normalisation’ of the German past promoted by German nationalists after 1989, preferring, instead, that Germans consider 1945 as the turning point away from nationalism. Jürgen Habermas, *A Berlin Republic: Writings on Germany*, trans. Steven Rendall (University of Nebraska Press; Lincoln, 1997; German 1st edn. 1967), pp. 161–81.
- 4 For an analysis of the divided German constructions of memory after Nazism, see Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanies* (Harvard University Press; Cambridge, 1997); Mary Nolan, ‘The Politics of Memory in the Bonn and Berlin Republic’, in Daniel Walkowitz and Lisa Maria Knauer (eds.), *Memory and the Impact of Political Transformation in Public Space* (Duke University Press; Durham and London, 2004).
- 5 The literature on the subject of memory and monument is enormous. To mention a limited few that focus on Berlin after German reunification, see Karen E. Till, *The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place* (University of Minnesota Press; Minneapolis and London, 2005); Jennifer A. Jordan, *Structures of Memory: Understanding Urban Change in Berlin and Beyond* (Stanford University Press; Stanford, 2006); Peter Carrier, *Holocaust Monument and National Memory: France and Germany since 1989* (Bergham Books; New York and Oxford, 2003).
- 6 Annette Tietenberg, ‘Denkmalpraxis in Ost- und West Berlin. Zum Denkmalbegriff’, in Eberhard Elfert et al. (eds.), *Erhalten, zerstören, verändern? Denkmäler der DDR in Ost-Berlin. Eine dokumentarische Ausstellung* (exh. cat.), Aktives Museum Faschismus und Widerstand in Berlin and Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, Berlin, 1990, p. 19.
- 7 James Young, ‘The Counter-Monument: Memory Against Itself in Germany Today’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 2, 1992, pp. 267–86; Walter Grasskamp (ed.), *Unerwünschte Monumente: Moderne Kunst im Stadtraum* (Silke Schreiber; Munich, 1992 [1989]); Michael Diers (ed.), *Mo(nu)mente: Formen und Funktionen ephemerer Denkmäler* (Akademie Verlag; Berlin, 1992); Felix Reusse, *Das Denkmal an der Grenze seiner Sprachfähigkeit* (Klett Cotta; Stuttgart, 1995).
- 8 Arthur Danto, ‘The Vietnam Veterans Memorial’, *The Nation*, August 31, 1986, p. 152. Young disputes Danto’s claim that any intrinsically formal difference exists in the function of a monument and a memorial. James Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (Yale University Press; New Haven, 1993), p. 3.
- 9 To Heinrich, ‘Denkmal’ remains the overarching term for all forms of commemoration. Christoph Heinrich, *Strategien des Erinnerns: Der veränderte Denkmalbegriff in der Kunst der achtziger Jahre* (Silke Schreiber; Munich, 1993), pp. 7 and 17. In contrast, Young chooses ‘memorial’ as the broader, more general term while he reserves ‘monument’ for the subset category that defines ‘material objects, sculptures, and installations used to memorialize a person or thing’. James Young, *The Texture of Memory*, p. 4.
- 10 Here ‘Denkmal’ is the broader category and umbrella term for forms of commemoration. The memorial is infamous for the many controversies surrounding it: the hiring of a firm that collaborated with the Nazis; the commemoration of Jews specifically and not the many minorities that were also persecuted and killed; and the randomly chosen location for the memorial. For the debates surrounding the monument, see Bürgerinitiative Perspektive Berlin (ed.), *Ein Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas: Dokumentation, 1988–1999* (Berlin, March 1995); Sybille Quack (ed.), *Auf dem Weg zur Realisierung. Das Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas und der Ort der Information. Architektur und historisches Konzept* (Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt; Stuttgart, 2002).
- 11 See for example Peter Reichel, ‘Berlin nach 1945 – eine Erinnerungslandschaft zwischen Gedächtnis-Verlust und Gedächtnis-Inszenierung’, in Hermann Hipp and Ernst Seidl (eds.), *Architektur als politischer Kultur: Philosophia practica* (Dietrich Reimer; Berlin, 1996); Herfried Münkler, ‘Das Kollektive Gedächtnis der DDR’, in Dieter Vorsteher (ed.), *Parteiauftrag: Ein neues Deutschland. Bilder, Rituale und Symbole der frühen DDR* (exh. cat.), Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, 1996; Monika Flacke and Urike Schmiegelt, ‘Deutsche Demokratische Republik. Aus dem Dunkel zu den Sternen: Ein Staat im Geiste des Antifaschismus’, in Monika Flacke (ed.), *Mythen der Nationen: 1945-Arena der Erinnerungen: eine Ausstellung des Deutschen Historischen Museums ...* (exh. cat.), Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, 2004, vol. 1.
- 12 SAPMO-BA, DY/30/J/IV 2/3/4089, Anlage Nr. 4 zum Protokoll Nr. 29, 18.03.1987, ‘Betreff: Zur Gestaltung von Denkmälern’, pp. 33–40.
- 13 Monika Flacke (ed.), *Auftrag: Kunst 1949–1990. Bildende Künstler in der DDR zwischen Ästhetik und Politik* (exh. cat.), Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, 1995, p. 204.
- 14 Adelheid von Saldern, ‘Zusammenfassung’, in idem. (ed.), *Inszenierte Einigkeit: Herrschaftsrepräsentationen in DDR-Städten* (Franz Steiner; Stuttgart, 2003), vol. 1, p. 391.
- 15 Walter Ulbricht, ‘Die Großbauten im Fünfjahrplan. Rede auf dem III. Parteitag der SED’, *Neues Deutschland*, 23 July 1950.

- 16 SAPMO-BA, NY/4036/686, Abteilung Wirtschaftspolitik an das Politbüro, Berlin, 14.8.1950, 'Betr.: Neuaufbau Berlins'; Bruno Flierl, 'Rund um Marx und Engels: Berlins 'sozialistische' Mitte', in Helmut Engel and Wolfgang Ribbe (eds.), *Hauptstadt Berlin - Wohin mit der Mitte? Historische, städtebauliche und architektonische Wurzeln des Stadtzentrums* (Akademie Verlag, 1993), p. 126.
- 17 Brigitte Hartel, *Denkmalgestaltungen in der DDR. Ein Beitrag zur Bestimmung einiger Grundzüge der Denkmalgestaltungen in der DDR unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Jahre 1971 bis 1989* (PhD diss., Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 1992), pp. 11-12; Ulrike Goeschen, 'From Socialist Realism to Art in Socialism. The Reception of Modernism as an Instigating Force in the Development of Art in the GDR', *Third Text*, vol. 23, no. 1, January 2009, p. 53.
- 18 The vast majority of large statues in the GDR were figurative and placed in connection with an architectural ensemble. Commemorative stones and stelae were often abstract and linked to an historical site. Elfert et al., *Erhalten*, p. 21.
- 19 Hartel, 'Denkmalgestaltungen', pp. 11-12.
- 20 Adelheid von Saldern, 'Einleitung', in idem., *Inszenierte Einigkeit*, vol. 1, p. 38.
- 21 Heinrich, *Strategien*, p. 18.
- 22 David Lowenthal, 'Fabricating Heritage', *History and Memory*, vol. 10, spring/summer 1998, pp. 5-24.
- 23 Abgeordnetenhaus von Berlin, 'Kommission zum Umgang mit den politischen Denkmälern der Nachkriegszeit im ehemaligen Ost-Berlin', Drucksache 12/2743 (Berlin, 15 February 1993), p. 6.
- 24 Abgeordnetenhaus, 'Kommission', p. 15.
- 25 Abgeordnetenhaus, 'Kommission', p. 6.
- 26 Abgeordnetenhaus, 'Kommission', p. 13.
- 27 Abgeordnetenhaus, 'Kommission', p. 13.
- 28 Fritz Cremer: 'Ich habe den Auftrag freudig übernommen. Diese Gedenkstätte ist ein Symbol dafür, dass wir das Vermächtnis des kämpfenden spanischen Volkes und der Interbrigadisten hochhalten. Der in äusserster Spannung aus dem Graben zum Angriff aufsteigende Kämpfer ist unbesiegbar. Muss er auch für eine Weile der Übermacht weichen, seine Kraft, die Kraft des proletarischen Internationalismus, bleibt ungebrochen!' Quoted in Rosemarie Stettin (ed.), *Berlin Hauptstadt der DDR. Der Leninplatz und Volkspark Friedrichshain* (Berlin-Information; Berlin, 1971), p. 14.
- 29 As quoted by Gerd Brüne, *Pathos und Sozialismus: Studien zum plastischen Werk Fritz Cremers (1906-1993)* (Verlag und Datenbank für Geisteswissenschaften; Weimar, 2005), p. 289.
- 30 Brüne, *Pathos*, p. 288.
- 31 Goeschen, 'From Socialist Realism', p. 51.
- 32 Stiftung Archiv der Akademie der Künste Berlin, 'Sitzungen der Sektion Bildende Kunst 1967-68', and 'Plenartagung der Deutschen Akademie der Künste zu Berlin am 22. Mai 1969'.
- 33 Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (Reaktion Books; London, 1997), p. 87.
- 34 Brüne, *Pathos*, p. 286.
- 35 Brüne, *Pathos*, pp. 286-87.
- 36 As quoted in the epigraph to Peter Paret, *An Artist against the Third Reich: Ernst Barlach, 1933-1938* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 2003), p. v.
- 37 Brüne, *Pathos*, p. 287.
- 38 Paret, *An Artist*, p. 27.
- 39 Paret, *An Artist*, pp. 30 and 40.
- 40 Günter Feist (ed.), *Stationen eines Weges. Daten und Zitate zur Kunst und Kunstpolitik der DDR 1945-1988* (Dirk Nischen; Berlin, 1988), pp. 9-10; John-Paul Stonard, *Fault Lines: Art in Germany 1945-1955* (Ridinghouse; London, 2007), pp. 183 and 272.
- 41 Goeschen, 'From Socialist Realism', p. 49.
- 42 For an account of the Constructivist approach to the Marx and Engels monument, see my dissertation: *Gestures of Iconoclasm: East Berlin's Political Monuments, from the Late German Democratic Republic to Postunified Berlin* (University of Chicago, 2010).
- 43 Ministerium für Kultur, *Marx-Engels-Forum: Das Denkmal für Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels in Berlin, Hauptstadt der DDR* (exh. cat.), Akademie der Künste der DDR, Marstall, April 1983, p. 6.
- 44 Authors who have also noted this trend include Hans-Ernst Mittag, 'Was ist aus Denkmälern der DDR heute zu lernen?', in Ralph Lindner, Christiane Mennicke and Silke Wagler (eds.), *Kunst im Stadtraum - Hegemonie und Öffentlichkeit* (DresdenPostplatz; Dresden, 2004), p. 89; and Brian Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape* (The University of Chicago Press; Chicago and London, 1997), p. 206. Some authors who have promoted the historicist view are: Jan Gympel, 'Ab ins Museum? Zur Zukunft der Denkmäler in der DDR', *Zitty*, vol. 18, August-September 1990, pp. 30-33; Sergiusz Michalski, *Public Monuments: Art in Political Bondage 1870-1997* (Reaktion Books; London, 1998), p. 147; and Svenja Moor, 'Marx-Engels-Forum 1977-1986', in Hans Dickel and Uwe Fleckner (eds.), *Kunst in der Stadt: Skulpturen in Berlin 1980-2000* (Nicolai; Berlin, 2003), p. 67.
- 45 Eugen Blume and Roland März, 'Utopie und Realität - Vom Scheitern in der Geschichte', in idem. (eds.), *Kunst in der DDR. Eine Retrospektive der Nationalgalerie* (exh. cat.), Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, 2003, p. 293.
- 46 Sibylle Bergemann's photographs have been reproduced several places, including in Barron and Eckmann, *Art of Two Germanys*, cover, p. 345; Heiner Müller, *Ein Gespenst verlässt Europa* (Kiepenheuer & Witsch; Berlin, 1990); 'Götterklein / Morcels [sic] of Gods', photographs by Sibylle Bergemann, *Daidalos*, vol. 49, September 1993, pp. 100-03.

47 Blume and März, 'Utopie', p. 293.

48 Barron and Eckmann, *Art of Two Germanys*, p. 344.

49 Ministerium, *Marx-Engels-Forum*.

50 'Götterklein / Morcels', pp. 100-03.

51 Peter Voigt, 'Nachwort', in Müller, *Ein Gespenst verlässt Europa*, n.p..

52 Paret, *An Artist*, pp. 39-48.

53 Müller, *Ein Gespenst verlässt Europa*.

54 Voigt, 'Nachwort', n.p.. Peter Voigt and Arno Fischer were given permission and funds to travel to Paris, Amsterdam, London and New York

City, with their wives, in the 1980s to do research for the Marx and Engels monument installations and collect photographs depicting international revolutionary struggle. This caused significant hostility toward these favoured members among other artists. SAPMO-BA, DŸ30/vorl. SED 38790, 'Brief von Gen. Hoffmann an Gen. Hager, 14.11.1984, "Zum Stand der Arbeiten am Marx-Engels-Denkmal der Hauptstadt Berlin"; BA, DR/1/1757, folios 97, 100, 133 and 138.

55 Christiane Mennicke, 'Kunst im Stadtraum - Hegemonie und Öffentlichkeit', in Lindner et al., *Kunst im Stadtraum*, pp. 12-13.

56 Bernd Lindner, *Verstellter, offener Blick. Eine Rezeptionsgeschichte bildender Kunst im Osten Deutschlands 1945-1995* (Böhlau; Cologne, Weimar and Vienna, 1998 [PhD diss., 1995]), p. 156.