

**BERNHARD HEISIG  
AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF EAST GERMAN ART**

by

**April A. Eisman**

BA, Lawrence University, 1994

MA, Courtauld Institute of Art, 1998

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Arts & Sciences in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh

2007

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH  
FACULTY OF ARTS & SCIENCES

This dissertation was presented

by

April A. Eisman

It was defended on

April 27, 2007

and approved by

Stephen Brockman, Professor, Dept of Modern Languages, Carnegie Mellon University

Terry Smith, Professor, History of Art and Architecture

Kathy Linduff, Professor, History of Art and Architecture

Kirk Savage, Associate Professor, History of Art and Architecture

Dissertation Advisor: Barbara McCloskey, Associate Professor, Hist. of Art and Architecture

Copyright © by April A. Eisman

2007

# **BERNHARD HEISIG AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF EAST GERMAN ART**

April A. Eisman, PhD

University of Pittsburgh, 2007

This dissertation focuses on the (East) German artist Bernhard Heisig (b. 1925), one of the most important German artists of the twentieth century. In English-language scholarship, however, he is virtually unknown, the result of lingering Cold War-era stereotypes that presume East Germany had no art, merely political propaganda or kitsch. This study focuses, in particular, on a crucial but little understood moment in Heisig's life and work, the decade between 1961 and 1971, a time when the style and subject matter for which he is best known today first emerged in his oeuvre.

The introduction provides an overview of Heisig's reception in East, West, and unified Germany that will show how Cold War-era thinking affected—and continues to affect—his reception. The second chapter focuses on his past as a teenage soldier in the Second World War and the emergence of explicit references to this past in his art in the early 1960s. A comparison of his work to that by other artists suggests that there was more to its emergence at this point in time than simply personal reflection. It also reveals how his own experiences affected his portrayal of the subject.

The third, fourth, and fifth chapters focus on a number of controversies that centered on Heisig and his work in the mid and late 1960s. It was during these years that the very definition of art in East Germany was under discussion: What is Socialist Realism? Heisig was a key figure in these debates, especially as they played out in Leipzig. A close investigation of the four main controversies in which he was involved reveals an artist deeply engaged with the society in

which he lived and worked. Rather than a uniformly repressive system, the East German cultural scene was one of negotiation, sometimes heated, between artists and cultural functionaries. By engaging in these debates, Heisig helped to change what art was in East Germany and developed the commitment to figuration, tradition, and allegory for which he is praised today. In the end, this dissertation will offer a deeper understanding of both the artist and art under Socialism.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>PREFACE.....</b>	<b>VIII</b>
<b>1.0 INTRODUCTION: MULTIPLE HEISIGS.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1 EAST GERMAN SCHOLARSHIP.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1.2 WEST GERMAN SCHOLARSHIP .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>1.3 THE RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION, 1989 .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>1.4 SCHOLARSHIP AFTER 1989.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>1.5 THIS DISSERTATION.....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>2.0 FIGHTING FASCISM .....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>2.1 THE WAFFEN-SS.....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>2.2 BRESLAU AND THE END OF WORLD WAR II.....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>2.3 A CHANGE IN THINKING.....</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>2.4 THE NAZI PAST IN EAST GERMAN ART, 1945-64.....</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>2.5 THE NAZI PAST AT THE LEIPZIG ACADEMY, 1964-65.....</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>2.6 PERPETRATORS AND VICTIMS.....</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>2.7 CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>3.0 A CHANGE IN STYLE.....</b>	<b>95</b>
<b>3.1 ART IN EAST(ERN) GERMANY, 1945-64 .....</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>3.2 THE FIFTH CONGRESS OF THE VBKD (MARCH 23-25, 1964).....</b>	<b>115</b>

3.3	HEISIG'S VIEWS ON ART, 1954-64 .....	123
3.4	IN THE WAKE OF THE CONGRESS.....	133
3.5	CONCLUSION .....	148
4.0	ART IN THE CRUCIBLE: LEIPZIG, 1965 .....	153
4.1	THE HOTEL GERMANY MURALS .....	155
4.2	<i>THE PARIS COMMUNE</i> (1964/65).....	175
4.3	CONCLUSION .....	189
5.0	PAINTING FOR THE EAST, 1968-71 .....	197
5.1	FROM <i>THE BRIGADE</i> (1969) TO <i>BRIGADIER II</i> (1970) .....	200
5.2	<i>LENIN (AND THE UNBELIEVING TIMOFEJ)</i> .....	217
5.3	CONCLUSION .....	225
6.0	CONCLUSION.....	226
	APPENDIX A .....	239
	APPENDIX B .....	240
	APPENDIX C .....	242
	APPENDIX D.....	243
	SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	248

## PREFACE

It was a cold, dark morning in Berlin in late January 2000 when I first “discovered” East German art. It was toward the end of my first internship at the Neue Nationalgalerie, where I had been working on an exhibition on Ernst Ludwig Kirchner or, more accurately, struggling with the German language. On this particular morning, the curator, Dr. Roland März, took me on a short trip, one of several in those months. This time, instead of donning hard hats as we had when we visited the inside of the Alte Nationalgalerie, then under major renovations, we descended into the basement of the Akademie der Künste on Pariser Platz. There in the relative darkness and amidst an obstacle course of lamps and equipment, people were scattered about on scaffolding, preparing to remove the murals from the walls. Reddish-brown wolves jumped out of the darkness in one room. Jaunty men in black sauntered along in another.

The murals, I found out, were by Harald Metzkes, an artist from the former German Democratic Republic. The building I stood in had been the Akademie der Künste in East Berlin, and these rooms had been its canteen. In that moment, I realized three things: 1) I had never heard of this artist before yet, based on the effort I saw around me, he was clearly important, 2) I did not know the name of a single East German artist despite having studied modern German art, and 3) the art before me was not the heroic, happy worker-sort I expected from East German art (not that I had actually ever thought about East German art before that morning.) It was truly an



epiphanic moment, one that led directly—albeit over the course of several years—to this dissertation.

It is humbling to think of all the people who have helped me with this project since then and to whom I am now indebted. I am grateful to the many artists who have met with me, most especially Professor Bernhard Heisig and his family, Gudrun Brüne, Johannes Heisig, and Walter Eisler. They not only opened their homes and studios to me on numerous occasions, but also helped on a practical level – Frau Brüne shuttled me back and forth from the train station several times and Walter drove me to a vernissage in Coburg. I am thankful for their support of my work, their insight into art and life in the GDR, and the many catalogs they have given me. I would also like to thank Professor Heisig for his generosity, both in terms of his time and the various written permissions, books, and works of art.

Early conversations with Sonja Eschefeld and heated ones with Roland Nicolaus, both artists active in Berlin before and after reunification, helped me to better understand the East German system. I am also grateful to Willi Sitte, Walter Womacka, Ursula Mattheuer-Neustadt, Gerhard Kurt Müller, Hartwig Ebersbach, Cornelia Schleime, and Hans Hendrick-Grimmling for sharing their stories and studios with me; many of them also provided me with catalogs of their work. Thanks also to Volker Stelzmann, Sighard Gille, Karl-Georg Hirsch, and Siegfried Krepp.

The art historians Günter Meißner and Rita Jorek have been excellent conversation partners over the years who have provided valuable insight into the art scene in Leipzig in the 1960s as well as important documents. Anneliese Hübscher also provided tremendous insight into life at the Leipzig Academy in the 1960s. I am grateful to all of them as well as to Ulrike Goeschen, Beatrice Vierneisel, Claus Pese, and Gisela Schirmer for their support of my work

and, together with Eduard Beaucamp, insight into East German art and its reception in Germany today.

Professor Heisig's dealers, Dieter Brusberg and Rüdiger Küttner, have provided me with helpful information and catalogs for which I am grateful. Eckhart Gillen offered me the opportunity to work on the *Wut der Bilder* exhibition and brought me to Professor Heisig's studio on a couple of occasions. Dietulph Sander, Sabine Heinke, and Jürgen Pappies generously shared with me their views on Heisig's work. Jutta Penndorf at the Lindenau Museum, Drs. Anja Gebauer and Ruth Neitemeier at the Galerie Brusberg Berlin, and Rainer Ebert at the Galerie Berlin, were similarly very helpful.

I also had the good fortune to work with great archivists and librarians, including Vincent Klotsche at the Archive of the Leipzig Academy, Anka-Roberta Lazarus at the library of the Museum of Visual Arts in Leipzig, and Ursel Wolff at the archive of the Akademie der Künste Berlin. I am grateful to them for their knowledge, expertise, and support. I am also thankful to Karen Goihl at the Berlin Program at the Freie Universität, Christine Enderlein and the staff of the Sächsische Landesarchiv, Uta Wanderer at the City Library of Leipzig, Renate Kranz at the BStU Leipzig, Elke Pfeil at the Brecht Archive, Iris Türke at the archive of the Gewandhaus, Beate Rebner at the archive of Leipzig University, and the staff at the Bundesarchiv Berlin, the Deutsche Dienststelle, the Archive of the Berlin Ensemble, and the library of the Leipzig Academy.

I would like to give special thanks to Dr. Roland März, who not only introduced me to East German art, but who also took me on again as an intern in 2003 for the *Kunst in der DDR* exhibition; the latter was an invaluable opportunity to learn more about this art as well as the

behind-the-scenes politics surrounding it. My thanks as well to Bettina Schaschke, Gabriele Bösel, Manfred Tschirner, and Fritz Jacobi at the Neue Nationalgalerie.

In the United States, a number of people have read and commented upon this manuscript at various points in its development. Most important among them is my advisor, Barbara McCloskey, who has offered insightful criticism and invaluable support of my work since I began at Pittsburgh in the fall of 2001. Stephen Brockmann has also been invaluable to me for his constructive criticism and encouragement, as has Kathy Linduff. My thanks as well to Terry Smith, Kirk Savage, and Anne Weiss for their support and feedback, to Marion Deschmukh for her comments on a paper that later became part of the Introduction, and to Scott Hendrix, who answered my many military questions and offered feedback and encouragement at critical moments in the process. I would also like to thank Sabine von Dirke, Sabine Hake, David Wilkins, Frank Toker, and Drew Armstrong at—or formerly at—the University of Pittsburgh, as well as the great staff at the Frick Fine Arts building, including Linda Hicks, Emily Schantz, Marcia Rostek, and Margaret McGill.

Additionally, I would like to thank a number of English-speaking scholars for thought-provoking conversations about East Germany: Bill Niven, Katy Frolick, Jeanne Nugent, Kerstin Mey, Heather Matthews, and Joy Calico. Thank you also to Carol Lawton and Nancy Scott for suggesting I pursue a PhD, to Tim Rodgers for inspiring me to pursue Art History in the first place, and to Barbara Martin and Gilian Shallcross at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, for teaching me how to look at a work of art and talk about it to the public.

I have received generous financial support from a number of institutions for pre-doctoral research and study for which I am grateful: the Berlin Program of Advanced German and European Studies at the Freie Universität, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the

U.S. Department of Education, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the University of Pittsburgh, including the Center for West European Studies, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, the Friends of Frick, the Stanley Prostrednik Nationality Room, and the International Studies Fund. Additionally, I received scholarships from the Provost and Dean as well as teaching fellowships from the History of Art and Architecture Department. Without their generous financial support, this project would not have been possible.

I also wish to thank some of my friends in Germany, beginning with Kathrin Wagner, who helped me apply for the first internship at the Neue Nationalgalerie, introduced me to life in Berlin, and has offered unflagging encouragement of my work on East Germany since the beginning. I am no less grateful to Ulrike Grittner, Constanze Korb, Karolina Pajdak, and Uwe Schumacher for their friendship and help with many things German, most especially with correcting my German texts. They, together with Roland Fuhrmann, Kris Huckauf, Daniela Krohn, Tina Bandlow, Sven Mesinovic, and Katrin Blum, have my sincerest thanks for their support and friendship. I would also like to include a few Americans to this list: Kate Dimitrova, Shad Wenzlaff, Sheri Lullo, and Felicia Rackowski. One could not ask for better friends than these!

Next to last, I would like to thank my parents, Skip and Rosemary Kask, for their love and support. Without them I would not be where I am today. And last but not least, I am grateful to Charley Simmons, whose faith and support in me over the years have made this all possible. It is to him and Meg that I dedicate this dissertation.

*Pittsburgh, PA*

*A.A.E.*

*May 2007*

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION: MULTIPLE HEISIGS

“It will take us longer to tear down the Wall in our heads than  
any wrecking company will need for the Wall we can see.”  
Peter Schneider, 1982<sup>1</sup>

When the Berlin Wall fell on November 9, 1989, much of East German artist Bernhard Heisig’s work was already in the West. Just a few weeks earlier, on September 30, a major exhibition of his art had opened at the Martin Gropius Bau in West Berlin. With 120 paintings and more than 300 prints and drawings, *Bernhard Heisig, Retrospective* was the largest and most comprehensive exhibition of an East German artist ever held in West Germany.<sup>2</sup> At the age of 64, Heisig had made it as a “German” artist—highly praised in both East and West—at a time when a unified Germany still seemed decades away.

The unexpected political events of 1989/90, however, had a huge impact on Heisig’s reception, as it did on many of East Germany’s most successful artists. Rather than praising his art and its commitment to the Expressionist tradition and to German history as it had in the 1980s, the press began to attack him on the basis of his biography, and in particular, his connection to the German Democratic Republic (GDR, or East Germany), where he had been both a successful artist and powerful cultural figure. These attacks reached their apex in 1998 when the appropriateness of inviting Heisig to contribute a painting to the Reichstag’s permanent collection was heatedly debated. Those in favor pointed to his art; those opposed, his biography.

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Schneider, *The Wall Jumper, A Berlin Story*, trans. Leigh Hafrey (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983) 119.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from the Ministerium für Kultur, August 11, 1989. AdK Archiv: VBKD 41

Not only had he been part of the Communist regime, some argued, he had also fought for the Nazis in the Second World War.

Since the turn of the millenium, the vociferous battles over the role East German art and artists should be allowed to play in the new Germany have quieted. The exhibition of work by Heisig and other major artists from the former GDR no longer stirs controversy the way it did only a few years ago. In fact, a traveling exhibition of Heisig's work for his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2005 was well received in the press. Significantly, Gerhard Schröder, then Chancellor of Germany, gave a speech at the opening. He called Heisig one of the most important German artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

This exhibition, *Bernhard Heisig, The Anger of Images (Bernhard Heisig, Die Wut der Bilder)*, has come to dominate current perceptions of Heisig's life and work. Heisig is thus best known today for his many paintings of war and conflict, works that are frequently interpreted in terms of his own past as a teenage soldier. Indeed, his tendency to paint multiple canvases with similar subject matter and to rework paintings, sometimes to the point of destroying them, seems to illustrate Freud's classic essay on trauma, *Memory, Repeating, and Working Through*.<sup>4</sup> From this perspective, Heisig can be seen as the quintessential German artist, his life and art a microcosm of Germany's ongoing struggle to come to terms with the Third Reich and its legacy.

---

<sup>3</sup> Rede von Bundeskanzler Gerhard Schröder zur Ausstellungseröffnung Bernhard Heisig – "Die Wut der Bilder," March 20, 2005. 21 February 2007, <[http://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Bulletin/2005/03/\\_Anlagen/nr-26-3814286.property=publicationFile.pdf](http://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Bulletin/2005/03/_Anlagen/nr-26-3814286.property=publicationFile.pdf)>. "...Bernhard Heisig [ist] einer der bedeutendsten deutschen Künstler des zurückliegenden Jahrhunderts." Schröder is not alone in his view of Heisig's importance. In 1995, (West) German curator Eberhard Roters stated, "Bernhard Heisig [gehört] zu den bedeutendsten deutschen Künstlern unserer Zeit... nicht nur der unmittelbaren Gegenwart, sondern des Jahrhunderts überhaupt." Eberhard Roters, "Bernhard Heisig: Zeiten zu leben," in *Geisterbahn* (Berlin: Galerie Berlin, 1995) 37. Eduard Beaucamp, Klaus Honnef, Peter Ludwig, Jörn Merkert, Uwe M. Schneede, and Carla Schulz-Hoffmann similarly consider Heisig to be one of Germany's most important post-war painters. Eckhart Gillen, "Schwierigkeiten beim Suchen der Wahrheit:" *Bernhard Heisig im Konflikt zwischen 'verordnetem Antifaschismus' und der Auseinandersetzung mit seinem Kriegstrauma*. diss., Universität Heidelberg, 2004, 6

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten (Weitere Ratschläge zur Technik der Psychoanalyse, II)," in *Internationale Zeitschrift für ärztliche Psychoanalyse* 2 (1914): 485-491.

This emphasis on Heisig's images of war and conflict, however, tends to overlook the diversity of his oeuvre, which includes portraiture, still lifes, landscapes, murals, and literary illustrations. It also says little about the relationship between his work and the East German context in which he chose to live for forty years. As he stated it in 1996, "I never wanted to emigrate. I always had the possibility, but I always had the feeling that I was needed... Art in the West... that of Joseph Beuys, did not offer what I wanted, therefore the West was not my world. I wanted this world here to be different..."<sup>5</sup>

Heisig's stated commitment to the GDR—and, indeed, the style and content of his art—may be surprising to many readers in the West, where East German art is frequently thought to be little more than political propaganda or kitsch. What was it about East Germany that Heisig preferred? How was it that he could develop into a "modern" artist while there? These are two of the issues that will be addressed in this dissertation, which brings together a close visual analysis of his art with extensive archival research and interviews to offer a deeper understanding of the artist, his work, and art under State Socialism. Before turning to the details of this study, however, it is important first to trace how Heisig has been discussed to date. As will be shown, the details and interpretation of his life and work can vary quite substantially depending on when and where the text was written.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Typescript (20 April 1995) for Lutz Dammbeck's documentary, *Dürers Erbe* (1995), as quoted in Gillen, 9. This and all subsequent translations are mine unless otherwise noted. "Ich habe nie emigrieren wollen. Ich hätte jedesmal die Möglichkeit gehabt, aber ich hatte immer das Gefühl, ich werde gebraucht. (...) Die Kunst des Westens, auch die des Joseph Beuys bot nicht das an, was ich machen wollte, deshalb war der Westen nicht meine Welt. Ich wollte, dass diese Welt hier anders wird. Und deswegen bin ich nicht emigriert."

<sup>6</sup> The title of this dissertation refers to the cultural politics of art in East Germany as well as to the cultural politics of East German art in the West.

## 1.1 EAST GERMAN SCHOLARSHIP

Heisig scholarship first began in East Germany, where a tremendous amount had been written about him already before he became a name in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, West Germany before 1990, unified Germany afterward) in the late 1970s/early 1980s. The earliest magazine articles date back to the latter half of the 1950s and become increasingly prevalent in the 1960s and especially the 1970s. In fact, 1973 marks a turning point in Heisig scholarship with the publication of the first of five major exhibition catalogs—and four books beginning in 1975—that would be written about him in the German Democratic Republic (GDR, or East Germany) before its collapse in 1989/90.

Karl Max Kober (1930-87), an art historian from Leipzig, dominates Heisig scholarship. In addition to a monograph published in 1981, he wrote the main text for each of the three catalogs published in the 1970s and an article for both of those created in the 1980s.<sup>7</sup> He also published articles in magazines in both East and West Germany.

In East Germany, it was not unusual for artists to have one main art historian who would be responsible for getting to know the artist and his or her work and then writing about it. This relationship, which lasted for years and often developed—as in the case of Heisig and Kober—into a friendship, led to a deeper understanding of the material being written about, as well as the opportunity for artists and art historians to discuss both the work itself and how it fit within the

---

<sup>7</sup> Kober's publications on Heisig include "Bernhard Heisig, Leben und Werk," in *Bernhard Heisig, Gemälde, Zeichnungen, Lithographien* (Dresden: Ministerium für Kultur der DDR, 1973) 13-47; *Bernhard Heisig, Malerei und Grafik* (Magdeburg: Museen, Gedenkstätten und Sammlungen der Stadt Magdeburg, 1978) 3-10; *Bernhard Heisig, Druckgrafik & Zeichnung* (Halle: Staatliche Galerie Moritzburg Halle, 1979) 3-9; *Bernhard Heisig* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1981); "Ikarus bei Heisig – oder 'der Unvernünftige will, daß man sich ihm anpaßt,'" in *Bernhard Heisig, Gemälde und Druckgraphik* (Staatliche Museum Schloß Burgk, 1981) 9-11; "Zur Entwicklung der Bildstruktur bei Bernhard Heisig," in *Bernhard Heisig, Malerei, Graphik, Zeichnungen* (Leipzig: Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig, 1985) 18-21.



East German system. From the government's perspective, this pairing was intended to help guide artists toward the proper ideological position. In Kober's case, he was also one of two IMs (Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter) assigned to Heisig by the Stasi to keep tabs on the artist, a fact that Heisig was unaware of until after the *Wende*.

In articles and books, Kober regularly presented Heisig's work as a feast for both the eyes and the intellect with its bravura brushwork and coloration as well its complex subject matter. He stressed the importance of seeing both in Heisig's work, although he tended to focus on the artistic side—and especially structure—in his writings. This emphasis was an effort, in part, to offset most viewers' inclination to focus on the compelling subject matter. Like Heisig, Kober was aiming his work at an educated audience of non-specialists.<sup>8</sup> His texts thus help one to see Heisig's work with an artist's—or art historian's—eye. By doing so, he was able to show how carefully constructed the works are in contrast to their seeming spontaneity. In fact, this was an explicit goal for the monograph he published on Heisig in 1981: “I wanted to show, among other things, that Bernhard Heisig is not solely the aggressive, spontaneous, expressive painter for whom he is often taken, but rather a clear deliberator, self critical strategist and tactician of form, who consciously employs his expressive means.”<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Heisig's interest in the opinion of the general public appears in the following two quotations from 1973: “Ich suche viel lieber das Gespräch mit jemandem, der zu artistischen Fragen keinen Kontakt hat; mich interessiert sein Reflex vor dem Bild. Ich ziele auf eine möglichst einfache Partnervorstellung: ich möchte gern, daß es den Leuten gefällt, daß sie etwas davon haben. Ich bin der Meinung, daß das geht, denn es ist ja immer gegangen. Immer bin ich wie ein Luchs hinterher zu erfahren, was die Leute zu einem Bild sagen. – Am ödesten sind die sogenannten Fachdiskussionen über Malerei.” *Bernhard Heisig: Gemälde, Zeichnungen, Lithographien* (Dresden: Gemäldegalerie Neue Meister, 1973) 46. Hereafter referred to as BH73. “Mann müsste eine Kunst machen können, zu deren Verständnis kein Kunstverständnis notwendig ist.” Renate Hartleb, *Bernhard Heisig* (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1975) 2.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Max Kober, *Bernhard Heisig* (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1981) 87. “Unter anderem wollte ich zeigen, daß Bernhard Heisig nicht ausschließlich der aggressive, spontane, expressive Maler ist, für den er oft gehalten wird, sondern auch ein klar abwägender, selbstkritischer Strategie und Formtaktiker, der seine Ausdrucksmittel sehr bewußt einsetzt.”

Kober also wrote about the importance of Heisig's experiences in World War II to his subsequent life and art. As he related it, Heisig

“was a soldier at 17... At 20, the artist experienced the end of the war in Breslau. After his release from a Soviet hospital he worked in a Polish Bureau for Propaganda, where his colleagues let him take part in their conversations by speaking German in front of him; this began the rethinking process as much as the content of the debates. Like so many people at the time, including the young artist, the extent of Nazi barbarism in the occupied zones, and above all in Poland, became known and a hate against everything anti-human has controlled his consciousness ever since. As such it was anything but merely a seized opportunity that Bernhard Heisig... sought out contact with the local group of the SED and joined this party in 1946.”<sup>10</sup>

Kober explained that these experiences gave Heisig deep insight into the human condition and led to his artistic commitment to both figuration and society. As Heisig stated it, “we have the chance to take part in [making] a world view!”<sup>11</sup> He was referring here to the fact that in the GDR, artists were given the responsibility of helping to mold the people into better human beings in the wake of the Third Reich. With artists' help, it was hoped that future wars and atrocities might be avoided. The purpose behind much of his art is thus, as Kober stated it, to “wake people up, to bring them to think about things in a particular way... to look behind the erected facades, to mistrust idols and to uncover wolves in sheeps' clothing, even when that means having to give up cherished illusions.”<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> BH73, 17-18. “Mit 17 Jaren wurde er Soldat. Manches seiner Werke spricht von diesen Erlebnissen, zum Teil direkt... zum Teil indirekt... Mit 20 Jahren erlebte der Künstler das Kriegsende in Breslau. Nach seiner Entlassung aus einem sowjetischen Lazarett arbeitete er in einem polnischen Amt für Propaganda, wo ihn seine polnischen Kollegen an ihren Gesprächen teilhaben ließen, indem sie sich seiner wegen der deutschen Sprache bedienten; dieser nebensächlich erscheinende Umstand setzte den Umdenkungsprozeß ebenso nachhaltig in Gang wie der Inhalt der Debatten. Wie so vielen Menschen wurde damals auch dem jungen Künstler das ganze Ausmaß der Nazibarbarei in den besetzten Gebieten und vor allem in Polen selbst bekannt, und ein Haß gegen alles Antihumane beherrscht seither sein Bewußtsein. So war es schon alles andere als eine nur erfaßte Gelegenheit, daß Bernhard Heisig in Zeitz, wohin ihn der Zufall verschlug, den Kontakt zur Ortsgruppe der SED suchte und dieser Partei im Jahre 1946 beitrug.” It seems unlikely that Heisig joined the SED at such an early date; more likely he joined in 1948. See footnote 184.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 47. “Wir haben die Chance, an einem Weltbild mitzuwirken!”

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 34. “Man könnte alle diese Werke Heisigs unter dem Leitgedanken zusammenfassen, die Menschen wach zu machen, sie in einer ganz besonderen Weise zum Nachdenken zu bringen... allen Verführungen gegenüber

Heisig's commitment to society also appeared in his active involvement in the artistic community. For sixteen years he was rector of the Leipzig Academy for Graphics and Book Arts (HGB, Hochschule für Grafik- und Buchkunst), where he also taught for thirty years and was head of the graphics department for eighteen.<sup>13</sup> In the Association of Visual Artists (VBKD, Verband Bildender Künstler der DDR), he held important positions at both the local and national levels for a total of fourteen years.<sup>14</sup> He also served regularly on exhibition juries, wrote occasional articles and reviews and helped found the Sächsische Galerie in Leipzig, which was an early attempt to establish a private market for the sale of art in East Germany.

While Heisig's active involvement in the GDR's cultural scene was not a topic of explicit discussion in most of the texts written about him, it was nonetheless well known and contributed to his reputation and success. In the catalog for his first major solo exhibition in 1973, for example, he was commended for his "highly developed sense of social responsibility" and his "political engagement."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in one of the last major exhibitions of his work in the GDR in 1985, his social commitment was highlighted by the Minister for Culture: "[Heisig's] artistic production, his effect as rector of the Leipzig Academy as well as Vice President of the VBKD, identify him as a Communist who—as a painter and graphic artist, a state leader, a Verband

---

wachsam zu sein und hinter die errichteten Fassaden zu schauen, Idolen zu mißtrauen und die Wölfe im Schafspelz zu entlarven, auch wenn dabei liebgewordene Illusionen aufgegeben werden müssen."

<sup>13</sup> Heisig was rector of the Leipzig Academy from 1961-64 and 1976-87. He taught from 1954-68 and 1976-90. He was head of the Graphics Department (*Abt. Freie Grafik*) from 1965-68 and head of a *Fachklasse* and *Meisterklasse* from 1976-90. HGB Archive: Personal file.

<sup>14</sup> Heisig was chairman of the Leipzig branch of the VBKD from 1956-59 and 1972-74. He was a vice president of the VBKD at the national level from 1974-78 and deputy of the president of the VBKD from 1978-83.

<sup>15</sup> Werner Wolf, "Vorwort des Mitgliedes des Rates des Bezirkes Leipzig und Leiters der Abteilung Kultur," in BH73, 9-10. ["Leidenschaftliches Bekenntnis zu unserer sozialistischen Wirklichkeit und politisches Engagement werden hier mit hoher künstlerischer Meisterschaft vorgetragen."] Wolf was a member of the District Council of Leipzig and was head of the Cultural Division. Joachim Uhlitzsch, "Vorwort des Direktors der Gemäldegalerie Neue Meister," in BH73, 12. ["...mit welchem hohem Verantwortungsbewußtsein er seine künstlerische Berufung zu erfüllen unternahm."] Uhlitzsch was an art historian who had taught at the Leipzig Academy in the 1950s; by the time of this exhibition, he was director of the Gemäldegalerie Neue Meister in Dresden.

official, and teacher of a younger generation—has stamped the intellectual and cultural life of our land with his whole personality...”<sup>16</sup>

Heisig, however, had not always been universally praised in the GDR. In fact, during the 1960s, he had been at the center of a number of heated controversies about art as artists and political functionaries—especially in Leipzig—battled over the very definition of what art in Socialism was and should be. Heisig’s willingness to stand up for his beliefs about art and to challenge the status quo despite the difficulties it could—and did—cause him actually contributed to his reputation as a socially committed and politically engaged artist, even if at the time some saw his stance as *Parteifeindlich* (hostile to the Party).<sup>17</sup>

With the significant cultural “thaw” that set in once Erich Honecker came to power in 1971, Heisig’s art and views on art were no longer controversial; rather, they had become praiseworthy. Two years later the first major retrospective of his work opened; it was the first large-scale solo exhibition of an East German artist under fifty years of age in the GDR.<sup>18</sup> Significantly, his earlier clashes with cultural functionaries were not ignored in the catalog, although the references were euphemistically phrased: “Bernhard Heisig, a very discussion-happy artist, made himself noticed through the confrontations that took place around his work.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Wolfgang Mattheuer, his colleague at the Leipzig Academy, referred to these conflicts

---

<sup>16</sup> Dr. Hans-Joachim Hoffmann, “Zum Geleit,” in *Bernhard Heisig, Malerei, Graphik, Zeichnungen* (Leipzig: Museum der bildenden Künste, 1985) 5. [“Sein bildkünstlerisches Schaffen, sein Wirken als Rektor der Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst Leipzig wie als Vizepräsident des Verbandes Bildender Künstler, weisen ihn als einen Kommunisten aus, der als Maler und Grafiker, als staatlicher Leiter, Verbandsfunktionär und als Lehrer einer jungen Künstlergeneration mit seiner ganzen Persönlichkeit seit Jahrzehnten das geistig-kulturelle Leben unseres Landes mitprägt.”] Hoffmann was the Minister for Culture of the GDR.

<sup>17</sup> Chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation will take a closer look at four debates around Heisig and his work that took place in the 1960s.

<sup>18</sup> BH73, 12.

<sup>19</sup> Klaus Wittkugel, “Vorwort des Vizepräsidenten der Akademie der Künste der DDR,” in BH73, 7. “Bernhard Heisig, der ein sehr diskutierfreudiger Künstler ist, machte mehrfach durch Auseinandersetzungen auf sich aufmerksam, die um seine Werke stattfanden.” Wittkugel was a vice president of the GDR’s Academy of Arts.

in a speech he held at the exhibition's opening in Leipzig: "...the years of more or less vehement criticism were also years of giving proof. To be proven was that his 'handwriting' is a possibility for socialist realist art. He fought this fight courageously in word and deed and grew considerably as a result... Tender natures might have sat frightened in a small room. He spread his threads farther, not untouched, but hardly distracted."<sup>20</sup>

Although Heisig is best-known today for his history paintings and *Komplexbilder*, or complex images, in the GDR these works were seen as only one side, albeit an important one, of his total artistic production.<sup>21</sup> Another important side was his portraiture, which can be divided roughly into five major groups: those focusing on his mother, women, cultural figures, and historical personalities, as well as self portraits. In 1973, Lothar Lang called Heisig one of the GDR's "best portraitists."<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Renate Hartleb, who wrote a short book about Heisig two years later, stated that he seems "predestined for portraiture" because of "his vital need for figuration and the ability to spiritualize appearances."<sup>23</sup>

Many of Heisig's best-known portraits are closely related to the East German context in which he lived and worked. In the 1973 retrospective catalog, for example, Kober drew attention to his portraits of Lenin, the historical figure Georgi Dimitroff, and a brigade worker, as well as several paintings of his mother. His Lenin portraits, in particular, were praised because they

---

<sup>20</sup> Wolfgang Mattheuer, *Künstler über Künstler: Bernhard Heisig* (Leipzig: Museum bildende Künste Leipzig, 1973) unpaginated. "...die Jahre der mehr oder weniger heftigen Kritik waren auch Jahre der Beweisführung. Es galt zu beweisen, dass diese seine 'Handschrift' eine Möglichkeit sozialistisch-realistischer Kunst ist. Diesen Kampf hat er bravourös in Wort und Tat geführt und ist dabei beträchtlich gewachsen... Zarte Naturen hätten sich vielleicht verängstigt ins Stübchen gesetzt. Er spann seinen Faden weiter, nicht unberührt, aber kaum irritiert."

<sup>21</sup> The German term "*Komplexbilder*" addresses the complexity of the works at hand without reducing the meaning of them the way the term "history paintings" does. Since one of my arguments is that many of Heisig's paintings are in fact as much—if not more—about the present than the past, I will use *Komplexbilder* throughout this dissertation.

<sup>22</sup> Lothar Lang, "Der Maler Bernhard Heisig," *Weltbühne* (24 July 1973): 944. "Man wird Heisig fortan zu unseren besten Porträtisten zählen müssen, von denen es übrigens gar nicht so viele gibt."

<sup>23</sup> Hartleb, 3. This small-format book contains eight pages of text, some basic biographical data, artist's quotes, and a number of color illustrations.

formulate “our” view of Lenin rather than “Lenin for the many hundredth time.”<sup>24</sup> Hartleb similarly praised Heisig’s painting, *Lenin and the Unbelieving Timofej*, because it “emphasized the personal view of Lenin, in conversation... and with great humor...”<sup>25</sup> Hartleb also singled out one of Heisig’s worker portraits, which she saw as “one of [his] best achievements.”<sup>26</sup> In particular she liked how Heisig had “sought to capture something of the new character of the worker in socialism.”<sup>27</sup> His portraits of his mother, on the other hand, were the focus of an entire article by Dieter Gleisberg in the 1985 retrospective catalog. Gleisberg called these works highly personal and yet of value to more than just the artist: “his sincere and thoughtful efforts to win understanding for... the unique personality of his mother exemplifies an impartial and open-minded sympathy for old people, for fellow man generally, and with that are a... touchstone for our individual and collective self understanding [in the GDR] as well as the ethos with which we report the humanization of society.”<sup>28</sup>

In addition to *Komplexbilder* and portraits, Heisig also painted numerous landscapes and still lifes, especially flowers. In fact, in the article quoted above, Lang actually stated, “It would

---

<sup>24</sup> BH73, 35. “Es ging also nicht darum, Lenin zum vielhundertsten Male schlechthin zu konterfeien, sondern jeweils neue Sichten oder doch neue Nuancen der Sicht auf ihn zu schaffen, so dass auch das hier zu geschehen hatte, was Kunst stets zu bewirken hat: aus den Personen, den Dingen und Erscheinungen ‘an sich,’ Personen, Dinge und Erscheinungen ‘für uns’ werden zu lassen. Kurz gesagt: für die Künstler der DDR erwuchs die Aufgabe ‘unseren’ Lenin zu formulieren. Bernhard Heisig leistete dazu drei gewichtige Beiträge...”

<sup>25</sup> Hartleb, 6. “Heisig tastete sich an das große Thema heran, indem er Lenin zunächst in betont persönlicher Sicht, im Gespräch, zeigen und also für sich selbst gleichsam erst erobern wollte. Indem er hierzu die mit großem Humor vorgetragene Legende von der Überzeugung des ungläubigen Thomas nutzte, verschaffte er seinem Bild um so größere Überzeugungskraft.”

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 4. “Zudem verzichtete Heisig auf Porträthafigkeit und suchte statt dessen etwas von dem neuen Charakter der Arbeit im Sozialismus zu erfassen. In der malerischen Verwirklichung... ist dieses Bild eine der besten Leistungen Heisigs.”

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Dieter Gleisberg, “Zu Bernhard Heisigs Mutterbildnissen,” in *Bernhard Heisig: Malerei, Graphik, Zeichnungen* (Leipzig: Museum Bildende Kunst, 1985) 28. “Vielmehr erscheint sein mit größter Aufrichtigkeit und Bedacht immer wieder vollzogenes Bemühen, Verständnis zu gewinnen und weiterzureichen für das durch Zeitumstände und Mentalität geprägte Anderssein der Persönlichkeit seiner Mutter geradezu exemplarisch für die vorurteilsfreie und aufgeschlossene Anteilnahme am alten Menschen, ja am Mitmenschen überhaupt und damit letzten Endes auch als Prüfstein für unser individuelles und kollektives Selbstverständnis sowie das Ethos, mit dem wir angetreten sind zur Vermenschlichung der menschlichen Gesellschaft.”

not be just to Heisig if we only see him as a painter of landscapes or still lifes...,” which suggests that these “lesser” genres were much better known in the GDR in the early 1970s than they are today.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, when Eduard Beaucamp, a West German journalist for the prestigious *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, looked back on his first visit to Heisig’s studio in 1968, he remembered that there were no “large history paintings, rather more landscapes, portraits and still lifes...”<sup>30</sup>

Heisig once explained his landscapes and still lifes as follows: “where else can I reload as before nature! For me it is an indispensable maxim! Otherwise I repeat myself; I do not want to always do the same thing!”<sup>31</sup> He further explained, “Having nature directly in front of me, I can realize it without excessive intellectual commitment and can give myself over fully to the joy of painting. As such, painting in front of nature is a recovery...”<sup>32</sup>

Although Kober was very interested in understanding the artistic aspects of Heisig’s work, he had little interest in looking at it chronologically. In the monograph he wrote on Heisig that was published in 1981, he stated, “[Heisig] does not approach his work linearly, but rather in concentric circles. It is therefore appropriate to abandon a chronologically ordered presentation.”<sup>33</sup> Hartleb made a similar statement at the beginning of her short book on Heisig

---

<sup>29</sup> Lang, 943. “Wir werden Heisig nicht gerecht, wenn wir ihn nur als den Maler von Landschaften oder Stilleben betrachten... Seine besten Leistungen liegen im Porträt und Historienbild...”

<sup>30</sup> Eduard Beaucamp, “Bewußtseinsräume und Bildtiefen” in *Bernhard Heisig, Retrospektive*, eds. Jörn Merkert und Peter Pachnicke (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1989) 43. “Im Atelier stieß man damals nicht auf seine großen Historienbilder, vielmehr auf Landschaften, Porträts, Stilleben...” Beaucamp may have been the first West German to write about the Leipzig art scene.

<sup>31</sup> Heisig as quoted in BH73, 39. “Wo soll ich mich sonst aufladen, als vor der Natur! Für mich ist das eine unabdingbare Maxime! Sonst wiederhole ich mich doch; schließlich will ich ja nicht immer dasselbe machen!”

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. “Habe ich den Natureindruck unmittelbar vor mir, kann ich ihn ohne übermäßigen intellektuellen Einsatz realisieren und kann mich dem Vergnügen am Malen voll hingeben. So gesehen ist das Malen vor der Natur eine Erholung.”

<sup>33</sup> Kober, 5. “...er seine Arbeit nicht linear, sondern in Form konzentrischer Einkreisungen angeht. So schien es angemessen, auf eine chronologisch geordnete Darstellung zu verzichten.”

six years earlier.<sup>34</sup> In fact, most scholars approach Heisig's work thematically, which contributes to the significant misunderstanding of his art today by removing it from the specific historical context in which it was created.

The difficulty with establishing a chronological view stems in part from the artist's working method. Heisig frequently makes multiple paintings of the same subject and does so across many years. Moreover, he regularly repaints his work, making changes to a composition that can range anywhere from minor details to destroying the work completely through overpainting. In fact, almost no Heisig painting is safe from his corrective brush, and he has been known to make changes to a work while it is hanging in a museum; reportedly he has even had others distract the guards so he can have more time.<sup>35</sup> It is for these reasons that Kober saw his work as cyclical rather than linear.

Kober explained Heisig's repetition and repainting as the result of perfectionism and, more specifically, an attempt to reconcile the intellectual with the aesthetic.<sup>36</sup> Hartleb explained it as the result of "creative unrest," which she saw as a foundational element of his work.<sup>37</sup> She was presumably drawing from Hermann Peters' article, "Full of Critical Restlessness, Creatively Active – Bernhard Heisig," which was published in the GDR's main art magazine, *Bildende Kunst*, the year before.<sup>38</sup> Peters spent much of this article talking about Heisig's working method: "he knows no complacency, no fulfillment of self expectations... he considers only a few of his popular works finished and (almost) none are safe from a later intervention, an intense

---

<sup>34</sup> Hartleb, 1. "Sein Werdegang... zeigt keine schamatisch lineare Entwicklung..."

<sup>35</sup> This has led to a story—probably true—that he was not allowed to enter certain museums if his work was on the walls. It also recalls the working method of the English painter JWM Turner who would send unfinished paintings to the Royal Academy and then completely rework them in the days leading up to the opening. *Varnishing Day at the Royal Academy*. 24 February 2007 <<http://www.j-m-w-turner.co.uk/artist/turner-vanishing-day.htm>>.

<sup>36</sup> Karl Max Kober, "Die anstrengenden Mitteilungen des Malers Heisig," in *Retrospektive*, 39.

<sup>37</sup> Hartleb, 1.

<sup>38</sup> Hermann Peters, "Voll kritischer Unrast schöpferisch aktiv – Bernhard Heisig," in *Bildende Kunst* 7 (1974): 315-19.



overpainting or complete destruction....”<sup>39</sup> For Peters, Heisig’s lack of complacency is “an important attitude for our socialist art.”<sup>40</sup>

Whereas Heisig’s working method makes a chronological approach to his work difficult, it is complicated even further by inconsistent dates for many of his early paintings. Heisig himself has little interest in such details and is thus an unreliable source for them.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Kober was not an “exact bookkeeping-type art historian.”<sup>42</sup> As a result, many of the dates in his texts are inaccurate and sometimes even conflicting, which has led to a virtual free-for-all in the dating of much of Heisig’s early paintings.<sup>43</sup>

To date there have been only two significant attempts to look at Heisig’s work chronologically. In 1988, Bernfried Lichtnau finished a dissertation at Greifswald University in East Germany on Heisig’s history paintings, which he organized thematically and then chronologically within each group; he also looked at several portraits, landscapes, and still lifes.<sup>44</sup> Five years later, in 1993, the (East) German curator Dietulf Sander completed his dissertation, which is essentially a *Werkverzeichnis* (catalog raisonné) of Heisig’s prints.<sup>45</sup> Begun under Kober’s guidance, Sander’s dissertation organizes thousands of prints dating from the

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 315. “Er kennt keine Selbstzufriedenheit, keine Erfüllung des Selbstanspruchs... Wer die Entwicklung Bernhard Heisigs in etwa verfolgt hat und obendrein erfährt, dass er nur wenige seiner populären Werke für abgeschlossen hält und (fast) keines vor einem späteren Eingriff, einer stärkeren Übermalung oder gar Zerstörung sicher ist.”

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 317. “Diese Haltung ist wichtig für unsere sozialistische Kunst.”

<sup>41</sup> Sander confirms this fact: “Heisig ist kein Systematiker, und Fragen einer exakten Numerierung der Zustände, der Kennzeichnung von Auflagen höhen oder der Datierung sind für ihn unwesentlich.” *Retrospektive*, 53.

<sup>42</sup> In his monograph on Heisig, Kober explained his thematic focus partly as follows: “Der auf exakte Buchführung bedachte Kunstwissenschaftler müsste vor der Aufgabe, chronologisch vorzugehen, die Waffen strecken.” Kober, 5.

<sup>43</sup> Johannes Heisig (b. 1953) admitted that at one point they had all sat down and tried to reconstruct the dates of various works; this was presumably for the 1973 retrospective exhibition. Interview with Johannes Heisig, Winter 2004.

<sup>44</sup> Bernfried Lichtnau, “Der Beitrag Bernhard Heisigs zur Weiterentwicklung der Historienmalerei in der bildenden Kunst der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik. Bestimmung der Funktions- und Gestaltungsdifferenzierung historisch-thematischer Kompositionen,” diss., Ernst-Moritz-Arndt-Universität Greifswald, 1988.

<sup>45</sup> Dietulf Sander, “Bernhard Heisig – Das druckgraphische Werk, Kommentiertes Verzeichnis der Lithographien, Radierungen und Monotypien, 1950-1990,” diss., Universität Leipzig, 1993, 87.

early 1950s to the early 1990s into ten volumes; these offer the only overview of Heisig's style and subject matter until now. Unfortunately, both dissertations are available in only a handful of university libraries in Germany, thus making two of the most significant studies of Heisig's work to date two of the least known by non-specialists.

In comparison to Lichtnau, Sander has published several texts on Heisig in addition to his dissertation and may have been slated to replace Kober—who died after a long illness in 1987—as his main art historian.<sup>46</sup> In 1985, he wrote an article about one of Heisig's best-known print cycles, *The Fascist Nightmare*, for the catalog of what would end up being one of the last major exhibitions of Heisig's work in the GDR. In 1988, he published a small book on these prints, and in 1989, an article about his prints more generally in the catalog for the major Heisig retrospective that traveled to cities in both East and West Germany. This exhibition, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, was the first—and ultimately last—joint East-West German production in the visual arts. As such, it emphasizes just how important Heisig was in both Germanys at the end of the Cold War era. Significantly, Sander is one of only three East German scholars to have published new material in a Heisig catalog after reunification.

---

<sup>46</sup> Lichtnau's dissertation, although a valuable contribution to Heisig scholarship, was written in the politicized language of the Cold War era; as such, it is difficult reading for Westerners and will presumably never be republished. Sander's work, on the other hand, was not overtly political in its language and can thus more easily survive the political change of 1989/90.

## 1.2 WEST GERMAN SCHOLARSHIP

West German journalists and scholars first began writing about Heisig in the early 1970s, although it was not until 1980 that such articles were anything but occasional.<sup>47</sup> In this year, Heisig had solo exhibitions in Bremen and Frankfurt am Main; these were followed by another at the Brusberg Gallery in Hannover in 1981.<sup>48</sup> Together, these exhibitions mark the beginnings of what would become a veritable flood of exhibitions—and articles—about him in the FRG that continues to the present day. Notably, the first of these took place in the immediate wake of documenta 6, which marks the emergence of contemporary East German painting—and, specifically, Heisig, Werner Tübke, Wolfgang Mattheuer, and Willi Sitte—onto the Western art scene.<sup>49</sup> These four artists quickly became the GDR’s best-known painters in the West and, later, the focus of controversy in the cultural battles following reunification.

Since none of Heisig’s solo exhibitions in West Germany was accompanied by a catalog, his western reception from these years must be reconstructed largely from press articles and entries about him in catalogs of East German art more generally.<sup>50</sup> These texts—the ones written

---

<sup>47</sup> The Munich-based *Tendenzen* magazine published an article about Heisig already in 1966, but it was written by the East German curator, Gerhard Winkler. The first articles written by West German authors appear in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in the early 1970s, although articles about the Leipzig art scene more generally had been published as early as 1968 (“Auf der Suche nach Bildern, Kunst in einer sozialistischen Stadt. Bericht aus Leipzig von Eduard Beaucamp”). The first article to focus on Heisig appears to be the one published on January 8, 1972, albeit without an author, “DDR-Kunstmarkt gefordert;” it was followed nearly two years later by Camilla Blechen’s article, “Nie ganz zufrieden. Bernhard Heisig in Leipzig.” With the exception of an article in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* on September 2, 1976, nothing else of significance appears to have been published about Heisig in the West until 1980, at which point at least nine different articles in a number of newspapers were published. He was, however, mentioned in reviews of documenta 6 in 1977.

<sup>48</sup> This was not Heisig’s first exhibition in the West. In 1966, he had exhibited prints from *The Fascist Nightmare* in Würzburg. (The Magdeburg catalog lists the Würzburg exhibition as having taken place in 1965). Nonetheless, he did not become a recognized name in the West until these later exhibitions.

<sup>49</sup> The East German sculptors Fritz Cremer and Jo Jastram also exhibited work at documenta 6; their inclusion was a concession to the East German government in exchange for allowing the four painters—who had been invited—to attend. *Stichwort für Ausstellung Paris und Documenta*. Bundesarchiv-SAPMO: DR1/8171.

<sup>50</sup> The press articles cluster around his solo exhibitions in 1980-82 and 1984, as well as his commission to paint the West German Bundeskanzler Helmut Schmidt in 1986. Important catalogs of East German art in West Germany that

by West Germans—have several themes in common that set them apart from their East German counterparts.<sup>51</sup> First, there is an overwhelming emphasis on Heisig’s paintings of war and conflict to the virtual exclusion of the rest of his oeuvre. His landscapes, for example, were mentioned in only three of the nineteen articles I looked at from the 1980s. Significantly, of the three, one dismissed them as a failure, while another saw little difference between them and his war paintings: “Even nature is made into a battlefield...”<sup>52</sup>

Second, Heisig’s paintings of war and conflict are largely interpreted in terms of his “personal entanglement” in the “horrors,” “nightmare” or “barbarism” of the Second World War, rather than from an intellectual investigation of the mechanisms of oppression that led to it.<sup>53</sup> The latter is only rarely mentioned. Instead, Heisig is called a “deeply frightened warner,” “traumatically touched” by his experiences, which “churn his innards” and “afflict him to the present day.”<sup>54</sup> His work is thus seen as an “attempt to free himself from [the] angst” produced by his “traumatic experience of the destruction of his home town of Breslau.”<sup>55</sup> As such, they are

---

included articles about him are *Zeitvergleich: Malerei und Grafik aus der DDR* (Hamburg: Art, das Kunstmagazin, 1982) and *Zeitvergleich '88 – 13 Maler aus der DDR* (Berlin: Galerie Brusberg, 1988).

<sup>51</sup> Frequently West German publications included articles by East German art historians. The article on Heisig in the documenta 6 catalog, for example, was written by Lothar Lang.

<sup>52</sup> PHG, “Unter dem Teppich sind Menschenleiber gefangen,” in *Berliner Morgenpost* (24 June 1984). In the original: “...flüchtigen Pseudo-Impressionen misslingen Heisig denn auch gründlich.” Michael Nungesser, “BH Neue Bilder, Zeichnungen,” in *Die Kunst* 6 (1984). In the original: “Selbst die Natur wird zu einem Schlachtfeld seiner virtuosen Mal-Gefechte.” In all three articles, the mention of Heisig’s landscapes was only in passing.

<sup>53</sup> Georg Bussmann, “Bernhard Heisig: Die Beharrlichkeit des Vergessens und andere Bilder,” exhibition pamphlet (Frankfurt am Main: Frankfurter Kunstverein, 1980). In the original: “verwickeltsein von Lebenslauf.” Volker Bauermeister, “Hannover: Bernhard Heisig. Bilder und Graphik,” in *Die Zeit* (18 December 1981). In the original: “personliches Betroffen sein.” Camilla Blechen, “Der Unzufriedene,” in *FAZ* (5 February 1982). In the original: “schrecken des Zweiten Weltkrieges.” Rudolf Lange, “Höllenfahrt durch Zeit und Geschichte, Bernhard Heisig bei Brusberg in Hannover,” in *Hannoversche Allgemeine* (12/13 December 1981). In the original: “Ein Alptraum...die Barbarei des Krieges...”

<sup>54</sup> Bussmann. In the original: “zu tiefst erschreckter Mahner.” Blechen. In the original: “traumatisch berührt.” Lange. In the original: “selber im innersten aufgewühlt ist” and “quält ihn bis heute.”

<sup>55</sup> Lange. In the original: “versucht von Ängsten zu befreien.” C.B. [Camille Blechen], untitled, in *FAZ* (25 January 1982). In the original: “traumatisches Erlebnis der Zerstörung seiner Heimatstadt Breslau...”

considered “authentic” expressions of the artist’s personal experiences in the “chaos of German history.”<sup>56</sup>

A third element shared by most of the articles written by West German authors—and which continues to the present—is the desire to place Heisig’s work within a “*Gesamtdeutsch*” (German without regard for East or West) tradition. In particular, leading Expressionist artists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century including Max Beckmann, Lovis Corinth, Oskar Kokoschka and Otto Dix were frequently mentioned as important precursors to Heisig’s work. Significantly, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Realist painter Adolph Menzel was rarely mentioned before the *Wende*, suggesting it was Heisig’s connection to the modern tradition that really mattered.

While the “Germanness” of Heisig’s art was an important factor for most of the West German authors—including Günther Grass, who stated in 1982: “they paint more German in the GDR”—a few focused on the critical potential of his work in terms of the Nazi past.<sup>57</sup> In his article from the Frankfurt am Main brochure, Georg Bussmann stated that Heisig’s art asks “questions that are only too seldomly... posed in the FRG.”<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Rudolph Lange wrote that the GDR is much further along in coming to terms with this past than the FRG; “it has not stopped denouncing the violent crimes of the National Socialists and the fascists.”<sup>59</sup> This view of Heisig’s work, however, which is similar to the one found in East German publications, was rare in the West, where the emphasis tended to be on Heisig as a victim of history.

---

<sup>56</sup> Bussmann. “kommst aus der Chaos der deutsche Geschichte.” G. Rühle, *FAZ* (14 April 1979). In the original: “Authentizität.”

<sup>57</sup> Günther Grass, “Sich ein Bild machen,” in *Zeitvergleich* (1982): 12. “In der DDR wird deutscher gemalt.”

<sup>58</sup> Bussmann. In the original: “Fragen, die so in dieser BRD-Gesellschaft zu selten, zu wenig genau und zu wenig beharrlich gestellt werden.”

<sup>59</sup> Lange. In the original: “Der politische Linie der DDR entsprechend, die weit stärker, als es in der Bundesrepublik geschieht, bis heute nicht aufgehört hat, die Gewaltverbrechen des Nationalsozialismus und des Faschismus anzuprangern, sind Heisigs Bilder als kritische Beiträge zu verstehen, das Bewusstsein dafür wachzuhalten...”

Significantly, and in contrast to the 1990s, most of the articles about Heisig published in the FRG in the 1980s are positive, nor do they attempt to hide his relationship to the GDR.<sup>60</sup> In fact, some even highlight it. In 1980, Bussmann stated that “one senses the person, one senses position and a point of view...” in Heisig’s work.<sup>61</sup> “It is clearly legible on which side he stands [ie, Communism]. Nonetheless this painting is... not one-dimensional propaganda... The human significance of Heisig’s work is obvious; it lies in the use value of these images for mankind, for his understanding of history, his self understanding, his self worth...”<sup>62</sup> As such, it was possible to “de-politicize even this art” and thereby appreciate it in the West.<sup>63</sup>

### 1.3 THE RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION, 1989

In the final years of the Cold War era, scholars from East and West Germany came together to create a retrospective exhibition of Heisig’s work that toured cities in both countries beginning in the fall of 1989. A joint East-West production, it reflects the state of the literature in both countries just before the GDR’s collapse. It remains the most comprehensive and representative look at Heisig’s work to date.

---

<sup>60</sup> An important exception to this is “Unter dem Teppich sind Menschenleiber gefangen” by PHG in the *Berliner Morgenpost* (24 June 1984). PHG calls Heisig’s work “eine krude, obsessive Malerei.” He ends the article by calling Heisig’s landscapes failures (“misslingen”). Peter Sager is also critical in his article, “Ein Künstler mit Profil,” in *Die Zeit* (26 March 1982), but his criticism is aimed at the East German government rather than at Heisig. Presumably there were a few more; Karin Thomas mentioned, for example, that Heisig had encountered “hybride Ignoranz... die ihm zweitklassigen Eklektizismus und allegorische Überladung vorwarf” during his first solo exhibition in West Germany at the Galerie Hertz in Bremen in 1980. Karin Thomas, “Deutsch-deutsche Kunstdialog,” *Die Weltkunst* (1 January 1982): 29. Note: I have seen many but not all of the press clippings from this first exhibition. Thank you to Dieter Brusberg for allowing me to use the press folders from his gallery.

<sup>61</sup> Bussmann. “...man spürt die Person, man spürt Haltung und Standpunkt.”

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. “...aus der Arbeit Heisigs ist in der Tat ablesbar, auf welcher Seite er steht. Trotzdem ist diese Malerei... nicht eindimensional propagandistisch... Das humane Gewicht der Arbeit Heisigs ist offenbar, es liegt im Gebrauchswert dieser Bilder für den Menschen, für sein Verständnis von Geschichte, sein Selbstverständnis, sein Selbstgefühl.”

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. “...sich birgt die Möglichkeit, eben diese Kunst zu enpolitisieren...”

The catalog contains more than one hundred full-page color illustrations dedicated to Heisig's paintings. Roughly 45% of them are history paintings and *Komplexbilder*, 34% are portraits, and 21% are still lifes and landscapes. There are also more than one hundred black-and-white pages devoted to Heisig's drawings and prints—which are generally black-and-white in the original—with topics representatively distributed among portraiture, history, and literary illustrations. The catalog thus captures the diversity of Heisig's artistic production in the GDR and weights each section accordingly. The works shown also represent the various phases in his oeuvre—at least as far as possible considering his tendency to rework images—with canvases dating from the late 1950s to 1989. In terms of presentation, there is no reliable order to the images, although one could argue they are roughly chronological.

In the introduction to the catalog, the exhibition's curators—Peter Pachnicke from the East and Jörn Merkert from the West—point out that in comparison to music and literature, which can cross political borders relatively easily, the lack of access to original works in the visual arts had led to deep-seated stereotypes on both sides of the Wall. In the West, East German art was often thought to be “beautified Party-conforming Realism without artistic individuality,” while in the East, West Germany was often thought to be an “art market dictatorship [promoting] abstract art with no relation to reality.”<sup>64</sup> Such stereotypes only began to be redressed in the 1970s and 1980s. Now a deeper look at individual artists was needed, they argued: A comprehensive exhibition of Heisig's work was wanted by both sides.

The introduction—like the catalog as a whole—combines eastern and western perspectives of Heisig's work. It points out that in the West, his work first gained notice in the

---

<sup>64</sup> *Retrospektive*, 7. “...tiefgreifende Vorurteile eingepflanzt: Kunst aus der DDR als ‘wirklichkeitsverschönernder parteikonformer Realismus ohne jede künstlerische Individualität’ und Kunst aus der BRD als ‘kunstmarktgesteuerte Diktatur der Abstrakten ohne allen Wirklichkeitsgehalt.’”

late 1970s at the documenta exhibition in 1977, and that it was particularly valued because of the “self-tormenting intensity with which he grappled with German history – and not as a moral finger pointer, but rather as someone involved... [Heisig] has created the “work of mourning” that, according to Alexander Mitscherlich, is necessary for coming to terms with the darkest phase of German history.”<sup>65</sup> These works appealed to the West’s recent “hunger for images” stemming from decades of abstract art, but were also different from the “wild painting” that had emerged there in the 1980s: “This is not painting from the gut... [here is] an intact, precisely calculated image... Heisig: a painter who sets the whole of his artistic means [in play]...”<sup>66</sup> In addition to his value for the West, the introduction also emphasizes his commitment to society: “for Bernhard Heisig, it is important to have the chance ‘to work on a world view,’ since he is convinced that the best art requires a connection to—and interaction with—society.”<sup>67</sup>

The introduction is followed by nine articles, three of which are by East Germans: Pachnicke, Kober, and Sander. Pachnicke’s article is by far the longest in the catalog and follows directly after the introduction. It attempts to correct some of the misunderstandings that surround Heisig’s work in the West. First, he looks at the often-vehement artistic debates that took place in the GDR, especially those in the 1960s in which Heisig’s Paris Commune paintings played a role. These conflicts, he explains, were a “dispute of opinions”—rather than merely clashes with

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. “Aufmerksamkeit erregten Bernhard Heisigs Bilder seit Ende der siebziger Jahre in der Bundesrepublik wohl vor allem, weil sich hier ein Maler in geradezu selbstquälerischer Intensität mit deutscher Geschichte auseinandersetzte – und zwar nicht als moralisierender Ankläger, sondern als ein darin Verstrickter. Da leistete ein Maler aus der DDR in Bildern jene ‘Trauerarbeit,’ die nach Auffassung von Alexander Mitscherlich unverzichtbar ist für die Bewältigung der dunkelsten Phase deutscher Geschichte.”

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 7-8. “Hier wird nicht aus dem Bauch gemalt, vielmehr erwächst formale Überzeugungskraft... Heisig: ein Maler, der ganz auf die Mittel seiner Kunst setzt...”

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 8. “Für Bernhard Heisig ist es wichtig, die Chance zu haben, ‘an einem Weltbild mitzuarbeiten,’ denn er ist davon überzeugt, daß große Kunst gesellschaftlicher Bindung und Reibung bedarf.”



“dogmatic narrow-mindedness”—over the definition of Realism in the GDR.<sup>68</sup> They were an attempt—ultimately successful—to “push through a new understanding of Realism against an historically outmoded [one, i.e., illusionism].”<sup>69</sup> Also at stake was the role of the artist in society: “[Artists like Heisig] wanted a dialogical relationship to the public,” rather than a didactic one.<sup>70</sup> These debates, Pachnicke points out, were the crucible in which Heisig forged his views on art; they were a “method of recognizing—and being able to formulate—his own truth.”<sup>71</sup>

Another important point Pachnicke made was that Heisig’s theme (*Thema*) is not war, as is often contended in the West, but rather conflict; war is simply the subject matter (*Stoff*) through which he can address it. He also pointed out that Heisig’s interest in conflict—his “preparedness” for this theme—predates his wartime experiences.<sup>72</sup> As Heisig has stated, just being in war is not enough to make one want to paint it; one needs a special leaning toward it. According to Pachnicke, this leaning was already evident in Heisig as a child.

Like Kober, Pachnicke emphasized the importance of structure in Heisig’s work, reinforcing the point made in the introduction to the catalog. He then ended the article by pointing out that Heisig’s images are “not just about oppression and angst. An insatiable hunger for beauty, harmony and continuity fill... many of Heisig’s landscapes, nudes and portraits.”<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 12. “Man verkleinert die Bedeutung dieser geistigen Auseinandersetzungen, wenn man so tut, als seien progressive Künstler damals nur auf dogmatische Engstirnigkeit gestoßen.”

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. “Vielmehr mußte sich ein bis dahin in Inhalt und Form neues Realismus-Verständnis gegen ein historisch altgewordenes durchsetzen.”

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 13. “Die Künstler wollte ihn Verhältnis zum Publikum nicht mehr als das von Lehrern zu Belehrteten definiert sehen, sondern als das von mündigen Partnern... Im Unterschied zum aufklärerischen Realismus-Verständnis der fünfziger Jahre zielte dieses Konzept auf ein ‘dialogisches’ Verhältnis zum Publikum.”

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 14. “Auseinandersetzung mit der Figur und Reibung am Gesellschaftlichen wurde zur Methode, die eigene Wahrheit zu erkennen und sie eigensinnig zu formulieren.”

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 15, 19. “...eine Bereitschaft für bestimmte Themen...”

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 24. “...nicht überall Unterdrückung und Angst herrschen... Ungestillte Sehnsucht nach Schönheit, Harmonie, Dauer erfüllt dieses Bild, erfüllt viele Landschaften, Akte, Porträts Heisigs.”

Pachnicke's article is followed by Merkert's, who focused much of his text on Heisig's views on art, which are often at odds with the Western perspective. He pointed out that Heisig does not believe in the West's emphasis on the unique individuality of the artist in paint and quotes him as follows: "having to hold onto oneself is very stressful, especially for artists. Always requiring him to be original and new, to push his ego to the forefront. A dreadful thought..."<sup>74</sup> Moreover, according to Heisig, "the problem with freedom and art [as understood in the West] is that it means 'make whatever you want.' ...To be needed, to play an indispensable role in the spiritual interaction with society, that needs the cooperation [*entgegenkommen*] of the artist with society. Not in that [the artist] gives in, but rather that he reaches out, gets mixed up in, and takes a position..."<sup>75</sup>

The rest of the articles in the catalog look at Heisig's life and work from a variety of perspectives. Beaucamp described his first encounters with the artist in Leipzig in 1968. He also placed his work within the Western art historical canon, making links not only to Corinth and Kokoschka but also to the Dadaists and Robert Rauschenberg. For Beaucamp, Heisig's greatest achievement is the integration of non-painterly artistic developments into painting. Klaus Honnef looked at the relationship between Heisig's work and film with its shifting perspectives and

---

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 26. "...sich an sich selbst festhalten zu müssen, ist sehr anstrengend, besonders für den Künstler. Verlangt es doch von ihm, stets originell und neu zu sein, immer sein Ich nach vorn zu treiben. Ein schrecklicher Gedanke..." Heisig in Merkert, "Die eindeutig vieldeutige Wirklichkeit,"

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. "Machen sie ganz frei, was sie wollen' heißt zugleich: 'Mach doch, was du willst,' und das ist eine gespenstische Gleichgültigkeit, die bei dem Künstler das Gefühl des Nichtgebrauchwerdens erweckt... Um gebraucht zu werden, in den geistigen Auseinandersetzungen der Gesellschaft eine unverzichtbare Rolle zu spielen, dazu bedarf es auch eines Entgegenkommens des Künstlers gegenüber der Gesellschaft. Nicht, indem er sich ihr anpaßt, sondern indem er... mit dem eigenen Anliegen auf sie zugeht, sich einmischt und Stellung bezieht."

acoustic references. Carla Schulz-Hoffmann compared his work to that of Beckmann and Dix. Sander, on the other hand, focused on Heisig's print series, *The Fascist Nightmare*.<sup>76</sup>

The last article in the catalog—not including the biographical documentation—was written by the highly regarded West German scholar, Eberhard Roters. Unlike the other texts, his continued in the Western tradition of focusing almost exclusively on Heisig's *Komplexbilder* and interpreting them in terms of his wartime biography. In fact, he argued that the Paris Commune paintings are actually allegories for Heisig's experiences as a soldier, “a first level for coming to terms [with this past].”<sup>77</sup> For Roters, Heisig's paintings are “memory paintings,” which he also called “the inner rooms of our consciousness.”<sup>78</sup> His importance as a painter is thus in “remembering for the future.”<sup>79</sup> It is this view—with its emphasis on memory and trauma—that would come to prominence after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

#### 1.4 SCHOLARSHIP AFTER 1989

Since reunification, the literature on Heisig has been dominated by publications created by his art dealers, Dieter Brusberg and Rüdiger Küttner.<sup>80</sup> Brusberg represented Heisig already in the early 1980s, when he began exhibiting and selling his work in the West. Significantly, he tends to

---

<sup>76</sup> Significantly, Sanders' article for the *WdB* catalog did not emphasize the prints as “making visible... the mechanisms of repression and manipulation” that lead to war, something he talked about in an earlier text about them in *Bernhard Heisig, Der faschistische Alptraum* (Leipzig: Verlag Philipp Reclam, 1989) 55, 73, 81.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 85. “Die Beschäftigung mit dem Thema ist, so erscheint es mir, eine erste Stufe der Bewältigung, eine erste Stufe auf der Jakobsleiter. Heisig ringt mit der Erinnerung, und das Thema ‘Pariser Kommune’ liefert dafür einen metaphorischen Spiegel.”

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 88. “Die Räume in Heisigs Bildern sind Erinnerungsräume, und Erinnerungsräume sind Innenräume unseres Bewußtsein... Der Alptraum als Erinnerungsraum: Es ist der deutsche Alptraum.”

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 83. “Heisigs Gemälde sind Erinnerungsbilder; sie sind dies im beschriebenen Sinne als Erinnerung für die Zukunft.” Originally, *Der Wut der Bilder* bore the title, “Erinnerungen für die Zukunft.” This was changed shortly before the exhibition opened in Leipzig.

<sup>80</sup> Brusberg is from West Germany; Küttner, East Germany.

promote Heisig's history paintings and *Komplexbilder*. Küttner, who had worked for the East German *Kunsthandel* in the 1980s, began representing Heisig only after the *Wende*—at which point he founded the Galerie Berlin—and tends to promote his landscapes and still lifes. Between them, they published more than five catalogs on Heisig between 1992 and 2003.<sup>81</sup> In doing so, they played a valuable role in helping to keep Heisig's work in the public eye at a time when the attacks on his character in the press were attempting to excise his contribution to art history. Generally, these catalogs contain a number of articles about Heisig written by different authors, although most are by former West Germans.

Whereas East German scholars dominated Heisig reception before 1990, writing all of the books and catalogs about Heisig's work before the 1989 Retrospective, only three have published new articles in a Heisig catalog since then.<sup>82</sup> Of them, only one—Dietulf Sander—had previously published on Heisig.<sup>83</sup> Not surprisingly, this shift from an East German perspective to a West German one in the wake of the *Wende* has led to a greater emphasis on Heisig's war paintings and a tendency to interpret them in terms of trauma. A significant difference from earlier West German publications, however, is that articles written after 1990 are frequently

---

<sup>81</sup> Dieter Brusberg, ed. *Bernhard Heisig "Begegnung mit Bildern"* (Berlin: Galerie Brusberg Berlin, 1995). Rüdiger Küttner, ed. *Bernhard Heisig, Geisterbahn* (Berlin: Galerie Berlin, 1995). Ernst Walter Brüggemann and Rüdiger Küttner, eds. *Bernhard Heisig, Bilder aus Vier Jahrzehnten* (Köln: Wienand, 1998). Dieter Brusberg, ed. *Bernhard Heisig "Gestern und in unserer Zeit"* (Berlin: Galerie Brusberg Berlin, 2003). The following catalog was for a show that closed at the Galerie Berlin: Theodor Helmert-Corvey, ed. *Bernhard Heisig, Zeiten zu Leben, Malerei* (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 1994). There were several other catalogs on Heisig in these years, but they contain little or no new text. These include *Bernhard Heisig "Der Maler und sein Thema," Bilder auf Stein und Leinwand* (Berlin: Galerie Brusberg Berlin, 2001) and *Bernhard Heisig, Herbstspaziergang* (Berlin: Galerie Berlin, 2003).

<sup>82</sup> There are occasional reprints of past articles by Kober and speeches by Heisig.

<sup>83</sup> Günter Scholz published a short article on *The Fascist Nightmare* in the small catalog, *Otto Dix, Bernhard Heisig. Der Schrecken des Krieges* in 1992. Jürgen Papies published two articles in 1995, each taking a close look at one of Heisig's themes. And in 1998 and 2005, Sander published articles on Heisig's prints. Sander also published a book in 2001 based on his dissertation research, *Bernhard Heisig, Schutzversuche, 1963-2001* (Berlin: Galerie Berlin, 2001). Significantly, this book contains virtually no text, only a short, four-page introduction by Sander and a half-page commentary by Heisig.

defensive in tone and many attempt to distance Heisig from the GDR.<sup>84</sup> Significantly, the conflicts he had with cultural functionaries, especially in 1964 and 1965, have become a regular feature of his biography in many of these texts. These differences must be seen, in part, as a response to the *Bilderstreit*, or image battles, of the 1990s over what role—if any—former East German artists and their work should be allowed to play in the new Germany. Indeed, these disputes are referred to directly in several Heisig catalogs published in the mid 1990s.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, East German artists like Heisig—those who had been the most highly praised in the West in the 1980s—experienced a sudden and dramatic reversal of fortune in the FRG in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Whereas Heisig’s Retrospective had opened to positive reviews in October 1989, by the end of November it was being criticized.<sup>85</sup> Similarly Peter Ludwig, a major West German collector and exhibitor

---

<sup>84</sup> Since 1989/90, the end of Heisig’s tenure as rector of the Leipzig Academy in 1964 has been explained as a punishment for the controversial speech he gave that spring. No explanation is given as to why Heisig was allowed to continue teaching or why he was promoted to head of the Graphics Department the following year. The former is particularly intriguing considering the official reason given in current scholarship is that Heisig was “not fulfilling his teaching duties toward students.” Since 1995, his complete departure from the Leipzig Academy in 1968 has been explained as the result of increasing political pressure on him. Since 1998, the latter was defined as a threat that Heisig attend a multi-year Party school. In chapters 3 and 4, I cite new archival evidence to argue that Heisig resigned from his position as rector in 1964 and voluntarily left the Leipzig Academy in 1968, both so he could have more time for his art.

<sup>85</sup> Between November 1989 and March 1990, the wife of artist Roger Loewig wrote a number of letters to curators at various museums in West Germany trying to stir up a negative reaction to Heisig and the traveling exhibition of his work. Notably, all of these letters date to after the Fall of the Berlin Wall. They hit upon—and perhaps contributed to the creation of—most of the major tropes of anti-Heisig sentiment. She saw Heisig as opportunistic, slippery and shrewd, and pointed out his joining the SS and then later the Communist Party immediately upon arriving in the eastern zone as proof. She pointed out that he was part of the GDR elite, which had the same privileges as the political elite, and thus that he represented the GDR with its “denial of human rights” and continuation of Nazi ways. Significantly, however, she admitted that he may be “one of the best of them” (i.e., East German artists) and also that she could not see past her own emotions. She wanted to know who was paying for this exhibition (with its posters, invitations, and catalog) and was upset that Heisig was receiving such attention both in terms of the money spent and the number of important guests attending the opening. Clearly her husband played a role in these letters (“the opening of the border is too late for Loewig”); Roger Loewig had lived in East Germany and been thrown into a Stasi jail in 1963 for a year for exhibiting works that were critical of the government. In 1972, he moved to West Germany. AdK Archiv: Loewig Nachlass.

of East German art, commented the following summer on the virtual ban he was seeing on the display of East German art.<sup>86</sup>

It was not until 1993, however, that what has become known as the German-German *Bilderstreit* began in earnest. In this year eighteen prominent West Germans—including the GDR emigrants Georg Baselitz and Gerhard Richter—left the visual arts department of the West Berlin Academy in protest against the en-bloc acceptance of colleagues from its eastern counterpart, the East German Academy.<sup>87</sup> One year later, in 1994, the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin became the focus of a second *Bilderstreit* because of an exhibition of post-war German art from their permanent collection that placed masterpieces from the two Germanys side by side. The CDU politician Uwe Lehmann-Braun ignited the debate with a polemic in parliament in which he likened the museum to a *Parteischule* (Communist school) because of its inclusion of the so-called *Staatskünstler* (State Artists), Heisig, Sitte, Tübke, and Mattheuer.<sup>88</sup> A third major *Bilderstreit* took place in 1998 when Heisig was invited—as one of only two East German artists—to contribute work to the Reichstag’s permanent collection. Heisig was attacked for having been a teenage soldier in the Waffen SS—he had fought for a division of the Hitler Youth—and for having been a respected and powerful artist within the GDR. In fact, the two were conflated by Lehmann-Braun, who stated that Heisig had “loyally served two dictatorships.”<sup>89</sup> In the end, however, it was Heisig’s commitment to the GDR—his role as a so-called *Staatskünstler*—that was the real problem.

---

<sup>86</sup> Paul Kaiser and Karl-Siegbert Rehbert, eds., *Enge und Vielfalt, Auftragskunst und Kunstförderung in der DDR, Analysen und Meinungen* (Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 1999) 589.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> For a reprint of some of the major press articles from this debate see Wolfgang Kahlcke, “Pressedokumentation zu einem durch die Neue Nationalgalerie ausgelösten ‘deutschen Bilderstreit,’” in *Jahrbuch Preußisches Kulturbesitz* 31 (Berlin, 1994) 365-408. Thank you to Bettina Schaschke for providing me with this article.

<sup>89</sup> Uwe Lehmann-Braun as quoted in Axel Hecht, “Editorial,” *Art, Das Kunstmagazin* 5 (1998): 3. “...in zwei deutschen Diktaturen treu gedient...”

On the surface of it, the term *Staatskünstler* is not a negative one. It means, quite literally, State Artist. The history of art is filled with them, from the Romans to Jacques Louis David; artists who fulfilled commissions for—and whose art came to represent—the State. From this perspective, Heisig was indeed a *Staatskünstler*. He fulfilled artistic commissions and his work represented the GDR in major international exhibitions, including documenta and the Venice Biennale. He also enjoyed significant privileges as a result, ranging from employment to the ability to travel to and exhibit in the West.

But the term *Staatskünstler* when used to refer to East German artists has a couple of negative connotations that do not apply to Heisig, nor, for that matter, to most of the other artists so labelled. The first of these is the idea that *Staatskünstler* forfeited their artistic integrity in exchange for fame and power. In Heisig's case, however, he actually changed from an illusionistic style to a “modern” one in the mid 1960s, thus from a style acceptable to the State to one that was not.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, rather than Heisig changing his style to fit the regime, it was actually the regime that changed its stance on art: when Erich Honecker came to power in 1971, he stated, “for those artists who truly believe in Socialism, there can be no more taboos on their work, neither in content nor in style.”<sup>91</sup> It is in the wake of this change that Heisig's rise to fame and power really began.

The second implication behind the term *Staatskünstler* is that these artists actively oppressed others. In Heisig's case, the implied accusation is that he, as professor at and rector of

---

<sup>90</sup> Throughout this dissertation I use the term “modern” the way it was used in East Germany, where it meant the formally innovative artistic styles of the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as expressionism, cubism, and surrealism. Depending on who said it and when, it could be a negative, neutral, or positive term.

<sup>91</sup> Erich Honecker at the Fourth Conference of the ZK der SED as reported in the Party's main newspaper, *Neues Deutschland* (18 December 1971) and cited in *Kunstkombinat DDR, Daten und Zitate zur Kunst und Kunstpolitik der DDR 1945-1990*, eds. Günter Feist and Eckhart Gillen (Berlin: Museumspädagogischen Dienst, 1990) 77.

“Wenn man von der festen Position des Sozialismus ausgeht, kann es meines Erachtens auf dem Gebiet von Kunst und Literatur keine Tabus geben. Das betrifft sowohl die Fragen der inhaltlichen Gestaltung als auch des Stils...”

the Leipzig Academy, prevented those with a different view of art from becoming artists. This is a complicated libel because it faults Heisig for doing his job, i.e. for accepting and rejecting applications for the Leipzig Academy, and implies that his choices were merely politically or personally motivated rather than stemming from choices about an application's artistic worth. It is exacerbated by the fact that it was much more difficult to become an artist in East Germany than in the West: usually one had to graduate from one of the four main art academies—located in Leipzig, (East) Berlin, Halle and Dresden—to succeed as an artist, so if Heisig rejected an application, there were not a lot of other options except to reapply the following year or to apply to one of the other three schools.<sup>92</sup> It argues in Heisig's favor, however, that many of the major names in the East German art world of the 1970s and 1980s were once his students.<sup>93</sup> That they were recognized on both sides of the Wall—and therefore in places beyond Heisig's control—further emphasizes their artistic merit.

As rector, Heisig also worked to make the Leipzig Academy more “modern.” He hired Hartwig Ebersbach—the so-called *enfant terrible* of the East German art world—to create and teach a multi-media class, running interference for years until it was ultimately shut down by political functionaries.<sup>94</sup> He also started an exhibition program within the Leipzig Academy to show works by Picasso and other modern artists. Moreover, he went to bat for students who were threatened by the State.<sup>95</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup> Each school had its own profile, however, so if someone wanted to be a graphic artist, for example, the Leipzig Academy would be the best of the four schools to attend. Besides the four main art academies, one could attend one of the *Abendakademie* (night schools).

<sup>93</sup> Students include Hartwig Ebersbach, Heinz Zander, Völker Stelzmann, Arno Rink and Sighard Gille. For a western audience, Heisig's most famous student was Neo Rauch, who studied with him as a master student from 1986-90. Lothar Lang, *Malerei und Graphik in Ostdeutschland* (Leipzig: Faber & Faber, 2002) 280.

<sup>94</sup> At Bernhard Heisig's request, Ebersbach taught a class in “experimental art” at the Leipzig Academy from 1979-84. Lang, 275.

<sup>95</sup> On September 20, 1961, just weeks after taking up the position of rector of the Leipzig Academy, Heisig wrote a letter to the district attorney of Bischofswerda in which he defended a student who had damaged an election poster.



In the end, however, the truth of whether Heisig and the other so-called *Staatskünstler* had actually oppressed others—or sold out their artistic integrity—did not really matter to those making the accusations in the early years of the new Germany. What mattered was these artists' high-profile association with the GDR, a country that was repeatedly attacked in the press in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall, which seemed to prove it was an *Unrechtsstaat*, or illegal country that never should have existed. In the heavily charged political atmosphere of Germany in the 1990s, the so-called *Staatskünstler* were seen by many (West) Germans as having helped legitimate the East German regime—and thus having contributed to its longevity—by the very fact that they had not left it, thus tacitly, if not actively, supporting it. This subtly poisonous accusation recalls the exiles-*Hierbleiber* debates from the Third Reich, where exiles were castigated for abandoning the German people in their time of greatest need, and *Hierbleiber* (literally: remaining here), for tacitly lending their support to the regime by not leaving. Artists like Heisig were thus castigated for being *Hierbleiber* – for staying in the GDR and attempting to change it from within.

The controversy around contemporary East German art did not begin with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Already in 1977 when Heisig, Tübke, Mattheuer, and Sitte exhibited paintings in documenta 6, there were problems. Protestors delivered leaflets and conducted a sit-in; Georg

---

Heisig explained that the student was studying poster design at the Leipzig Academy and that his destruction of the poster was presumably a result of this fact. Heisig stated he “could imagine” it was simply an impulsive response, spurred on by alcohol, to the bad design of the poster itself. Heisig wrote that he did not think the destruction was politically motivated and pointed out that the election had taken place only a few hours later, i.e. the “use effect” of the poster had been largely fulfilled already. *Eilbrief von Heisig an Staatsanwalt des Kreisgerichtes Bischofswerda*, September 20, 1961. HGB Archive. Heisig got into considerable trouble for this letter. In a meeting held on October 13, 1961, some used this event to question how it was he had become rector of the Leipzig Academy in the first place. “We knew that it would not be easy to work with him... but in the last few years he has shown a thoroughly positive development... doubtless, there are still a few flaws...” [“Wir wussten, dass es nicht einfach würde mit ihm zu arbeiten, aber... Gen. Heisig hat in den letzten Jahren eine durchaus positive Entwicklung genommen, zweifellos hat er noch einige Mängel...” *Protokoll der Parteileitungssitzung vom 13.10.61*. HGB Archive. In a meeting held on October 17, 1961, Heisig had to defend his defense of the student. *Protokoll der Parteileitungssitzung vom 17.10.61*. HGB Archive.

Baselitz and Markus Lüpertz pulled their work from the show.<sup>96</sup> But these voices did not command press attention the way they did in the wake of November 1989. In large part this was due to the leftist leanings of West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s. With the sudden collapse of the GDR, however, the authority that leftist intellectuals had enjoyed since Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* (politics toward the East) was undermined and conservative voices came to the fore.<sup>97</sup>

Not all of the criticism came from West Germans, however. There were, in fact, three distinct groups of East Germans whose condemnations of the so-called *Staatskünstler* were used to buoy negative (West) German criticisms. The first came from the youngest generation of artists in the GDR, those whose radicality in terms of formal innovation or direct criticism of the State had caused conflict with the government, and for whom the fall of the Berlin Wall had ended the GDR before such conflicts could be worked out; or, in the case of those who had recently emigrated to the West, before they could disassociate themselves from their East German past. It is this group in particular that sees the so-called *Staatskünstler* as having sold out their artistic integrity—as evidenced by their apparent artistic conservatism—and misused their power to oppress younger, more formally innovative artists. Such views are not surprising and are, in essence, a generational conflict typical for Germany where, as Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich observed in their book, *The Inability to Mourn*, intergenerational conflicts are

---

<sup>96</sup> “Protest gegen offizielle ‘DDR’-Maler in Kassel,” *Die Welt* (22 June 1977). “Was auf der documenta nicht gezeigt wird. Die verfemte Kunst der ungehorsame Maler aus der ‘DDR.’ Hinter jeder Säule lauschen Riesenohren,” *Die Welt* (30 June 1977). “Malerei, Plastik, Zeichnung, Video, Photo: auf der sechsten documenta ist die Kunst sich selber zum Thema geworden,” *Die Zeit* (1 July 1977). For a more comprehensive look at the inclusion of East German artists in documenta 6, see Gisela Schirmer, *DDR und documenta. Kunst im deutsch-deutschen Widerspruch* (Berlin: Reimer, 2005).

<sup>97</sup> Two additional factors that contributed to the negative reception of East German artists in the new Germany was: 1) West German artists did not want the competition East German artists brought to the art market, and 2) after the Wende, Berlin lost the extra funding for the arts it had had in the Cold War era when it was a *Schauplatz* between East and West.

particularly strong due to the horror of the German past.<sup>98</sup> These younger artists were rebelling against the hegemony of the *Flakhelfer* (anti-aircraft) generation of artists—which included the *Staatskünstler*—who were not only greatly praised in the GDR and internationally in the final decades of the Cold War, but who were also in control of the East German art academies and institutions and, as such, dictating policy.<sup>99</sup>

A second group of East German voices critical of the “*Staatskünstler*” came from artists who left the GDR and made an international name for themselves as “German” artists. The most notable example of this group is Baselitz, who stated in an oft-quoted interview in *Art* magazine in 1990: “There were no artists in the GDR, they all left... no artists, no painters. None of them ever painted a picture... They are interpreters who fulfilled the program of the East German system...[they are] simply assholes.”<sup>100</sup> Both he and Gerhard Richter left the GDR as adults for the artistic “freedom” of the West, where they became internationally famous. Their East German backgrounds—including artistic training—are usually glossed over.<sup>101</sup> And yet, this background played a role in their work and lent them an aura of Otherness—but one that also confirms the West by their choice to live there—a valuable commodity in a capitalist market.

---

<sup>98</sup> Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior*, 1984. In this book, the Mitscherlichs were speaking about West Germany, but the concepts can also be applied to East Germany.

<sup>99</sup> Members of the *Flakhelfer* generation, also known as the Hitler Youth generation, were born between 1925 and 1935. They are so named because they helped defend Germany against the Allies at the end of the war, albeit as children. See Stephen Brockmann, *Literature and German Reunification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 139. This generation of artists held most of the jobs in the GDR in the 1980s, thus inadvertently blocking the upward mobility of younger generations. This was the result of historical circumstances: in the wake of the Second World War, there were plenty of openings in the art world that needed to be filled. By the 1980s, the generation who had taken these jobs was only just getting to retirement age. Had the GDR survived another ten years, there would have been a significant change in artistic guard that presumably would have alleviated some of the tension between this generation and the ones that followed.

<sup>100</sup> “Ein Meister, der Talent verschmäht,” *Art, das Kunstmagazin* 6 (1990): 70. “Es gab keine Künstler in der DDR, alle sind weggegangen... Keine Künstler, keine Maler. Keiner von denen hat je ein Bild gemalt... Das sind Interpreten, die ein Programm des Systems in der DDR ausgefüllt haben... ganz einfach Arschlöcher.”

<sup>101</sup> This is beginning to change. Jeanne Nugent, for example, recently completed a dissertation on Gerhard Richter that includes a discussion of his East German work and training. Jeanne Nugent, “Family Album and Shadow Archive: Gerhard Richter’s East, West and All German Painting, 1949-1966,” diss., U of Pennsylvania, 2005.

The third group of East German voices is comprised of artists, critics, and art historians from places other than Leipzig/Halle. These individuals have attempted to reconfigure—perhaps unconsciously—the history of East German art in recent years. In particular, they downplay the importance of the Leipzig School. This view was particularly apparent in the 2003 exhibition at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, *Art in the GDR, A Retrospective (Kunst in der DDR, Eine Retrospektive)*, where the “Leipzig School” had only one small artificially lit room, while artists from Berlin enjoyed three of the five rooms in the exhibition that were open to natural lighting (Dresden had the other two). For those unfamiliar with the history of East German art, the “Leipzig School” would have seemed no more important than Hermann Glöckner—an artist who lived in obscurity for most of his life in the GDR—while Berlin enjoyed an importance it did not possess before the fall of the Berlin Wall, at least not in the West.<sup>102</sup>

With the new millenium, the *Bilderstreit* have quieted.<sup>103</sup> In fact, the *Art in the GDR* exhibition of 2003 can be seen as the first in a new phase in the post-Wall reception of East German art, one marked by relative acceptance, if not praise, in the press. This is the result, in part, of *Ostalgie*, or nostalgia for the East, in which East German products suddenly became trendy.<sup>104</sup> In part, it is the result of tailoring exhibitions of East German art to western interests and understanding. *Art in the GDR*, for example, did not attempt to present a comprehensive overview of East German art. Rather, it focused on those works that had a “modern” style and a

---

<sup>102</sup> Officially, (East) Berlin was one of two official centers for painting in East Germany. It did not excite the same level of interest in the West as Leipzig did.

<sup>103</sup> For years people have been claiming that the *Bilderstreit* are over. I am not yet decided on this point. In terms of public outcries in the press, the *Bilderstreit* are indeed largely over, although Willi Sitte continues to be denigrated. The implication that the issues at stake have been resolved, however, is not accurate. Time has simply made East Germany less threatening to the identity of the new Germany.

<sup>104</sup> *Ostalgie* reached its peak in 2003 with the film, *Goodbye Lenin*. The *Kunst in der DDR* exhibition, which opened in the summer of 2003, coincided with this relatively new positive interest in East Germany. The exhibition was intended as a follow-up to the Neue Nationalgalerie’s controversial 1994 exhibition.

universal, if not western, subject matter. Conservative works of Socialist Realism and paintings of workers, although common in the GDR, were largely excluded. The result was an exhibition that was highly praised in the press and that managed to convince many of its western viewers—who attended in record-breaking numbers—that, indeed, there had been art in the GDR.

The attempt to gain recognition for East German art by casting it into a form more palatable to a Western audience can also be seen in the 2005-06 exhibition, *Bernhard Heisig, The Anger of Images*. Like *Art in the GDR*, this exhibition was well received in the German press. Put together by the (West) German curator Eckhart Gillen for Heisig's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, it opened in Leipzig and traveled to Düsseldorf and Berlin before closing in Wrocław, Poland. It was based largely on Gillen's 2004 dissertation, "*Difficulties in the Search for Truth*": *Bernhard Heisig in Conflict Between "Prescribed Antifascism" and his War Trauma; A Study of the Problems of Antifascist and Socialist Art in the SBZ/GDR 1945-89*.<sup>105</sup> This work—easily accessible on the web—and the related exhibition have come to dominate current perceptions of Heisig's life and art.

Inspired by the Reichstag debate of 1998, Gillen's dissertation "focuses on one, albeit central, aspect of [Heisig's] work: his personal confrontation as a painter and graphic artist with the past, with his role as perpetrator and victim in the war and as a member of a criminal organization, the Waffen-SS."<sup>106</sup> He was particularly interested in how Heisig "countered" the "prescribed antifascism" of the East German state with an art "free from ideological guidelines"

---

<sup>105</sup> Gillen's dissertation does not focus on Heisig so much as use him as its main example in its exploration of the "problematic of antifascism and socialist art in the SBZ/GDR 1945-89." Of the approximately 412 pages of text in the body of the dissertation, Heisig is the focus for less than half (approximately 198 pages). This is an important point because it helps explain why significant archival sources—such as those requiring Heisig's signature—were not consulted.

<sup>106</sup> Gillen (2004), 15. "Die vorliegende Untersuchung versteht sich nicht als Monographie über Heisig, sondern konzentriert sich auf einen, wenn auch zentralen, Aspekt seines Werkes: seine persönliche Auseinandersetzung als Maler und Grafiker mit der Vergangenheit, mit seiner Rolle als Täter und Opfer im Krieg und als Angehöriger einer verbrecherischen Organisation, der Waffen-SS."

based on his own “individual experiences and impressions” from the Second World War.<sup>107</sup> In this regard, Gillen praised Heisig’s independence and courage: As he stated it, “art that is ‘the creation of the personality’ is only possible in a system of organized Schizophrenia [i.e., a dictatorship like the GDR] with great courage of conviction.”<sup>108</sup>

But Heisig is also presented in the dissertation as a “victim” of Communism.<sup>109</sup> Indeed, his well-known tendency to rework his paintings is presented as proof that “forced self censoring perhaps affected his work more deeply than he himself knows.”<sup>110</sup> Similarly, his success in the GDR in the 1970s is attributed to his “preparedness to make ideological and artistic compromises” rather than a change in cultural policy.<sup>111</sup> Significantly, Gillen points to *The Brigadier II* (1970) and *The Paris Commune* (1971)—two particularly East German works in terms of subject matter—as evidence of Heisig’s willingness to make “concessions.”<sup>112</sup>

These varying and at times conflicting portrayals of Heisig presumably stem, in part, from a condemnatory view of the “second German dictatorship” prevalent in German society since the *Wende*. It is a view that can also be seen in the dissertation’s dismissal of antifascism as “the central lie of the SED and the GDR.”<sup>113</sup> Heisig’s work and decision to remain in East Germany, however, cannot be fully understood outside of this so-called lie. In fact, the Communists’ proven anti-Nazi track record and commitment to maintaining the fight against

---

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. “Am Beispiel seiner Gemälde- und Grafikzyklen werde seine künstlerischen Versuche analysiert, dem offiziellen Geschichtsbild eines ‘verordneten Antifaschismus’ unbeeinträchtigt von ideologischen Vorgaben seine individuellen Erfahrungen und Eindrücke entgegenzusetzen...”

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 10. “Kunst als ‘die Schöpfung der Persönlichkeit’ ist in einem System organisierter Schizophrenie nur mit großer Zivilcourage möglich.”

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 222. “...dass er Täter und Opfer der Zeitläufte war. Seine künstlerische Leistung liegt in der steten künstlerischen Auseinandersetzung mit den Traumata einer Biografie, die aus Krieg und Diktatur in eine weitere Diktatur und den Kalten Krieg überging.”

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 10. “Diese erzwungene Selbstzensur hat sein Verhalten und sein Werk vielleicht tiefer geprägt als er es wohl selbst wahrnehmen kann.”

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 222. “Die Brechungen und Kompromisse im Lebenslauf...”

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 15. “...Heisigs Bereitschaft zum ideologischen und künstlerischen Kompromiß.”

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 16. “...den Antifaschismus als zentrale Lebenslüge der SED und der DDR.”

fascism are two of the most important reasons for Heisig's commitment to the GDR, as they were for many intellectuals who chose to live there, including Bertolt Brecht, Anna Seghers, and Arnold Zweig. Antifascism must thus be recognized as an important ethical stance for intellectuals in East Germany regardless of the problematic nature of its utilization by the SED.

Heisig's commitment to antifascism is closely related to his wartime biography, which appears in its most detailed form in Gillen's dissertation. This information is based on four day-long interviews he conducted with the artist in 2001 and a typescript of an interview conducted by the (East) German filmmaker Lutz Dambeck in 1995. The story told—often through the artist's own words—is a valuable contribution to Heisig scholarship. Yet, the artist's comments are not dealt with critically, a tendency that appears in most of the literature about him today despite the problems it raises in terms of forgetting, misremembering, and intentionally altering facts. This is particularly problematic in Heisig's case because of the volatility of his past, both as an SS soldier and as a leading cultural figure in the GDR. In both cases, the world view Heisig had subscribed to not only collapsed completely, but was the focus of significant denigration afterwards. As a result, the memories of these pasts are particularly susceptible not only to inadvertent reinterpretation in light of subsequent events, but also to conscious alteration in order to avoid condemnation.<sup>114</sup>

Until it was revealed in a French newspaper in 1981, for example, Heisig made no mention of his past as part of the SS. In fact, neither his friends nor his own sons knew.<sup>115</sup>

---

<sup>114</sup> The continuing volatility of this past was demonstrated in August 2006 when the (West) German author and “moral voice of Germany” Günter Grass outed himself as having been part of the SS as a teenager. This revelation created a media frenzy in Germany. Significantly, Grass' SS affiliation can be found in his military files, which, apparently, no one had ever consulted.

<sup>115</sup> An exception to this is Herbert Stähr, a friend of Heisig's since childhood. Both had fought in the Second World War. After the war, Stähr settled in West Germany. Nonetheless the two remained in contact, a fact that was remarked upon in Heisig's Stasi file. BStU Leipzig: ZMA Abt. XX 3098 II, 000003.

Whether the Stasi did is unclear.<sup>116</sup> In any case, Heisig was not forthcoming about this part of his past until after he was outed in 1981. In official questionnaires he filled out in 1948 and 1976, for example, he listed his rank in the war as “O.-Gefreiter” (lance corporal).<sup>117</sup> And yet in the SS there were no *Obergefreiter* but rather *Rottenführer* (lance corporal). It is a difference only in name, not in rank. Yet it is a significant difference because one term refers to a soldier in the *Wehrmacht*, where many were drafted, and the other, a soldier in the SS, an elite group of volunteers. Similarly, in the 1976 questionnaire, he stated he was part of the “12. Panzer div.” (12<sup>th</sup> Tank Division), rather than part of the 12. SS Panzer division. By using the term “*Obergefreiter*” instead of “*Rottenführer*” and leaving the “SS” out of the name of his division, Heisig made it easy for people to think he was an ordinary soldier in the *Wehrmacht* rather than the SS; it is an assumption encouraged by his young age.<sup>118</sup> As a result, he diverted attention away from his participation in one of the most fanatical units in the Nazi military.

\* \* \*

---

<sup>116</sup> Someone looked at Heisig’s hospital files from the Third Reich in 1973, which is the year he had his first major retrospective in the GDR. This suggests the Stasi knew about this past; were it a West German who had looked, presumably the information would have been used to discredit him and, with him, the East. On the other hand, in 1981, when Heisig’s past as part of the HJ-SS emerged in the French press, there was a request—currently in his Stasi file—to do a background check on Heisig, his mother, and his father during the Third Reich. This suggests they either did not know about this past or, perhaps, were making sure they had all the details. BStU Leipzig: Bernhard Heisig 82616/92, 000023/24/25.

<sup>117</sup> Heisig filled out the first questionnaire in 1948 as part of his application for the Leipzig Academy. SächsStAL: SAfgKBL 324/1. The second questionnaire was filled out in 1976, presumably as a prerequisite to reassuming the position of rector at the Leipzig Academy. HGB Archive: Bernhard Heisig.

<sup>118</sup> The fact that Heisig still uses the term “*Obergefreiter*” today despite being open about his involvement in the SS indicates that he has internalized this change. Documents in Heisig’s Stasi file suggest that his alterations were successful. See footnote 116. For a literary approach to this issue, see Annah Seghers’ short story from 1952, “Der Mann und seine Name,” which focuses on a Nazi soldier who changes his name after the war in an attempt to escape his past.



Gillen's dissertation served as the basis for the 2005-06 exhibition, *Bernhard Heisig, The Anger of Images*.<sup>119</sup> Presented in the catalog and official press materials as a "comprehensive overview of Heisig's work," it actually focused on his *Komplexbilder*.<sup>120</sup> These made up two thirds of the exhibition. Significantly, no still lifes were included; Heisig's landscapes were represented by only two small works, neither of which was shown in Berlin; and his portraiture was limited, with one exception, to biographical works and politicians.<sup>121</sup> Similarly, his graphic work made up only a small portion of the exhibition and was limited primarily to self portraits and images of war and conflict.<sup>122</sup> None of his many literary illustrations were included.<sup>123</sup>

By calling itself a comprehensive overview of his work, *The Anger of Images* presented Heisig as an artist obsessed with the traumas of war. It seemed he could paint little else. His tendency to rework images and to create multiples was presented as further proof: it "recalls

---

<sup>119</sup> Of the approximately 248 pages of text in the catalog, more than half were written by Gillen. Approximately 133 pages (54%) are attributed to him alone, with another 25 in collaboration with others. Many of these texts appear to be refined versions of his dissertation.

<sup>120</sup> Eckhart Gillen, ed., *Bernhard Heisig, Die Wut der Bilder* (Köln: Dumont, 2005) 10. Hereafter *WdB*. "Die Wut der Bilder ist eine Ausstellung benannt, die es sich zum Ziel gesetzt hat, einen umfassenden Überblick über das Werk von Bernhard Heisig zu geben." The brochure for the exhibition in Berlin suggests this goal was attained: "Die Ausstellung gibt mit über 60 Gemälden einen umfassenden Überblick auf das Werk des 1925 in Breslau geborenen Malers." The press release from the Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig stated that the exhibition contained a representative selection of Heisig's work: "...eine repräsentative Auswahl seiner Gemälde, Zeichnungen und Graphiken..." *Bernhard Heisig, Retrospektive* (1989) remains the most comprehensive and representative overview of Heisig's work to date.

<sup>121</sup> The catalog includes *Modellszene Jutta* (WV10), but this painting was not in the exhibition in either Leipzig or Berlin. I do not know if it was in Düsseldorf or Wrocław.

<sup>122</sup> *Bernhard Heisig, The Anger of Images* contained 71 paintings and 62 drawings and graphics. The 1989 Retrospective exhibition, by contrast, contained nearly three times as many graphics (300) as it did paintings (120). This more accurately reflects the important role prints and drawings play in his oeuvre. In fact, Heisig was primarily a graphic artist until the latter half of the 1960s, although graphics continue to play an important role in his work to the present day.

<sup>123</sup> Literary illustrations have played an important role in Heisig's work since the 1950s and perhaps even more so now as a result of his no longer being as physically able to work on large-scale paintings. The following is an incomplete list of the books he has illustrated. Some works he illustrated more than once. Ludwig Renn, *Der Krieg* (c. 1958 and 1979). Johannes R. Becher, *Gedichte* (1959) and *Winterschlacht* (1960). Bertolt Brecht, *Dreigroschenoper* (1963), *Mutter Courage und Ihre Kinder* (1965), and *Dreigroschenroman* (1978). H.J. Christoffel von Grimmelhausen, *Die Landstörtzerin Courasche* (1969). Lorenzo Da Ponte, *Memoiren* (1970). Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust I* (1982). Anna Seghers, *Das siebte Kreuz* (1988). Heinrich Mann, *Der Untertan* (1992). Hugo Ball, *Der Henker von Brescia* (1993). Hanns Eisler, *Johann Faustus* (1996). Heinrich Böll, *Der Zug war pünktlich* (1998). Theodor Fontana, *Schach von Wuthenow* (1998). Georg Büchner, *Woyzeck* (2004).

Freud's essay, *Memory, Repeating and Working Through*.<sup>124</sup> Partly the result of the curator's personal interest in the topic, the emphasis on Heisig's *Komplexbilder* was presumably also an attempt—in light of the *Bilderstreit* of the previous decade—to have the final say on Heisig and thereby to validate him for (West) Germany today by promoting him as *the* artist of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past). From this perspective, Heisig can be seen as the quintessential German artist, one struggling with the very issues that define German identity today. The problem of coming to terms with the Nazi past is, after all, one shared by Germans from both sides of the Iron Curtain. And yet, it is not the only lens through which to view Heisig's work.

Significantly, evidence of Heisig's positive relationship to East Germany tended to be overlooked, downplayed, or dismissed in the exhibition. This can be seen in the selection of images as well as in some of the texts in the catalog. *Brigadier II*, for example, which was one of Heisig's most famous paintings in the GDR, was not included. Depicting a confident construction worker giving a thumb's up sign, it was dismissed in the catalog as little more than a concession to curry favor with the government. Similarly, his many images of East German cultural figures were represented by only one painting, *Vaclav Neumann*.<sup>125</sup> Indeed, those aspects of Heisig's oeuvre that do not fit well within the rubric of trauma—still lifes, landscapes, literary illustrations—were almost completely excluded from the exhibition.

Heisig was thus presented as a victim of history rather than an active participant: “all his life, Bernhard Heisig has struggled to come to terms with the traumas of a biography that passed

---

<sup>124</sup> Gillen, *WdB*, 28.

<sup>125</sup> *Brigadier II* belongs to the Leipzig Museum, which is where the exhibition opened. Neumann was a conductor in Leipzig in the 1960s.

from war and dictatorship to a further dictatorship and the Cold War.”<sup>126</sup> This pronouncement subtly condemns the GDR. It also attempts, perhaps unconsciously, to remove Heisig from it. Indeed, he appears throughout the catalog as a great German artist *in spite of* the East German context in which he lived and worked. The overemphasis on his war paintings, which are interpreted primarily in terms of personal trauma, and the implication that he was almost always a modern artist suggest that neither his content nor his style were affected positively by the GDR.

Similarly, Heisig’s difficulties with the regime tended to be highlighted. This can be seen, in particular, in the biographical emphasis on two conflicts he had with political functionaries in the 1960s. One of these controversies was over a speech he gave in support of “modern” art in 1964; the other, over a “modern” painting he exhibited in 1965. The implication is that he was willing to fight and suffer for his artistic convictions, which appear to be commensurate with western beliefs about art. Significantly, the other conflicts Heisig had in these years in which his art was decidedly East German in content are barely mentioned.<sup>127</sup>

The story told by *The Anger of Images* thus suggests that Heisig was born a great artist; that he was willing to fight and suffer for his beliefs; and that in the end he triumphed over totalitarianism. It is a story that lends him authenticity as an artist and that subtly supports the West. Indeed, the exhibition can be seen as a continuation of West German scholarship of the 1980s with its emphasis on Heisig’s *Komplexbilder* and the interpretation of them in terms of trauma. The negative representation of the GDR, however, is relatively new within Heisig scholarship. It seems to reflect, if unconsciously, the condemnatory view of the “second German dictatorship” that came into renewed prominence after the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, a

---

<sup>126</sup> Exhibition brochure, *Bernhard Heisig, The Rage of Images*, Martin-Gropius-Bau Berlin, October 22, 2005 to January 29, 2006.

<sup>127</sup> One of these focused on Heisig’s murals at the Hotel Germany in Leipzig; the other, on his painting, *The Brigade*. Detailed discussions of these controversies can be found in chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation.

view that too easily conflates East Germany with the Third Reich. Attempts to distance Heisig from the GDR must also be seen, however, as a response to the *Bilderstreit*, an attempt, presumably, to insulate him from political condemnation for his past as a so-called *Staatskünstler* so that his art can be valued in Germany today: Heisig's life and work are presented as a microcosm of Germany's ongoing struggle with the legacy of the Nazi past.

## 1.5 THIS DISSERTATION

This dissertation looks at the relationship between Heisig's work and the East German context in which it was created. In particular, it focuses on one of the least understood—or most *misunderstood*—periods of his life and art: the final years of the Ulbricht era, 1961-71. It is in these years that the style and content for which Heisig is best known today first emerged. It is also in these years that he was at the center of a number of artistic controversies, a couple of which are frequently used to suggest he was a dissident artist. As I will show, Heisig's art in these years was closely related to the East German context in which he lived and worked. Moreover, at this point in time, he viewed the GDR as the better Germany. His many battles with cultural functionaries in the 1960s were not directed against the State, I argue, but rather were an attempt to improve it from within. These attempts were highly valued in Leipzig at the time, which helps to explain why he could be threatened with being thrown out of the Party for his controversial speech in 1964 and nominated for the City Prize of Leipzig in 1966.

Chapter 2 begins with Heisig's childhood and, especially, his experiences as a soldier in World War II. These are the events that dominate current (western) interpretations of his oeuvre. It then focuses on the first painting in Heisig's oeuvre to contain an explicit reference to this past,

*The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier* (WV25, 1964). A close examination of this little-known painting suggests Heisig underwent a significant change in thinking in the almost twenty years between the end of the war and when he created the work. I then place this painting within the East German context in which it was created to better understand the motivation behind it. In the mid 1960s, for example, there were at least three artists working at the Leipzig Academy alone who made explicit references to the Nazi past in their paintings. This suggests that there was more to its emergence in Heisig's oeuvre at this time than just a personal desire to come to terms with his own traumatic experiences.

Chapter 3 focuses on the controversial speech Heisig gave at the Fifth Congress of the Association of Visual Artists in 1964, placing it within the larger context of the discussion about art taking place in East Germany at the time and Heisig's own views on art as expressed in a number of articles he had written in the 1950s. According to current scholarship, this speech—which called for openness to western artistic styles—led to Heisig's "dismissal" from the Leipzig Academy the following month. Newly found archival material, however, suggests otherwise. Toward the end of the chapter, I therefore turn to the aftermath of this speech, including the multi-week investigation to decide what punishment he should receive and his self criticism. Ultimately, I argue that this speech and its fallout are related to the significant change in his painting style that took place between 1962 and 1964.

Chapter 4 continues with the discussion about art taking place in East Germany in the mid 1960s, but shifts its emphasis from the national to the local, focusing on two controversies that took place in Leipzig around Heisig's art in 1965. The first focused on a series of murals he created at the Hotel Germany, and especially on one titled *Schwedt*, the other on a painting he exhibited at the Seventh Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig, *The Paris Commune*. While the

latter controversy is well-known in current scholarship, the former is not. In fact, Heisig's mural work in general remains a virtual absence in the literature today, presumably the result of its being a particularly Socialist medium and one he did not pursue past the mid 1970s. When seen together, these two works—and the debates about them—suggest Heisig was deeply engaged in the question of what art in East Germany should be.

As will become evident, these discussions about art hinged upon the value, or lack thereof, of “modern” art for the Socialist tradition. “Modern” was a term used by artists like Heisig to refer to art that rejects a simple illusionism in favor of formal innovation. In some contexts, it is a synonym for Modernism or, more generally, for art created in the West. It should not be seen, however, as something separate from or opposed to Socialist Realism. Although frequently viewed in the West today as a style—one marked by a simple realism, optimism, monumentality, and a commitment to figuration—Socialist Realism in East Germany was, in fact, a position (*Haltung*); it was a commitment on the part of the artist to creating art for Socialist society and its people.<sup>128</sup> Socialist Realism is thus not the binary opposite of modern art, but rather of the western idea of “art for art's sake.” As such, the term “modern” is most frequently used throughout this dissertation to designate the formally innovative style of Heisig's brand of Socialist Realism after 1964 in comparison to the illusionist brand promoted by the Soviet Union in the early 1950s. Indeed, this difference in definitions is what was being argued for in the controversies discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

---

<sup>128</sup> The Grove Art Online Dictionary describes Socialist Realism as follows: “Apart from ideology... the most obvious attributes of Socialist Realism are its monumental scale, heroic optimism, and eclectic realism as well as its dependence on the personality of the cult of the leader.” David Elliott, “Socialist Realism,” in *Grove Art Online* (Oxford University Press) 2 April 2007 <<http://www.groveart.com/>>. Earlier in the article, however, Elliott states, “...Socialist Realism was seen as a method of creation rather than a style...” It is this latter definition that best fits East German art. In fact, many of Heisig's paintings contain none of the “obvious attributes of Socialist Realism.”

Chapter 5 focuses on a handful of paintings Heisig created between 1968 and 1971 that were highly praised in the GDR, but which are dismissed in current literature as little more than concessions to the government. A close examination of these works and the context in which they were created further suggests that Heisig was deeply engaged with the art of his time and, in particular, that he was committed to creating challenging works of art that responded to the needs and interests of his audience.

This dissertation is based above all on a close visual analysis of Heisig's art, and especially his paintings. This has led my research in terms of the questions asked and the conclusions made. A prerequisite was thus the creation of a *Werkverzeichnis* of Heisig's paintings. In addition to going through all of the Heisig catalogs and books, as well as the major exhibitions—East and West—of East German art, I looked at countless articles about Heisig and paged through more than twenty years of the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* and the GDR's main art magazine *Bildende Kunst*, among others. This research allowed me to more accurately date many of Heisig's early paintings, to trace the evolution of various myths in his biography, and to see how Heisig and his art were discussed in the GDR; it also gave me insight into the major issues of the day from the East German perspective.

The focus on Heisig's paintings also lead to a reorganization of his life and work during the Cold War era into three distinct phases.<sup>129</sup> 1948-62 are the early years. They are marked by

---

<sup>129</sup> The biography in *Bernhard Heisig, The Anger of Images*, which is the most detailed to date, divides Heisig's life into five sections based largely on his relationship to the Leipzig Academy. 1948-53 are his early years in Leipzig, when he was a student and later a freelance artist. 1954-63 is his "first career," a time that begins with his being hired to teach at the Leipzig Academy and ends with his first term as rector. 1964-68 mark years of conflict and punishment, beginning with his controversial speech at the Fifth Congress—for which he supposedly lost his job as rector—and ending with his leaving the Leipzig Academy altogether. 1969-75 is the beginning of his "second career" as a freelance artist. And 1976-89 are his years as rector of the Leipzig Academy (for the second time), although technically Heisig retired two years before the *Wende*.

an illusionistic style and East German subject matter. 1963-76 continue with East German subject matter, but the style is “modern.” 1977-89 continue with a modern style, but the content becomes “German” rather than East German. In fact, I believe this last period marks a substantial change in Heisig’s work based on disillusionment with the GDR in the wake of the forced expatriation of Wolf Biermann on the one hand, and the opening up of the West German art market to the GDR on the other. The latter created a new opportunity for Heisig to create work for a united Germany—if only at the level of *Kulturnation*—at a time when his hopes for such a unification under Socialism had been put to a conclusive end.

Much scholarship today is based, albeit unknowingly, on this final phase of Heisig’s work in the GDR. During these years, Heisig created many more paintings dealing directly with the Nazi past than he ever had before. This new emphasis must be seen, in part, as a response to the interest in this topic expressed by a Western audience and presumably encouraged by his West German dealer, Dieter Brusberg. Creating such works not only contributed to a common German culture that transcended the Iron Curtain, but also helped Heisig gain more security in the GDR, since the more valued an East German artist was in the West, the less political functionaries were able to take action against him; East German politicians were very mindful of the West German press. Another factor, however, in Heisig’s increasing turn to the Nazi past in these years was presumably his age. Whereas wartime traumas are frequently suppressed in one’s youth, they often emerge decades later. The fortieth anniversary of the beginning of World War II in 1979—together with the recent death of his mother and his youngest son’s enlistment in the National People’s Army—may well have triggered a personal examination of this past in these years.



In addition to the paintings themselves and their public reception, the interpretations in this dissertation are based on extensive archival research. This research included numerous files at the Bundesarchiv in Berlin and the Sächsisches Landesarchiv in Leipzig, as well as Heisig's Stasi files. New to this dissertation are the archival files at the Leipzig Academy, where Heisig was a student, professor, and rector for thirty years, as well as those files requiring Heisig's signature for access.<sup>130</sup> The latter include his military files during the Third Reich and, more substantially, his files from the GDR, including records of his commissions and sales. Among other things, archival research led to the discovery of photographs of two key paintings that are reproduced for the first time in this dissertation: *The Christmas Dream of the Militarist* (1962, WV17) and *The Brigade* (1969, WV63). I also looked at numerous smaller archives and the private papers of important people with whom he had contact, including Max Schwimmer and Alfred Kurella.<sup>131</sup>

This dissertation is also based on a large number of interviews conducted over the course of several years. I have met with Heisig on numerous occasions, from exhibition openings and dinners to more than five day-long interviews in his home. I have talked with his family on several occasions, including his wife Gudrun Brüne and his sons Walter Eisler and especially Johannes Heisig. I have also met with key figures in Heisig scholarship today as well as colleagues and friends of his from the Ulbricht era. The latter include a large number of artists and art historians who were important in Leipzig at the time but who have largely disappeared from view after the *Wende*. Careful of the pitfalls of first person narrative—from the vagaries of memory to the desire for personal gain—I have nonetheless obtained significant insight into both

---

<sup>130</sup> My thanks to Vincent Klotzsche at the Archive of the Leipzig Academy for his diligence in finding relevant information for me. Some of these documents were subsequently cited in the *Wut der Bilder* catalog.

<sup>131</sup> In Summer 2005, I also looked at the Lea Grundig files in the AdK and spoke to Christa Cremer about the files of her father, Fritz Cremer, neither of which included documents directly related to Heisig.

Heisig and East Germany from these interviews. On several occasions, discussions with eyewitnesses also led to primary documents that were in their possession; these ranged from meeting minutes to personal letters, photos, and works of art.

Lastly, this dissertation benefited from secondary literature and, especially, English-language publications in History and German Studies, both of which—in sharp contrast to Art History—have a significant body of literature about East Germany. Authors whose writings were particularly influential to my thinking include Corey Ross, Bill Niven, and Konrad Jarausch, as well as Stephen Brockmann and David Bathrick.

For German sources, I am particularly indebted to Werner Mittenzwei's *Die Intellektuellen*, which provides an East German perspective on key moments in the GDR's history. As for books on East German art published after the *Wende*, I have been most impressed by the writings of younger scholars including Ulrike Goeschen and Martin Damus, and former East Germans such as Lothar Lang and Peter Guth.<sup>132</sup>

In terms of Heisig scholarship, I am most indebted to three authors. Karl Max Kober, who was Heisig's biographer and friend, has written the most insightful essays on Heisig's work in terms of the artist's motivation and process. These texts have also helped me to look at more than just the subject matter of Heisig's work. Dietulf Sander's dissertation has been an invaluable resource for understanding the development of Heisig's graphic work, which I could then apply to his paintings. It also gave me hope that the creation of a *Werkverzeichnis* of his paintings was indeed possible. And, lastly, the work of Eckhart Gillen has been a valuable resource for quotations from the artist. It has also served as a constant reminder of the current

---

<sup>132</sup> Lothar Lang was an important art historian in East Germany. He has continued to publish after the *Wende*.

state of Heisig scholarship that has validated the importance of my own work and motivated me to complete this project.

While the assumption may be that scholarship after the *Wende* is “better” than that written in the GDR, both because it was free from the ideological constraints of a dictatorship and because of better access to archival materials, this is frequently not the case. Politics actually plays a more conspicuous role in current scholarship—and, in particular, a condemnatory view of the “other” Germany—than it did in the Cold War era. Whereas East German scholars could not write against the system, they were not as constrained in their interpretations as is often presumed in the West. Moreover, they had strategies for getting around the censors that ranged from being vague to couching a less acceptable interpretation between a political introduction and conclusion. Another tactic was to choose a politically correct-sounding title—one that might alienate Western readers today—to camouflage a challenging piece of scholarship. Moreover, these writers knew the artists and the context in which they were working, a context that is frequently ignored today.

In this dissertation, I place great emphasis both on Heisig’s paintings—including several that are relatively unknown today—and the context in which he lived and worked. This examination has revealed that Heisig was not an artist aloof from or somehow in opposition to the GDR, but rather was deeply committed to Socialism. Moreover, his art—both in content and style—is closely related to the East German context in which it was created. In the end, this dissertation will show that Heisig is not a “great” German artist today in spite of the East German context in which he lived and worked, but rather because of it and the challenges it posed. This dissertation will thus offer new insight into both Heisig’s work and art under Socialism.

## 2.0 FIGHTING FASCISM

In October 1964, Bernhard Heisig exhibited the painting *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier* (WV25) at an exhibition of the Leipzig Academy celebrating the institution's 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Illustrated in the exhibition catalog, the work received little if any attention in the press and was later destroyed by the artist through overpainting. As a result, it is not well known in current scholarship.<sup>133</sup> As one of the first paintings in his oeuvre to include explicit references to the Nazi past, however, it is a pivotal piece, one that can provide valuable insight into the motivations behind the emergence of this past in his art at this point in time.

In the center of the small canvas a barefoot man in black pants and a white shirt reclines on a light-brown oriental carpet. Arms folded by his head, an iron cross visible in his right hand, he stares off in horror—eyes wide open, mouth agape—at the toy tank on his stomach or, more likely, beyond it to visions of his own wartime experiences, which literally surround him. At the bottom right of the painting, a war plane, presumably having just crossed his field of vision, is flying out of the image. Below it, several helmeted soldiers, one clearly wearing a gas mask. In the top right-hand corner of the painting billows a swastika flag like a pillow behind him, and an atomic mushroom cloud, recalling the end of World War II. Behind the man's right arm hovers the German imperial eagle with its wings extended. Next to it, in the top center of the painting, an angel blows a trumpet, perhaps extolling the war, announcing the end of the world or merely

---

<sup>133</sup> Later versions of the painting are better known. See WV57 and WV137.

having taken flight from the Christmas tree behind it; this tree, albeit undecorated, recalls the title of the work. In subsequent versions of the painting, the expression on the protagonist's face becomes more pained – the mouth opens into a scream, the eyes clench shut.<sup>134</sup>

It is easy to see why such a work is viewed today primarily in terms of Heisig's wartime biography. The traumatized figure lends itself to being read as the artist himself, a visual counterpart to Heisig's comment from years later, "[one] can't sleep after three years of war."<sup>135</sup> Similarly, the tank on the man's stomach seems to refer to Heisig's experiences as part of a tank unit on the Western Front. It is a painting that draws upon the trope of the suffering soldier that developed in Germany in the wake of its defeat in the First World War. Moreover, Heisig's working method—his tendency to paint multiple canvases with the same subject matter and to repaint them, sometimes to the point of destroying them—seems a classic illustration of Freud's theories on trauma as expressed in his 1914 article, "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through."<sup>136</sup>

A closer look at the emergence of explicit references to the Nazi past in Heisig's work, however, suggests that trauma was not the only factor playing a role in his art in these years. In fact, when one places *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier* into the East German context in which it was created—both the GDR generally and Leipzig more specifically—it becomes apparent that Heisig was concerned at least as much with criticizing the continuation of fascist militarism in the present—and the simplification of its memory—in these years than he

---

<sup>134</sup> See *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier* WV57 (1968) and WV137 (1975/77), among others.

<sup>135</sup> Birgit Lahann, "Salto mortale in zwei Diktaturen, Bernhard Heisig und Johannes Heisig," in *Väter und Söhne, Zwölf biographische Porträts* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1996) 409. "Und schlafen konnte man auch nicht mehr nach drei Jahren Krieg." The figure does not look like Heisig, but rather a generic "everyman."

<sup>136</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten (Weitere Ratschläge zur Technik der Psychoanalyse, II)," in *Internationale Zeitschrift für ärztliche Psychoanalyse* 2 (1914): 485-491.

was in the past itself. This is not to say his wartime experiences were unimportant, but rather that their impact may have been less emotional than intellectual at this point in time.

Before turning to this painting, however, I will first look at Heisig's past during the Third Reich. It is a story based almost exclusively on his description of events. Although this fact makes the story less than reliable for reasons discussed in the introduction, it is nonetheless valuable, both because it may be the only story of Heisig's past we will ever know, and because it dominates his reception today. I will then look at *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier* in terms of the significant change in thinking it represents in both subject matter and style before placing it within the social, political and cultural contexts of East Germany in the Ulbricht era. This investigation will not only suggest a more complicated reading of Heisig's work than the current paradigm of trauma allows, it will also provide insight into why many intellectuals, including Heisig, saw the GDR as the better Germany at this point in time and thus chose to live there instead of in the West.

## 2.1 THE WAFFEN-SS

Heisig was born in Breslau, Germany, on March 31, 1925. The only son of Walter Heisig, a painter, and his wife Hildegard, he learned to draw at an early age. As he explained it in 1989, "I grew up in an environment in which drawing belonged to the everyday. I could already draw before I had learned to read and write. But I didn't make children's drawings. I drew with a certain perfection."<sup>137</sup> Nonetheless, his father discouraged him from pursuing a career as an artist

---

<sup>137</sup> Heisig as quoted in *Bernhard Heisig, Retrospektive*, eds. Jörn Merkert und Peter Pachnicke (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1989) 94. "Ich bin in einer Umgebung aufgewachsen, wo Zeichnen zum Alltag gehörte. Ich konnte schon

because of his own financial difficulties as a painter. In the wake of his father's premature death in 1941 after a fall from a ladder while working, Heisig dropped out of high school and began taking classes at the local art academy, the *Meisterschule des Deutschen Handwerks*. It was also in this year, at the age of 16, that he enlisted in the military.<sup>138</sup>

When the polemical (East) German filmmaker Lutz Dammbeck asked him in 1995 why he had volunteered for the military, Heisig responded that, "like many of my generation, we were overfed on Nazi ideology in the Hitler Youth. We were scared we were going to miss the war. [...] I had expected a great adventure..."<sup>139</sup> Such comments are not surprising from a man who was only seven years old when the Nazis came to power. Moreover, he was born and raised in Breslau, Germany, a stronghold for Nazi support.<sup>140</sup> At the age of ten, he joined the Hitler Youth, where he would have been inculcated into Nazi ideology through the many group activities that targeted ambitious boys.<sup>141</sup>

Six years later, in 1941, he signed up for military duty, although he was not called up until the following year. He states that an SS-Commission came to roll call one day:

---

zeichnen, ehe ich lesen und schreiben gelernt hatte. Aber ich habe nicht das gemacht, was man allgemein Kinderzeichnung nennt. Ich zeichnete mit einer gewissen Perfektion."

<sup>138</sup> For the dissertation I am interested in Heisig's story as currently told. In those cases where I have archival evidence that supports or contradicts this story, I have included it in the footnotes.

<sup>139</sup> Transcript (20 April 1995) for Lutz Dammbeck's documentary, *Dürers Erbe* (1995) 1, as quoted in Eckhart Gillen, "*Schwierigkeiten beim Suchen der Wahrheit: Bernhard Heisig im Konflikt zwischen 'verordnetem Antifaschismus' und der Auseinandersetzung mit seinem Kriegstrauma*." diss., Universität Heidelberg, 2004, 192. "...warum er sich als Kriegsfreiwilliger gemeldet hat, antwortet Heisig: Wie viele meiner Generation wurden wir in der Hitler-Jugend mit der Nazi-Ideologie überfüttert. 'Wir hatten richtig Angst, den Krieg zu verpassen. [...] Ich hatte das große Abenteuer erwartet, und was dann kam, war Stumpfsinn.'" This film compares Heisig, Werner Tübke, and Heinrich Witz to a monkey named Pavlov, who is encouraged to paint with various enticements. The suggestion is that these artists are little more than trained monkeys of the Communist State. Significantly, Pavlov is thanked in the end credits, but the artists who provided interviews for the movie are not.

<sup>140</sup> The NSDAP received some of its best election results in Breslau. In July and November 1932, for example, 37.2% and 33.1% of Germany as a whole voted for them. In Breslau, it was 43.5% and 40.5%. Gregor Thum, *Die Fremde Stadt, Breslau 1945* (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 2003) 17.

<sup>141</sup> According to the application for the Akademie für Grafik und Buchkunst that Heisig filled out in January 1946, he belonged to the Hitler Youth from 1935-42. (SächsStAL: SAfgKBL 324/1). Technically speaking, he was presumably part of the Deutsches Jungvolk—an organization aimed at boys aged 10-14—from 1935-39 and then joined the Hitler Youth proper when he turned 14.

The officer, who had only one arm—which I viewed at the time as something heroic—asked me, why don't you come to us? I said that I had already signed up for a tank unit. Then he said, do you think we don't have any tanks? Or do you have something against us? Naturally I knew that the SS were seen as elite troops. They were better equipped and were placed in the neurological hot points. In the SS you didn't need the written permission of your parents. That was also a reason why I landed in the SS. I signed up and got the call up, but not to a tank unit. I went and asked why not. So they made a note of it. Such rubbish! I ended up in the infantry. That was a con. [...] Another reason why I volunteered was the possibility to shorten the two-year work service to around three months. We harvested potatoes and I learned how to use a shovel. Thereafter was basic training, which wasn't modern military training but rather a horrible Prussian drill. Since I had flat feet, I was assigned to be a tank driver...those who, like me, were drivers, were very low in the hierarchy.<sup>142</sup>

Heisig was assigned to the Twelfth SS Tank Division of the Hitler Youth, nicknamed “the Children's Division” by the Allies. It was formed in 1943 in response to the staggering German losses at Stalingrad in January and February of that year. As the name suggests, the recruits came from the Hitler Youth and were chosen based on their commitment—ideally possessing a Hitler Youth Merit Badge—physical fitness and size, with a minimum height of 168 cm. The compulsory Labor Service was waived for these recruits, who were first sent to a Defense Competence Camp (WEL, Wehrtüchtigungs-lager) and then, beginning in July 1943, to the training grounds set up specifically for them in Beverloo, Belgium. Most were 16 and 17 years old.

---

<sup>142</sup> Gillen, 192, 194. This interview took place on June 1, 2000. “Der Offizier, er hatte nur einen Arm—das war damals in meinen Augen schon etwas ganz Heldenhaftes—fragte mich, wollen Sie nicht zu uns kommen? Ich sagte, ich habe mich schon zur Panzertruppe gemeldet. Da sagte er, denken Sie, wir haben keine Panzer? Oder haben Sie ‘was gegen uns? Natürlich wusste ich, dass die SS als Elitetruppe angesehen wurde. Sie war besser ausgerüstet und wurde an neuralgischen Punkten eingesetzt. Bei der SS brauchte man keine Genehmigung der Eltern. Das war auch ein Grund, warum ich bei der Waffen-SS gelandet bin. Ich habe dann unterschrieben und erhielt den Einberufungsbescheid, aber nicht zur Panzertruppe. Ich ging hin und fragte, warum ich nicht zur Panzertruppe eingezogen werde. Da hat man mit dem Bleistift Panzertruppe danebengeschrieben. So ein Quatsch! Ich bin trotzdem zur Infantri-truppe gekommen. Das war Bauernfängerei. [...] Ein weiterer Grund warum ich mich freiwillig gemeldet habe, war die Möglichkeit den zweijährigen Arbeitsdienst auf ca. drei Monaten zu verkürzen. Wir haben Kartoffeln geerntet und ich habe bei dieser Gelegenheit gelernt, mit der Schaufel umzugehen. Die darauf folgende Grundausbildung war nicht eine moderne Militärausbildung, sondern in Wirklichkeit der schlimmste preußische Drill. Da ich einen Senkfuss hatte, teilte man mich als Kraftfahrer ein. Es gab den Spruch ‘Benzin verdirbt den Charakter.’ Wer also wie ich Fahrer war, galt nichts, stand in der Hierarchie ganz unten.”



According to Heisig, he was wounded on the way to Beverloo when jumping for cover during a low-flying attack. The head and collarbone injuries he incurred were so bad that he spent ten weeks in a military hospital. Thereafter he was assigned to garrison duty on the homefront due to what the doctor judged to be lasting vision problems.<sup>143</sup> Heisig states he resisted this assignment, however, and was finally returned to his unit. At the time of the invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944—when the Americans, Canadian and British launched a massive offensive against the Germans—he was reportedly in an infantry course.

History books tell us that the 12<sup>th</sup> SS Division's first engagement in Normandy was against the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Infantry Division on the afternoon of June 7<sup>th</sup> when they effectively ground the Canadians to a halt. For the next three months they battled fiercely against the Allied forces, where they received decimating losses but continued undaunted and effectively defended their positions. While the exact number of casualties is unknown, conservative estimates suggest that approximately 40% of the 12<sup>th</sup> SS Division was killed; others believe the losses to have been significantly greater, placing the number of survivors at about 600.<sup>144</sup>

It is generally agreed among military historians that the teenagers of the 12<sup>th</sup> SS Division were excellent fighters. Led by officers from the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler, they lived up to the “honor” of being one of only two units in the Nazi military to bear Hitler's name. They

---

<sup>143</sup> Archival evidence states that Heisig was admitted to a military hospital in Krefeld on September 16, 1943, where he spent ten weeks recovering from a broken (left) collar bone before being released to his unit on November 26. Less than a month before, he had been at a military hospital in Berlin for at least two weeks due to an infection. WAST Berlin: Bernhard Heisig. The dates and length of stay differ slightly from Heisig's account in Gillen's dissertation; there is also no mention of a vision problem.

<sup>144</sup> Michael Sullivan points out that there is considerable debate on this issue, with some scholars claiming a 40% loss rate (thus approximately 12,500 survivors) and others, a much higher rate with only 500 survivors. He states that a safe estimate is between 9,000 and 11,000 casualties, with most coming from the infantry and the armoured battalions. Michael Sullivan, “Hitler's Teenaged Zealots: Fanatics, Combat Motivation, and the 12<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Division Hitlerjugend,” MA Thesis, New Brunswick University, 1999, 27. H.W. Koch lists the numbers of survivors as of September 1944 as 600. H. W. Koch, *The Hitler Youth, Origins and Development, 1922-1945* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000) 247.

were indoctrinated to believe that combat would purify the German Volk and that their willing sacrifice was the key to this transformation. They were said to be unafraid of battle or dying and even eager for both. As Heisig later stated, “I had a friend, who told me in all honesty, that he hoped he’d fall in battle.”<sup>145</sup> Such a sentiment was evidently the norm among the 12<sup>th</sup> SS troops.<sup>146</sup>

In his 1999 Master’s Thesis, *Hitler’s Teenaged Zealots: Fanatics, Combat Motivation, and the 12<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Division Hitlerjugend*, Michael Sullivan relates a story about the “heroic” death of SS-Unterscharführer Emil Dürr that captures the extraordinary mindset of these young men.<sup>147</sup> Dürr, a member of the 12<sup>th</sup> SS Division of the *Hitlerjugend*, had stayed behind with a small group of soldiers to defend St. Manvieu against the 15<sup>th</sup> Scottish Division in late June 1944. It was a suicide mission since they were up against an entire division; the Scots also had a flame-thrower tank. When the tank reached his position, Dürr grabbed a *Panzerfaust* and charged it. His weapon failed to penetrate the hull, however, and he was shot in the chest in the process. Ignoring the wound, he returned to cover, got another *Panzerfaust* and charged the tank again. This time he aimed at its track, which effectively immobilized the tank, but it was not destroyed. He ran back to cover, grabbed a magnetic charge and returned to the tank a third time. When the magnet failed to work and the charge fell off, he held it to the tank with his hand until it exploded. Miraculously, he survived the blast to die four hours later from his wounds. Reportedly his final words were, “do not be sad – there is nothing sad.”<sup>148</sup>

---

<sup>145</sup> Bernhard Heisig in the 1999 documentary, *Hitlers Kinder*, as quoted in Gillen, 195. “Ich hatte einen Freund, der sagte mir allen Ernstes, ich möchte fallen.”

<sup>146</sup> Heisig himself has said he wanted to be a hero. Discussion with the artist on June 18, 2005.

<sup>147</sup> Sullivan, 3-5.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

Although this account may seem extraordinary, Sullivan points out that it is only one of many such stories that have been recorded about the 12<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Division. He cites British historian Chester Wilmont: “the 12<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Division... fought with a tenacity and ferocity seldom equalled and never excelled during the whole campaign.”<sup>149</sup>

According to an investigation by the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces Court of Inquiry, however, the 12<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Division’s fanaticism led to “a consistent pattern of brutality and ruthlessness”.<sup>150</sup> This view was shared by their German comrades, who called them the “Murder Division.” Following their orders, they took no prisoners, even when that meant killing unarmed soldiers. The most notorious cases were against Canadian soldiers near Caen in Normandy.

Heisig, however, states that he did not fight in the Battle of Normandy. While the literature to date has conflicting reports on this point, circumstantial evidence supports his assertion. The questionnaire he filled out in 1948, for example, does not list it.<sup>151</sup> The two battles that are listed—the Ardennes Offensive and Fortress Breslau—both appear later in his art; the Battle of Normandy does not.<sup>152</sup> It would appear that Heisig was indeed “spared the tank battle in Caen.”<sup>153</sup>

---

<sup>149</sup> Chester Wilmont, *The Struggle for Europe* (London: Collins, 1965) 343, as quoted in Sullivan, 5. Koch uses the same quote, 246.

<sup>150</sup> Sullivan, 21.

<sup>151</sup> Beaucamp also believes Heisig fought in Normandy. Eduard Beaucamp, “Die Verzweifelte Erinnerung, Geschichtskonstrukte und Bewusstseinsanalysen,” in *Retrospektive*, 20.

<sup>152</sup> In response to a question asking where he had fought in the war, Heisig wrote, “Invasion, Winter Offens. Fortress Breslau.” SächsStAL: SAfgKuBL 324/1, 108.

<sup>153</sup> Letter from Heisig, January 28, 2006: “My division belonged to the Heeresgruppe Rommel, which was the Hitler Youth division. It had very high losses, so that an Unterführerlehrkompanie (Junior Leader Training Company) was set up to which I belonged. At that time, only 600 of the 12,000 17- to 18-year olds survived the crossing of the Seine. So I was spared the tank battle near Caen.” [“Meine Division gehörte zu der Heeresgruppe Rommel, das war die Hitlerjugenddivision. Sie hatte sehr hohe Verluste, so dass man eine Unterlehrführerlehrkompanie aufstellte, zu der ich gehörte. Damals blieben beim Übergang über die Seine von 12.000 17- bis 18-Jährigen noch 600 übrig. So ist mir die Panzerschlacht bei Caen erspart geblieben.”] It is interesting that Heisig specifies Caen in his response: by doing so, he makes it clear that he was not involved in the war crimes that took place there but without making

\* \* \*

In the wake of the Battle of Normandy, the 12<sup>th</sup> SS Division was but a shadow of its former elite self. Those who had survived made it back to Germany by mid September 1944, where their fallen comrades were replaced by young volunteers, wounded soldiers who had been cleared for duty and personnel from the Air Force and Navy. Heisig was presumably one of these replacement troops. After a short respite, they were deployed to the Ardennes forest in France in December as part of the 6<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Army.

The Battle of Ardennes, better known in English as the Battle of the Bulge, was Germany's last major offensive during World War II. It was also Heisig's last—and perhaps only—battle as part of the 12<sup>th</sup> SS Tank Division of the Hitler Youth. Planned by Hitler, who had ignored his military advisors' warnings that they did not have enough forces and supplies to complete such a manoeuvre successfully, the Ardennes Offensive was a vain attempt at victory on the Western Front by surprising the Allies in a place where they were weakly defended and where the German military had succeeded in breaking through four years earlier. The hope was that such an offensive would not only gain time for the German armaments industry to complete the design and production of new weapons, but also force the Western Allies to negotiate a peace treaty and thereby free up German troops for the Eastern Front.

On December 15, 1944, German troops moved into position under the cover of night and a thick fog that kept their movements hidden and the Allies' superior air power grounded. They attacked early the following morning and made several significant breakthroughs before the weather cleared just over a week later. On December 23<sup>rd</sup>, however, the Allies were able to

---

explicit reference to them. As such, those unaware of these events would be none the wiser from his comment. According to Gillen's dissertation, however, Heisig fought in Normandy: "So kam Heisig zum ersten Fronteinsatz in der Normandie." Gillen, 196.

launch massive air attacks on the Germans and their supply lines. As Heisig described it in 2000, “In the narrow valleys, battle on a wider front wasn’t possible; only the foremost units reached engagement. The gas refuellers couldn’t get through. We stood around and were an ideal target for the *Jabos* [the fighter planes].”<sup>154</sup>

According to Heisig, he was wounded while in the Ardennes when gas from a military tank he was trying to repair poured across his arm. In the freezing cold temperatures, the affected skin quickly blistered, and he ended up spending the next few weeks in a military hospital recovering from severe frostbite.<sup>155</sup> While there, he was called upon to return to Breslau, where he spent the final months of the war defending his home town against the Russians.

## 2.2 BRESLAU AND THE END OF WORLD WAR II

The largest German city east of Berlin, Breslau had been one of Europe’s most beautiful cities in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Together with Dresden, it was also one of the last with over 500,000 inhabitants still largely intact in Germany in early February 1945.<sup>156</sup> Out of range of British bombers, it was seen as “the air raid shelter of the Reich” and its numbers swelled over the course of the war from 600,000 to almost 1,000,000. It was also an important logistical center for the Nazis on the Eastern Front and bore the additional nickname of “Bulwark of the East.” In

---

<sup>154</sup> Heisig as quoted in Gillen, 197-8. “In den engen Tälern war keine Schlacht auf breiter Front möglich, eigentlich kamen nur die Spitzen der Einheit zum Einsatz. Die Spritwagen kamen nicht durch. Wir hingen nur rum und war ein ideales Ziel für die Jabos (Jagdbomber).”

<sup>155</sup> This hospital visit does not appear in Heisig’s records. This does not mean, however, that it did not take place. Records from the Third Reich are frequently incomplete due to war-time damage.

<sup>156</sup> Thum, 30.

the fall of 1944 Hitler declared Breslau a “fortress” that under no circumstances was to capitulate.

Breslau’s fate began to change in mid January 1945 when the Russians launched their big offensive toward the Reich. On January 19, SS-Gauleiter Karl Hanke—who would later appear in Heisig’s *Fortress Breslau* paintings—ordered an evacuation of all non-military personnel, which was in effect a forced exodus that led to the deaths of at least 90,000 civilians in the freezing cold of that winter. As the Breslau priest Paul Peikert noted in his diary at the time, “[it was] a horrific picture of a fleeing people that went on day and night for days. Unbroken columns of farm wagons with horses or cows attached, as well as workers pushing hand wagons, or columns of war prisoners, foreigners, Russians, French, Serbs, etc. pushing their packs on small sleds...they met harsh winter days, 55-59 degrees below and worse was the temperature. Children froze and were laid on the streetside by relatives. It was reported that truckloads of such frozen children were delivered to the morgue.”<sup>157</sup> Similarly grotesque scenes took place in the train stations, where “people fought for every place on trains leaving for the Sudetenland and Saxony. Corpses of children and old people, crushed by the crowds, lay on the platforms among piles of abandoned coffers and cases after the departure of every train.”<sup>158</sup>

It is presumably shortly after this that Heisig returned to the city. He explained it as follows:

---

<sup>157</sup> Peikert as quoted in Thum, 20. “Nun bot sich Breslau tagelang Tag und Nacht ein grauenhaftes Bild einer flüchtenden Bevölkerung. Ununterbrochene Kolonnen von Bauernwagen, mit Pferden oder Kühen bespannt, dazu die Handwagen der Arbeiterinnen oder die Kolonnen der Kriegsgefangenen, Ausländer, Russen, Franzosen, Serben usw. mit kleinen Schlitten, auf denen sie ihr Gepäck führen... Dazu trifft die Massenflucht in strenge Wintertage, 13-15 Grad Kälte und noch mehr ist die Temperatur dieser Tage. Kinder erfrieren und werden von ihren Angehörigen an den Straßenrand gelegt. Es wird berichtet, dass ganze Lastautos solcher erfrorener Kinder in den hiesigen Leichenhallen eingeliefert werden.”

<sup>158</sup> Karol Jonca, “The Destruction of ‘Breslau,’ the Final Struggle of Germans in Wroclaw in 1945,” in *Polish Western Affairs* (1961) 316.

As I arrived in Breslau's main train station, I experienced situations characteristic of the mood in the fortress at the time. There was a soldier (*Landser*) fighting with an officer. The officer was clearly a fresh recruit who wanted to make himself important: 'Show me your papers!' So the soldier... pulled out his pistol. After that I got on the street car... the conductor said, 'you don't need to pay, no one does that anymore.' I finally got to my house; everything was dead quiet. Columns of the so-called 'loudspeakers of the Reich' resounded through the ghostly empty streets... My mother was already gone. The neighbors and baker were still there. On the next day, the street car didn't run. I had to walk for miles and saw overall signs of disintegration... I got to a replacement battalion, a massive infantry cannon unit. Amazing to me was the fact that the cannons were being pulled by oxen...<sup>159</sup>

As for his experiences as a soldier in Breslau, he stated:

The units in the fortress were named after commanders; mine was called 'Regiment Hanf.' Every two days I had to watch out for artillery... One time I was supposed to shoot a curtain of fire (*Sperrfeuer*), but I didn't have any idea how to do that... Basically the position had to be held, but we didn't have any ammunition; it was heavily rationed. Every grenade had to be flown in... I shot only one single time and didn't hit anything.<sup>160</sup>

Although Heisig's story suggests he saw little action while in Breslau, historical descriptions of the final months of the war suggest otherwise. Once the city was surrounded by Russians in mid February, a brutal street battle ensued—especially in the southern and western parts of the city—in which the Front was fought for street for street, house for house, and floor for floor. In the less than three months time from the first battle in Breslau until the end of the

---

<sup>159</sup> Heisig as quoted in Gillen, 198-9. "Als ich im Hauptbahnhof Breslau ankam, erlebte ich zwei für die damalige Stimmung in der Festung charakteristische Situationen. Da war ein Landser, der sich mit einem Offizier stritt. Der Offizier war offensichtlich ein frisch eingezogener, der sich wichtig machen wollte: 'Zeigen sie mir ihre Papiere!' Da zog der Landser, der sich das nicht bieten lassen wollte, seine Pistole. Darauf stieg ich in die Strassenbahn und suchte einen Groschen, da sagte mir der Schaffner, 'du brauchst nicht zu bezahlen, das macht keiner mehr.' Ich kam schliesslich nachts nach Hause, alles war totenstill. Da hallten durch die gespenstisch leeren Strassen aus den sogenannten 'Reichslautsprechersäulen' Durchsagen [...] Meine Mutter war schon weg. Die Nachbarn, Bäcker, waren noch da. Am nächsten Tag fuhr keine Strassenbahn. Ich musste kilometerweit laufen und sah überall Zeichen der Auflösung. Vom Lehrgang war natürlich nicht mehr die Rede. Ich kam zu einem Ersatzbataillon, eine schwere Infantriegeschützeinheit. Erstaunlich für mich, dass die Geschütze von Ochsen gezogen wurden."

<sup>160</sup> Ibid. "Die Einheiten in der Festung wurden nach ihren Kommandeuren genannt, meine hiess 'Regiment Hanf.' Alle zwei Tage musste ich in die Stellung als Artilleriebeobachter. Aber ich hatte nichts zu beobachten. Ich sollte einmal Sperrfeuer schießen, hatte aber keine Ahnung, wie man das macht, da hat mir einer die Werte rübergerufen. Im Grunde musste nur die Stellung bezogen werden, wir hatte ja keine Munition, bzw. sie war streng rationiert. Jede Granate musste mit einer Junkers 52 eingeflogen werden. Ich habe ein einziges Mal zwei Schüsse abgegeben, getroffen habe ich nichts."

war, entire neighborhoods were destroyed, often by the Germans themselves as they tried to halt the advance of the Russians by blowing up buildings directly in their path; this was also the fulfillment of the Nazis' "scorched earth" policy to leave nothing of value behind. Those who refused to fight were executed. By this point in time, there were roughly 200,000 civilians—of which tens of thousands were forced laborers and prisoners—and 45-50,000 soldiers left in the city.<sup>161</sup>

In early March, just weeks after the Russians first reached Breslau but before the city was destroyed, there was significant disagreement among the fortress leadership about how best to proceed as some began to doubt that Breslau could be successfully defended. This led to the replacement of Generalmajor Hans von Ahlfen by General Hermann Niehoff, who believed to the very end in the successful defense of Breslau.<sup>162</sup> As a result, the street fighting continued, and on April 1 the Russians bombarded the city center; it was Easter Sunday. More than 5,000 bombs were released in the course of the day.<sup>163</sup> The bombing continued and intensified on Monday, and it is then that the historic Cathedral Island—which would later appear in Heisig's Fortress Breslau paintings—went up in flames. According to Heisig, "Without motorcycle glasses one couldn't move in the burning city because the air was full with tiny particles of hot soot."<sup>164</sup>

But the city was not destroyed through fighting alone. On March 7 Hanke issued an order that forced all remaining civilians to work for the war effort, including boys over ten and girls

---

<sup>161</sup> Thum, 21.

<sup>162</sup> Both generals survived the war and would later co-author, *So kämpft Breslau (So fought Breslau)*, a positive view of the defense of the city. This book was published in Munich in 1959, a time when West Germany was rebuilding its military. Four years earlier, in 1955, Allied military occupation of West Germany had ended and a small German military (Bundeswehr) was established.

<sup>163</sup> Jonca, 335.

<sup>164</sup> Heisig as quoted in Gillen, 200. "Ohne Motorradbrillen konnte man sich überhaupt nicht in der brennenden Stadt bewegen, weil die Luft voller winziger heisser Russpartikel war."



over twelve years of age. Those who refused were shot and their deaths publicized in posters and the local newspaper to encourage obedience, which together with executions of military deserters numbered in the hundreds. They made barricades and cleaned out buildings, burning the belongings to keep them from the Russians, and built a landing strip for airplanes in the middle of the city. This latter action led to the destruction of numerous historic buildings that might otherwise have survived the war, as well as to the death of more than 13,000 civilians from enemy fire. According to the Polish historian Karol Jonca, many Breslauers were angered by the Nazis' refusal to capitulate, which they saw as leading to the senseless destruction of the city, and ultimately their fear of the Red Army turned to fear of the "fortress" leadership—what has been termed the terror regime of Hanke—and of the German soldiers under their command.<sup>165</sup>

Two months later, on May 6, Breslau surrendered. According to Heisig, he experienced the end of the war while

on duty at a crossroad. Suddenly a flag-waving German medic followed by a Russian came and called: "don't shoot, don't shoot." I presumed the war was over, but we didn't want to be captured. So we took off for the West because there was supposedly... [another unit still fighting there.] We walked the entire night through Breslau and wanted to cross the Oder. It was pitch black; we had no boat or food except for chocolate. We laid down in a small house... to sleep. The Russians woke us up with loudspeaker announcements about the capitulation. We threw away our weapons, ran back to the burning city and joined the train of prisoners.<sup>166</sup>

---

<sup>165</sup> Jonca, 29.

<sup>166</sup> Gillen, 201. "...an einer Strassenkreuzung auf Posten. Plötzlich kam ein fahnenschwenkender deutscher Sanitäter, gefolgt von einem Russen und rief: 'nicht schiessen, nicht schiessen.' Ich nahm an, dass der Krieg zuende ist, aber gefangennahmen lassen wollten wir uns doch nicht. Wir sind also nach Westen abgehauen, weil dort angeblich die Heersgruppe Mitte (Schlesien) des Oberbefehlshabers Ferdinand Schörner noch kämpfte. Wir sind die ganze Nacht durch Breslau gelaufen und wollten über die Oder. Es war stockdunkel, wir hatten kein Boot und bis auf Schokolade keine Verpflegung. In einem Häuschen mit Gartenstühlen auf dem Grundstück einer Kegelbahn legten wir uns schlafen. Die Russen weckten uns mit Lautsprecherdurchsagen über die Kapitulation. Daraufhin haben wir die Waffen weggeworfen, liefen wieder in die brennende Stadt zurück und schlossen uns dem Zug der Gefangenen an."

Heisig spent the next six months in a Soviet military hospital in Breslau recovering from a leg injury, after which he was released as “unable to work” in terms of hard labor. He worked instead as a graphic artist for the Polish Bureau of Propaganda until he was forced—together with his mother—to leave the city in 1947 as part of the city’s changeover from Germany to Poland; Breslau became Wrocław.<sup>167</sup>

### 2.3 A CHANGE IN THINKING

It would take nearly twenty years before Heisig began dealing directly with the Second World War in his art.<sup>168</sup> In this regard, he is not unlike Otto Dix, whose most famous paintings emerged years after his service in World War I and did so in the context of a strong anti-war movement. In West Germany, by contrast, painters dealing with the Second World War in their art did not emerge onto the art scene until the 1980s, most notably in the work of Anselm Kiefer; yet Kiefer is too young to base his work on lived experience.<sup>169</sup> Heisig’s only real counterpart in the West is thus Joseph Beuys, whose installations and performances of the 1960s began to be interpreted

---

<sup>167</sup> An application Heisig filled out for the Leipzig Academy in May 1948 states he had been part of the Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (FDGB) in Zeitz since January 15, 1946. SächsStAL: SAfgKBL 324/1. In a questionnaire he filled out in 1971, on the other hand, he lists having worked in Poland from 1945-47. BStU Leipzig: Bernhard Heisig 000050. The latter seems more likely.

<sup>168</sup> *Weihnachtstraum des unbelehrbaren Soldaten* (WV25) was later destroyed through overpainting and exists today only as a color reproduction in *200 Jahre Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst* (Leipzig, 1964). The expressionist and simultaneous narrative style of this work suggest it was created no earlier than 1964. See my discussion of Heisig’s style in chapter 3 of this dissertation. In the 2005 exhibition and catalog, a 1968 painting from the Christmas Dream series is incorrectly dated to 1964. According to the owners of the painting, Mr. and Mrs. Karl-Georg Hirsh, the original 1964 painting was reworked by Heisig into a “flower picture” (*Blumenbild*). Unhappy at the loss of the original, they were able to get Heisig to paint them another in the same vein. It is this replacement that appears in the exhibition. Discussion with Mrs. Karl-Georg Hirsch on March 31, 2005.

<sup>169</sup> Presumably there were painters working on this topic earlier, but the political climate of forgetting combined with the western art market’s focus on abstraction and American-style modernism were not conducive to the recognition of such works. It was only in the wake of the Student Movement of the late 1960s and the reemergence of figuration in the 1980s that works dealing with this past became of interest. In the case of Kiefer, it was only after he was highly praised in the United States that he found recognition in the FRG.

in terms of his past as a soldier in World War II during the 1970s.<sup>170</sup> Significantly, Heisig's work was interpreted in terms of this past already in the 1960s.

Heisig's emphasis on suffering in *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier* suggests he had undergone a significant change in thinking in the nearly twenty years since the end of the war. As a member of the 12<sup>th</sup> SS Tank Division of the Hitler Youth, he was almost certainly inculcated in the ideas of the superior race. As part of an elite unit that received preferential treatment from the beginning, he would have believed himself the elite of the elite. He himself states, "We really thought we were the best division in the Wehrmacht."<sup>171</sup> In sharp contrast to the idea of superiority, however, *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier* focuses on the trauma of a solitary man. He is weak and in pain. He is also alone and thus no longer able to disappear into the "mass ornament" of Nazi ideology.<sup>172</sup> The symbols of power that had encouraged him into battle—the German eagle, iron cross, and swastika—swirl around him, yet they are of no consolation. They have lost their meaning in the wake of the Nazis' utter defeat, not to mention the atrocities that they had perpetrated. Nazi ideology had not prepared its soldiers for a life after Nazism. Heisig shows the existential angst of a former soldier—representative of an entire generation of German men—suffering not only from post-traumatic stress disorder brought on by the bloodshed of war, but also from the staggering loss of his entire

---

<sup>170</sup> Before 1970, Beuys was reluctant to speak about his war-time experiences, although he did make explicit references to the Nazi past in works such as *The Auschwitz Vitrine* (1968). The story that has come to dominate Beuys scholarship today—that he was a downed pilot in World War II saved by Tartars who wrapped him in felt and fat—was first fleshed out in an interview in 1976. It became canonized in the retrospective exhibition of his work held at the Guggenheim in 1979. Beuys, on the other hand, stated in 1980 that this story was overrated and rejected a causal relationship between his war experiences and his use of materials. Peter Nisbet, "Crash Course, Remarks on a Beuys Story," in *Joseph Beuys, Mapping the Legacy* (Sarasota, FL: John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 2001).

<sup>171</sup> Heisig in the 1999 documentary, *Hitlers Kinder*, as quoted in Gillen, 195. "Wir dachten wirklich, wir sind die beste Division der Wehrmacht."

<sup>172</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," 1927, as reprinted in Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, transl. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1994) 75-86.

belief system.<sup>173</sup> The trauma of war depicted in the painting would have been unfathomable to the “invincible” teenage soldier.

Just as the content of the *Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier* marks a significant departure from Heisig’s thinking as a teenage soldier, so too does the style. During the Third Reich, a timeless heroic realism was promoted by the Führer, an art that focused on bravery and honor, traditional family values, ethnic purity and the German landscape.<sup>174</sup> Modern art, on the other hand, was rejected because of its formal innovations and “questionable” subject matter. In 1937, a commission was put together to purge German art museums of such works, which were then sold to buyers from other countries, placed in the infamous *Degenerate Art* exhibition—intended to foment antipathy toward modern art among the populace—or simply destroyed.<sup>175</sup>

A comparison of Heisig’s work with Richard Rudolph’s *Comrades* (fig. 2-1) reveals just how different Heisig’s painting is from those with which he grew up. In Rudolph’s work, two German soldiers are carrying a wounded third across the battlefield with the help of a rifle. The wounded soldier’s forehead and right foot have been bandaged, and a knife has been used as a make-shift splint for his left shin. His face shows no signs of pain, however, nor do the faces of the two carrying him show signs of strain. Instead, all three have their eyes trained on their goal, which lies outside the picture frame. They appear strong and determined in this heroic image of battlefield brotherhood. Similarly, the style of the work is realistic. The brushstroke is invisible, the colors presumably naturalistic, and there is a unified sense of time and space. In comparison

---

<sup>173</sup> Heisig in a letter to me, January 28, 2006. “Ich habe mich bemüht, mir mit Hilfe der Bilder eine Bewusstseinslage klar zu machen, in der ich mich – und mit mir viele meiner Generation – befand. Was natürlich auch mit meiner Erziehung zusammenhängt, die wesentlich geprägt war durch Kriegserlebnisse meines Vaters im 1. Weltkrieg. So was bleibt in der Erziehung nicht ohne Wirkung.”

<sup>174</sup> See Peter Adam, *Art of the Third Reich* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992).

<sup>175</sup> See Stephanie Barron, ed. “*Degenerate Art*,” *The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (Los Angeles: Harry N. Abrams, 1991).

to this work, it is easy to see that had *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier* existed, it would have been labeled “degenerate” by the Nazis, both for its formally innovative style and its depiction of a suffering soldier.

But Heisig’s paintings were not always modern in style. In fact, *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier* is one of the first to break away from the illusionism that dominated his paintings in the 1950s. Not coincidentally, it is also one of the first to include explicit references to the Nazi past, which, as I will argue in Chapter 3, is one of several reasons for the change in his artistic style in the mid 1960s.

The stylistic change evident in *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier* reflects a shift in thinking that was, similar to the change in his painting style, not immediate. As he stated it years later, “one was stupid when he went to war and even more stupid when he came back out.”<sup>176</sup> Early attempts at his official de-nazification were unsuccessful: “A sergeant from the ‘National Committee for a Free Germany’...told us how people were murdered in the concentration camps, made into soap. I remember it as if it were yesterday how the soldiers had laughed. No one believed it; all were calling for him to stop talking such nonsense. The sergeant couldn’t get through. We didn’t believe what he was saying.”<sup>177</sup>

And yet three years later, Heisig joined the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands), the Communist Party of the soon-to-be-founded East German State. The years in between had been difficult, but they had also brought him in contact with new people and ways of thinking. In late 1945/early 1946, for example, he had worked with the artists’ group Paleta in

---

<sup>176</sup> Lahann, 409. “...man war dämlich, als man in den Krieg zog, und noch dämlicher, als man wieder rauskam.”

<sup>177</sup> Gillen, 201. “Ein Feldweibel vom ‘Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland’ mit einer schwarzweissroten Armbinde stellte sich auf eine Baracke und erzählte davon, wie in den Konzentrationslagern Menschen ermordet, zu Seife verarbeitet worden sind. Ich weiss noch wie heute, wie die Landser anfangen zu lachen, keiner hatte es geglaubt, alle riefen, hör auf mit dem Quatsch. Der Feldweibel konnte sich nicht durchsetzen. Wir haben es nicht geglaubt, was er erzählte.”

Breslau. There were “two Russians, two Dutch, and eight Poles [...] All spoke German so I could understand them. That really impressed me. I thought about what would have happened to Poland if it had remained under German occupation.”<sup>178</sup> He was also amazed by how openly they interacted with him, the only German. They liked him, and he them.<sup>179</sup> By the end of the year, however, he and his mother were forced to leave Breslau, part of the massive shuffling of peoples that took place in Europe in the early years after the war as the borders of eastern Europe—and Germany—were redrawn. They ended up approximately 300 miles away in Zeitz, Germany, part of the Soviet Occupation Zone, where he found work as a graphic artist, taking up jobs in nearby Gera and Weißenfels as well.

A little more than a year later, in April 1948, Heisig applied to the Leipzig Academy, where he hoped to continue the art education he had begun in Breslau.<sup>180</sup> According to Heisig, however, his work was not “modern” enough and his application was rejected.<sup>181</sup> Depressed and possibly even suicidal, he visited the Kunstgewerbeschule in Leipzig where he met Walter Münze, a professor for decorative painting.<sup>182</sup> As Heisig describes it, “Walter Münze [was] a true Communist from the old school. When you listened to him, you could almost believe he had been friends with [Ernst] Thälmann. He took me under his wing in every respect, and he let me into his class for decorative painting and graphics. I didn’t even need to take an entrance test. I

---

<sup>178</sup> Gillen, 65. “...zwei Russen, zwei Holländer und acht Polen [...] Alle sprachen deutsch, damit ich sie verstehe. Das hat mich ziemlich beeindruckt. Ich dachte darüber nach, was mit Polen geworden wäre, wenn es unter deutscher Besetzung geblieben wäre.” See also Lahann, 409.

<sup>179</sup> But when they showed him pictures of how the Germans had wreaked havoc [*gehaust*] in Poland, wanting him to understand what had happened there, he still did not want to believe it. They would shake their heads and say: What a stubborn dog you are! [Was bist du bloß für ein verbohrter Hund!] Lahann, 407.

<sup>180</sup> In a note to the Leipzig Academy dated April 26, 1948, Heisig states, “Da von einem Weiterstudium für mich alles abhängt (Ich bin Übersiedler und meine Studien wurden durch Einberufung zum Militär unterbrochen) bitte ich hofl. um bald mögl. Bescheid, da ich, im Falle meiner Aufnahme, bei der Kreiskommission für Arbeiterstudium noch einen Stipendienauftrag einreichen möchte.” SächsStAL: SAfgKuBL 324/1.

<sup>181</sup> Dammbeck, 3, as quoted in Gillen, 68. “Da bin ich abgelehnt worden, weil ich nicht modern genug war, also das verrückte Zeug, das konnte ich nicht, keine Phantasie und so.”

<sup>182</sup> Ibid. “Da bin ich ziemlich verzweifelt nach Hause gefahren zu meiner Mutter in Zeitz und hab gesagt, das wird nichts mehr mit mir. Ich dachte, ich bring mich um und so.”

have a tremendous amount to thank him for.”<sup>183</sup> It was Münze who first told him about Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg and Ernst Thälmann, and who suggested he become a member of the SED, which he did in late 1948.<sup>184</sup>

Over the course of the 1950s, Heisig became an important figure within the Leipzig art scene, where he was not only a teacher at the Leipzig Academy and member of the board of trustees responsible for the distribution of cultural funds in Leipzig, but also spent three years as chairman of the Leipzig branch of the Association of Visual artists (VBK-L). During this time he also exhibited regularly, was on the jury of almost all of the Regional Art exhibitions in Leipzig and wrote art reviews. According to an evaluation of his person written by the secretary of the Party Organization in 1961 to justify his receipt of a Medal for Outstanding Achievement—an award he received five times during the Ulbricht era—Heisig was seen as “one of the most talented young artists in the Republic...”<sup>185</sup> He was also praised for his ideological committedness: during his three years as chairman of the VBK-L, he had “done a great service in the clarification of the ideological and artistic situation in VBKD Leipzig.”<sup>186</sup> In this same year, Heisig became professor of the Leipzig Academy, as well as its rector, both influential positions in the GDR’s cultural world.

---

<sup>183</sup> Ibid. “Walter Münze, ein richtiger Altkommunist, wenn man ihm zuhörte, konnte man denken, er war mit Thälmann befreundet. Unter dessen Fittiche bin ich nun geraten in jeder Hinsicht und der hat mich in seine Klasse für Dekorative Malerei und Graphik aufgenommen. Ich brauchte auch keine Aufnahmeprüfung zu machen. Ihm habe ich eigentlich einiges zu verdanken.”

<sup>184</sup> Gillen, 68. There is some disagreement in the archival files as to whether Heisig joined the SED in 1947 or 1948. According to a questionnaire he filled out in 1971, for example, he lists membership in the SED since 1947. BStU Leipzig: Bernhard Heisig 000049. Based on his story about Münze, 1948 seems the more likely year for him to have joined the SED.

<sup>185</sup> *Beurteilung*, February 22, 1961. HGB Archiv. “Unserer Meinung nach gehört Genosse Heisig zu den talentiertesten jungen Künstlern der Republik...” I do not know what organization was responsible for this evaluation. It was written by [Jochen?] Nusser, Secretary of the Parteio rganization.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid. “Als ehemaliger zweiter Vorsitzender des VBKD Leipzig hat er grosse Verdienste um die Klärung der ideologischen und künstlerischen Situation im VBKD Leipzig.” See also *Begründung zum Vorschlag für die Auszeichnung mit der “Medaille für ausgezeichnete Leistungen” anlässlich des 1. Mai 1960*, April 19, 1960 (SächsStAL: VBK-L 155)

It is at this point in time that he first began dealing explicitly with the Nazi past in his art with works like *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier*. Before looking more closely at how this work relates to those created by other artists in Leipzig in the mid 1960s, however, it is important to first look at how this past was treated in East German art more generally.

## 2.4 THE NAZI PAST IN EAST GERMAN ART, 1945-64

In the wake of World War II, artists in a number of media created work that dealt with the Nazi past or, more accurately, the legacy it left behind. Some of the earliest of these focus on the wartime destruction of major German cities, especially Dresden.<sup>187</sup> Wilhelm Lachnit's *Death in Dresden* (1945, fig. 2-2), for example, shows a mourning mother—echoed in the background by a similarly posed figure of death—and her child in the bombed out ruins of what had been one of Europe's most beautiful cities until February 1945, when it was carpet bombed by Western Allies. The near complete destruction of the city was also documented in an extensive series of prints by Wilhelm Rudolph and photographs by Richard Peter, Sr.

Another frequent theme in early post war-era paintings is the concentration camp. Horst Strepel's triptych, *Night over Germany* (1945/46, fig. 2-3), shows haggard figures, some behind barbed wire, others sitting in cramped cells. Hans Grundig's *Victims of Fascism* (1946/48, fig. 2-4), on the other hand, shows two prisoners—the Communist red triangle visible on one of them—lying dead, albeit peacefully, in the courtyard of the concentration camp in

---

<sup>187</sup> This emphasis on ruins also took place in literature and film of the 1940s, the so-called *Trummerliteratur* and -*film* (*trummer* means “ruins”).



Sachsenhausen where Grundig himself had been incarcerated from 1940 to 1942 for his Communist activities. The identity number visible on one of the victims is Grundig's own.

Whereas post war-era artworks created about the Nazi past in western Germany are not well known today, their eastern counterparts became part of the art historical canon in East Germany, where they contributed to the legitimation of Communist rule and the founding myth of anti-fascism. In all three of the paintings mentioned above, the emphasis is on victimization, which not only reflects how many Germans felt in these early years, it also helped to discredit the Nazi regime, which was ultimately responsible for the misery depicted. At a deeper level, this emphasis on the destruction caused by the Nazis also illustrated what the German people had brought upon themselves by supporting that regime. This culpability was used in the East in the immediate post-war years to legitimate the imposition of a dictatorial rule and to discredit a democratic one by showing that the people could not be trusted to choose what was in their own best interest.

Similarly, *Night Over Germany* and *Victims of Fascism* legitimate the imposition of a specifically Communist government by focusing on the suffering of Communists in concentration camps. This not only emphasized the idea that Communism was the enemy of Fascism, and thus the natural choice to rule in its wake, it also showed that Communists had been willing to sacrifice themselves in the fight against Fascism. Stempel's painting, as a triptych, draws upon the Christian tradition of the crucifixion of Christ, to which he also makes a more explicit reference in the central panel with the figure hung on barbed wire in the background. Similarly, Grundig's painting is the shape and size of a predella, the bottom panel of a triptych, where the dead body of Christ is traditionally depicted. In Grundig's painting, the two Communists are dead, but the implication is that they, like Christ, will rise again. The

establishment of a Communist Germany with the foundation of the German Democratic Republic one year later can be seen as the real-world fulfillment of this idea.

This emphasis on the Communists' sacrifices in the Third Reich also helped immunize the East German leadership against opposition in the Cold War era, especially in the early years, since many of those in power had actively fought against the Nazis and suffered exile or imprisonment as a result. To challenge them was thus to challenge the enemies of Nazism. As such, East Germany tended to be more conservative in the Ulbricht years (1949-71) than other Eastern bloc countries, especially in the wake of Khrushchev's first de-Stalinization speech in 1956. As Wolfgang Kohlhaase put it: "one would have had to fight antifascists in order to fight Stalinism."<sup>188</sup>

In the later 1940s, painting in East Germany turned increasingly from victimization to rebuilding. By the end of 1949—at which point Germany was officially divided in two—the last vestiges of sadness in official East German painting had been replaced almost completely by the optimism of the future as embodied in rebuilding. It is from this time period, culminating in the Third German Art Exhibition in 1953, that the stereotypical socialist realist images of happy workers that westerners tend to equate with East German art were created and exhibited. It was also in this time that the Formalism Debates took place, resulting in the denigration of "modern" styles.<sup>189</sup> In this context, the Nazi past and the suffering caused by it became inappropriate subject matter for easel paintings.

Despite the emphasis on optimism, there were nonetheless paintings in the mid-to-late 1950s that focused on—and protested—the threat of nuclear war, such as Grundig's *Ban the*

---

<sup>188</sup> David Bathrick, *The Powers of Speech, the Politics of Culture in the GDR* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995) 13.

<sup>189</sup> These debates pick up on those from the 1930s between Brecht, Lukacs and Bloch. See *Aesthetics and Politics, The Key Texts of the Classic Debate within German Marxism* (London & New York: Verso, 1977).

*Atombomb!* (1954, fig. 2-5). In this work, we, the viewer, stand before a wooden desk set against a window. On the desk rest two vases with flowers, an art book open to show a madonna-and-child image, a pair of blue gloves, and a handwritten letter that quotes from a famous text by Bertolt Brecht: “The great Carthage had three wars. It was still powerful after the first, still liveable after the second. It was no longer findable after the third.”<sup>190</sup> Through the large window behind the desk, a giant mushroom cloud dwarfs the small town that lies between it and the room in which we are standing. Images such as this illustrated the GDR’s stated commitment to world peace and pointed an accusatory finger, if only implied, at the imperialist West.

Although the Nazi past virtually disappeared as a subject in East German painting in the 1950s, at least in public venues, it did not disappear from all “high” art media. Fritz Cremer’s sculpture for the concentration camp in Buchenwald (fig. 2-6), for example, was widely publicized in East Germany in the mid-to-late 1950s. There were several articles and numerous photos in *Bildende Kunst*, as well as a book and a fund raiser. The larger-than-life-sized sculpture, dedicated in 1958, depicts eleven camp prisoners standing defiantly. Some bear raised fists; some hold weapons; one has a flag. They are the political resisters of fascism, an image of triumph despite the haggard faces and tattered clothes.

It is also in the mid-to-late 1950s that an increasing number of books about the Nazi past began to be published in the GDR.<sup>191</sup> Perhaps the best known of these was Bruno Apitz’s surprise bestselling novel, *Naked Among Wolves*, released in 1958. Based on a true story, the

---

<sup>190</sup> Bertolt Brecht, “Open Letter to German Artists and Writers,” 1951, in *Brecht on Art and Politics*, eds. Tom Kuhn and Steve Giles (London: Methuen Publishing Ltd., 2003) 317-318. This text became famous for its concluding lines about Carthage—recalling the three Punic Wars between Carthage and Rome (264-146 BCE)—which were read on the radio by Brecht’s wife Helene Weigel in 1951. Stephen Parker et al, eds. *Brecht on Art and Politics* (London: Methuen Publishing Ltd., 2003) 278, 319.

<sup>191</sup> Wolfgang Emmerich, *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR, Erweiterte Neuauflage* (Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch, 2000) 131. Books about the Nazi past had been published before this point in time—such as Arnold Zweig’s *Beil von Wandsbek* in 1951—but they were singular occurrences rather than part of a broader trend.

novel focuses on several Communist prisoners in Buchenwald who, upon discovering a Jewish child who had been smuggled into the camp in a suitcase, successfully keep him alive until the liberation of the camp a few weeks later.<sup>192</sup> After being made into a successful television movie for the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Buchenwald in 1960, *Naked Among Wolves* was taken up by the renowned East German director Frank Beyer and made into a highly acclaimed DEFA film with Armin Mueller-Stahl, who later made a name for himself in Hollywood. It was released in 1963 where it, like its predecessors, was highly praised by audiences and critics alike. The first East German film to take place in a concentration camp, it hit upon many of the tropes already discussed: Communists as the enemy of fascists, as active resisters of Nazism, and as willing to sacrifice themselves to save others from the National Socialists.

It is in this cultural context that Heisig first began making explicit references to the Nazi past in his painted oeuvre with works like *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier* (1964). Unlike Cremer and Apitz, however, Heisig focused on suffering rather than heroism in this painting, which recalls the pathos of works created in the immediate post-war era. The inclusion of a mushroom cloud, on the other hand, connects it to the anti-nuclear paintings of the more recent past. In this context, the look of shock on the man's face can be interpreted as more than just a response to the fascist past; it is a response to the perceived threat of war in the present. And yet Heisig's work is very different from those that came before it: *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier* focuses on a Nazi perpetrator rather than a victim.

---

<sup>192</sup> The child—Stefan-Jerzy Zweig—was subsequently found in Tel Aviv in 1964 and officially invited to come to the GDR, where he studied film.

## 2.5 THE NAZI PAST AT THE LEIPZIG ACADEMY, 1964-65

While Heisig's focus on a Nazi perpetrator marks a significant change in content from what was being praised in official circles at the time, it was not the only one of its kind, nor even the only one in Leipzig. In the same year that Heisig created *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier*, one of his students, Heinz Zander, created *The Anachronistic Procession*, a painting that focuses on crowd of marching Nazis, whom it ridicules by depicting them as misshapen figures and animals. A year later, Werner Tübke, a colleague of Heisig's at the Leipzig Academy, similarly began work on a series of paintings that focus on a Nazi lawyer entitled, *The Life Memories of Dr. Schulze, Attorney at Law*; in the most famous of these, a high-court lawyer looks out at his past, which surrounds him in a simultaneous narrative composition not unlike Heisig's Christmas Dream painting from the previous year. In all three of these artists' paintings, the emphasis is on a Nazi perpetrator, which can be seen upon closer examination as a direct response to political events of the day.

The youngest of the three, Zander (b. 1939) began studying at the Leipzig Academy in 1959, where he was part of the first group of students to graduate from the painting class created and taught by Heisig.<sup>193</sup> For his graduation project in 1964, he created the triptych, *The Anachronistic Procession* (fig. 2-8), which takes its title and some of its imagery from Brecht's 1947 poem, "The Anachronistic Procession, or Freedom and Democracy." In both, the focus is on the degeneracy of the Nazis and their followers.

The center panel of Zander's painting focuses on a procession of more than twenty-five figures, near the front of which a Nazi storm trooper holds up a large swastika flag. Just to its

---

<sup>193</sup> Lothar Lang says 1959; Hermann Raum says 1958. Lothar Lang, *Malerei und Graphik in Ostdeutschland* (Leipzig: Faber & Faber, 2002). Hermann Raum, *Bildende Kunst in der DDR* (Berlin: Edition Ost AG, 2000).

right, a burly man wearing an SS hat, black military dress pants with a red pinstripe and dark sunglasses turns toward the viewer. He is wearing a flamboyant purple-pink jacket with a red collar over an orange shirt and feminine black boots that come to a point at the toes. His attire suggests he is homosexual, thus drawing upon homophobic rhetoric equating Nazi “deviancy” with that, allegedly, of homosexuals. The figure also seems to illustrate Susan Sonntag’s description—written more than a decade later—of the sado-masochistic quality of the Nazis.<sup>194</sup> Just to the right of center another man in similarly pointed black shoes and wearing a light blue tank top and orange pants looks out of the picture frame. The top of his head is missing and an axe is firmly lodged in his brain, suggesting that he, like the others, is not governed by thought. He steps over a man with a sickly green face who is painting a black swastika on the ground. The latter figure looks warily at a mutated, lipstick-wearing brown dog that is standing next to him. Between them and just to the left of center, a large red-headed woman with five o’clock shadow and exposed breasts pulls up her white dress to reveal a swastika garter belt. It is an image straight from the poem: “And those Nazi women there / With their skirts up in the air - / Legs, they reckon, are what gets / Allied sweets and cigarettes.”<sup>195</sup> On the left-hand side of the canvas a large figure wearing only white briefs bangs on a drum painted with the German imperial colors: black, white and red. This figure is not in the procession, however, but rather faces us. He has no mouth. He beats out the militarist tempo to which the others march. Behind him on the left edge of the painting, a blue donkey in a purple-pink dress carries a framed portrait of Hitler. Above him can be seen the last four letters of the word “democracy.” The word “Freiheit” (freedom) appears in black gothic font behind the man-woman’s head.

---

<sup>194</sup> Susan Sonntag, “Fascinating Fascism,” *The New York Times Review of Books* (6 February 1975).

<sup>195</sup> Bertolt Brecht, “The Anachronistic Procession, or Freedom and Democracy,” in John Willett and Ralph Manheim, eds., *Bertolt Brecht Poems 1913-1956* (London, New York: Methuen, 1987) 412.

The predella looks through a sewer pipe that has been broken open to show a procession of anthropomorphized rats marching in the same direction as the people in the panel above them. Similarly, a swastika flag is clearly visible. Blowing brass horns, they appear to animate the figures above them in an inversion of the Pied Piper story. The left-hand panel shows a group of people struggling to get out of the sewers. One crawls into a pipe, while an SA man holds his mouth with one hand and grabs onto the edge of a manhole with the other; the city above is visible through the opening. The implication is that the deformed Nazis in the center panel were originally rats who took on human form and emerged from the sewers below.

The right-hand panel, depicted in more sober colors and with fewer, more realistic details, focuses on the stage actor Ekkhard Schall, who was well-known for his roles at the Berlin Ensemble.<sup>196</sup> Standing under a spotlight on the wooden boards of a stage, he looks out at the viewer and points with his left hand at the scenes taking place in the other three panels. Presumably he is delivering the words of Brecht's poem, which are written on the canvas below him. Next to him the pages of a script are visible, as well as a man playing a brass instrument.

While there is no evidence that Brecht's poem was staged at the Berlin Ensemble at this point in time, another play featuring Schall and focusing on the insanity of the Nazis was in production during these years, *The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui*. Written by Brecht in 1941, this play satirizes the rise of Adolph Hitler to power by focusing on a fictional mobster from Chicago named Ui. The Berlin Ensemble production opened in 1959 and saw more than five hundred performances before closing fifteen years later in 1974.<sup>197</sup> Although there were guest performances of the play in Leipzig in 1960 and 1965, it is likely Zander traveled to Berlin to see

---

<sup>196</sup> Schall was Brecht's son-in-law.

<sup>197</sup> Brecht Archive: *Arturo Ui* subject folder.

it.<sup>198</sup> The often controversial Berlin Ensemble was a drawing point for artists and writers throughout East Germany, who would regularly organize group trips to Berlin to see the plays. Moreover, Zander exhibited a painting of Schall in the title role of Brecht's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Coriolan*—which had opened in Berlin in late September 1964—at the controversial Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig in 1965.

The brochure for the 1959 production of *Arturo Ui* is illustrated by photos of the Third Reich and photomontages by John Heartfield. Rather than discussing the play, however, the brochure's text quotes from a document written by the Committee for German Unity that was presented at an international press conference in Berlin in February of that year. This text is quite revealing about the role the Nazi past played in East Germany at this point in time. In particular, it shows how West Germany was seen as the continuation of this past, which is an important subtext for understanding Zander's as well Heisig's and Tübke's work:

According to the "Handbook for Justice," 80% of the higher judicial officers in the Federal Republic had leading positions in the Nazi justice system. 65-70% of all judges and public prosecutors working in the Federal Republic today were formerly members of the NSDAP. 39 of these judges and public prosecutors are on the war crimes list of the International Commission for the Investigation of War Crimes; their delivery has been hindered.

26,000 German citizens were murdered by the former Nazi blood-judges (*Blutrichter*) currently working in the Federal Republic. More than 1000 convictions can be traced back to these judges.<sup>199</sup>

---

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> From the findings of the Committee for German Unity at the International Press Conference in Berlin on February 25, 1959, as quoted in an undated brochure for *Arturo Ui*. The play premiered at the Berlin Ensemble on March 23, 1959, so the brochure presumably dates from this year. Archive of the Berlin Ensemble: *BE-Aufführungsverzeichnis*, 9 October 2003. "Laut dem *Handbuch der Justiz* haben 80% der höheren Justizbeamten in der Bundesrepublik in leitenden Stellungen der Nazi-Justiz gearbeitet. 65 bis 70 Prozent aller heute in der Bundesrepublik tätigen Richter und Staatsanwälte sind ehemalige Mitglieder der NSDAP. Von der Internationalen Kommission für die Untersuchung von Kriegsverbrechen wurden 39 wieder amtierende Richter und Staatsanwälte auf die Kriegsverbrecherliste gesetzt; ihre Auslieferung wird gehindert. Von den in der Bundesrepublik amtierenden ehemaligen Nazi-Blutrichtern sind allein 26,000 deutsche Bürger ermordet worden. Über 1000 Urteile können diesen Richter nachgewiesen werden."



This text makes clear that the events taking place on stage should not be read just in terms of the Nazi past, but also in terms of its continuation in the present as seemingly demonstrated by West Germany. This connection with the FRG was not a part of Brecht's original text, which was written before the collapse of the Third Reich, although its setting in Chicago indicates a critique of capitalism. "The Anachronistic Procession," on the other hand, was written in 1947 in direct response to the continuation of former Nazis in positions of power in the western sectors. It is a biting critique of the "immorality" of post-war western Germany, where stability was sought at the expense of justice in order to establish a democratic system of government: "Through the streets resounds the lash: / SS men flogging for cash. / Freedom needs them too, you see - / Freedom and Democracy."<sup>200</sup>

Based as it is on a poem criticizing western Germany, Zander's painting must be seen in terms of the present rather than merely as a reflection on the past. Moreover, it was created at a time when West Germany was being criticized for allowing high-level Nazis to play a role in its government and judicial system.<sup>201</sup> In 1963, for example, Hans Globke lost his position as Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's secretary and right-hand man when his Nazi past became public. In the Third Reich, Globke had written the official commentary on the Nuremberg Laws that had deprived German-Jews of their rights, a fact that had been glossed over when he was hired by Adenauer in 1953.<sup>202</sup>

---

<sup>200</sup> Brecht as cited in Willett, 412.

<sup>201</sup> Articles about the continuation of Nazis in high-power positions in West Germany were frequent in the East German press. "Blutrichter hatten Bonner Auftrag," *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (9 November 1961): 2. "66 Nazi-Diplomaten im Bonner Dienst," *Mitteldeutsche Neueste Nachrichten* (hereafter *MNN*) (13 December 1961): 1.

<sup>202</sup> East Germany brought Globke's past to light in 1961 and wrote numerous articles about it. "Awneri: 'Für Globke das Todesurteil,'" *MNN* (1/2 July 1961): 2. "Globke – Mitwisser der Endlösungsverbrechen," *MNN* (3 July 1961): 2. "Aus Bonn droht der Globkismus," *MNN* (13 July 1961): 5. "Adenauer behält den Massenmörder Globke," *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (13 November 1961): 2.

Another significant event that took place in the mid 1960s was the Auschwitz Trial in Frankfurt am Main in West Germany. Beginning in December 1963 and lasting until August 1965, it was the largest trial ever held in Germany to that date. More than 350 witnesses testified against the atrocities that took place in the concentration camps in Auschwitz. This trial focused on the terror system of the camps and on the brutal, sadistic actions of the perpetrators; it changed the perception of the camps from being the unfortunate result of war to a place where the crime of genocide had occurred. This event marked the beginning of West Germany's coming to terms with the Nazi past and was heavily publicized in the GDR as proof of the West's failure to do so earlier; it was also a topic in western news, which many in the GDR were able to watch—albeit not openly—at this point in time.

According to Tübke, the series of eleven paintings he created between 1965 and 1967 titled, *Life Memories of Dr. Schulze, Attorney at Law*, originated “from Neofascist tendencies in the Federal Republic, including the Auschwitz Trials...”<sup>203</sup> The most famous of these paintings, and one of East Germany's best-known works on the topic, is the third, *Life Memories of Dr. Schulze, Attorney at Law, III* (1965, fig. 2-9). It focuses on a high-power lawyer—depicted as a marionette—whose past surrounds him in a series of overlapping, simultaneous narrative images. In front of him are scenes from his wealthy childhood. The figure's bourgeois upbringing is further emphasized by the monocle he wears as an adult. Behind him are the crimes to which he contributed in the Nazi era. It is to these memories that he turns his gaze. There are figures in concentration camp bunks, dead bodies, and haggard figures being tortured or hanged by SS soldiers. Some of the latter are merely skeletons in uniform, the embodiment of death.

---

<sup>203</sup> Tübke as quoted in *Kunst in der DDR, eine Retrospektive der Nationalgalerie*, eds. Eugen Blume and Roland März (Berlin: Verlag Berlin, 2003) 270. “Gedanklicher Ausgangspunkt sind im Prinzip neofaschistische Tendenzen in der Bundesrepublik, hinzu kamen Anregungen vom Auschwitz-Prozess usw.”

Although Heisig did not state directly that the politics of the day were a factor in his work the way that Tübke did, *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier* must nonetheless be viewed within this broader context. Indeed, Ullrich Kuhirt interpreted his painting as “a visual reckoning with western imperialism and militarism” in his two-volume official history of East German art in 1983.<sup>204</sup> From this perspective, the look of shock—or horror—on the protagonist’s face can be interpreted as the way some former Nazis living in West Germany must have felt at this point in time when, after nearly twenty years, they were suddenly starting to be held accountable for their actions. Similarly, the painting as a whole can be read as an allegory for the divided Germany, with the right-hand side of the image representing West Germany with its military symbols, and the left-hand side, East Germany with its angel of judgement.

The use of the word “unteachable” in the title also suggests that Heisig was thinking about West Germany, at least on some level, when he created this work. As he once stated about himself, “I was just as stupid after three years of war as I was as a seventeen-year-old volunteer. But not unteachable, as one saw. The environment later certainly contributed to my dealing with the war.”<sup>205</sup> The figure in the painting, by comparison, has not learned anything—he is “unteachable”—which could be a reflection of the fact that in the early years of the Cold War era, West Germany tended to repress memory of the Nazi past whereas East Germany emphasized it. This polarized response to the memory of the Third Reich is what led many intellectuals to see East Germany as the better Germany in these early years.

---

<sup>204</sup> Ullrich Kuhirt, *Kunst der DDR, 1960-80* (Leipzig: Seeman Verlag, 1983) 44. “Eine ins phantastische überspringende Variante bildnerischer Abrechnung mit dem Wesen des Imperialismus und des Militarismus bezeichnete Bernhard Heisig’s *Weihnachtstraum des unbelehrbaren Soldaten*.”

<sup>205</sup> *ZEIT Magazin* 36 (29 August 1997): 29, as cited in Gillen, 243. “...das war ich mal, und nach drei Jahren Krieg war ich noch genauso dämlich wie als siebzehnjähriger Freiwilliger. Aber nicht unbelehrbar, wie man sah. Die Umgebung später hat sicher dazu beigetragen, daß ich mich mit Kriegsstoffen beschäftigt habe.”

That Heisig saw the GDR as the better Germany at this point in time is suggested not only by the fact that he chose to remain there despite having opportunity to leave, but also by a number of prints he created just a year or so earlier for a book titled, *The Historical Duty of the GDR and the Future of Germany*.<sup>206</sup> Published in 1963, this book—which came out in limited numbers—was created to commemorate the National Conference held in Berlin the previous year. It was a conference that announced the official division of Germany into two separate states. Although Germany had been politically divided since 1949, it was only in 1962 that the GDR accepted this division as a lasting state of affairs.<sup>207</sup>

For the book, Heisig created more than ten black-and-white lithographs of which eight were included in the final publication.<sup>208</sup> Significantly, these prints mark the first emergence of explicit references to the Nazi past in his oeuvre as a whole. They focus on the GDR and, in particular, on its responsibility to stamp out fascism. The first work (fig. 2-10) in the book shows two police officers and two Nazis—a swastika and SS visible on their clothing—being forced out of the picture frame by a marching mass of demonstrators. In the next image (fig. 2-11), the point of view changes and we, the viewers, are behind a worker who is using the length of his rifle to push back two military officers and a well-dressed man in a top hat. The perspective suggests

---

<sup>206</sup> Until the Wall was built in August 1961, East Germans could move back and forth to the West in Berlin. Heisig, for example, is said to have gone to West Berlin in the 1950s to watch movies such as *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. (Interview with Anneliese Hübscher, Summer 2005). Archival evidence suggests that even after 1961, Heisig visited the West on numerous occasions, a privilege extended only to the most reliable. According to a note in his Stasi file dated to February 2, 1975, for example, Heisig visited West Germany in 1963, 1964, twice in 1972, and once in 1975; in 1974, he also visited France and Italy (Leipzig BVfS, XIII 1149-74, 000195). Another document indicates he had a visa in 1981 that allowed him to go back and forth to West Berlin for day trips to visit museums and galleries for the entire year without prior authorization (Leipzig BVfS, ZMA Abt XX 3098, 0000085). Had he wanted to stay in the West, Heisig would have had to leave his mother, two children, friends and belongings behind, including most of his art. As such, there was plenty of incentive to return. Nonetheless, there is no suggestion that Heisig wanted to live in the West. See footnote 5.

<sup>207</sup> Dietulf Sander, “Bernhard Heisig – Das druckgraphische Werk, Kommentiertes Verzeichnis der Lithographien, Radierungen und Monotypien, 1950-1990,” diss., Universität Leipzig, 1993, 87.

<sup>208</sup> I found no reference to these works in the archival files at the Sächsisches Landesarchiv in Leipzig, which is the most likely location for such information. As a result, the details of the commission are unclear.

that we are one of the masses shown in the previous work marching against the three figures who now face us. In the third image (fig. 2-12), a woman holds her head in her hands while four men crowd her from behind. Two of them are wearing an iron cross; one, the eagle insignia of the Wehrmacht. Their faces are distorted, and one wears a monocle. In his *Werkverzeichnis* of Heisig's prints, Dietulf Sander titled this work, "Mourner in Front of the Military and a Ruined Landscape," thus highlighting the damage caused by the Nazis. The next image (fig. 2-13) continues this emphasis on destruction, albeit implied, by showing two prisoners huddled together, a swastika "spider" with a skull for a head menacing them from the back right-hand corner of the work.

The remaining three prints in the book focus on the promise of the GDR. In the fifth image (fig. 2-14), a well-dressed worker with fist raised marches confidently at the front of a large group of demonstrators. It is followed by a print (fig. 2-15) of a male worker embracing two women, thus suggesting the happy comradeship of the GDR. The final image (fig. 2-16)—like the one on the title page of the book—shows a man raising the GDR's flag, complete with hammer and compass encircled by grain. In this image, the man appears to be declaring the victory of socialism, and both he and the flag are portrayed from the worm's eye view, which valorizes the two.

These works suggest that the emergence of the Nazi past in Heisig's work related more to the GDR and its mission to fight fascism than from a desire to come to terms with this past on a personal level. In fact, there seems to be little connection between these images and Heisig's own wartime experiences. The Nazis shown are caricatures—police officers, bourgeois businessmen, and decorated military officers—that recall the satirical Weimar-era works of George Grosz. As such, they conflate capitalism with Nazism to suggest that the latter continues

in the West. This reading is further emphasized by the fact that the book stems from a conference declaring the division of Germany into two states. Whereas the GDR is clearly represented as the opponent of and salvation from fascism, the subtle implication is that West Germany, as the “other” state, is fascist-friendly. The GDR is thus presented as the “better” Germany. Considering the illustrative function of these images, the overtly propagandistic nature of them is hardly surprising. The issue is more subtly handled in his paintings.

It was one year later that Heisig created *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier*. Although this painting was almost certainly responding to the cultural-political context of the day, it nonetheless differs from those of his colleagues. In both Zander’s and Tübke’s paintings, there is a clear distinction between the viewer and the Nazis portrayed. In Zander’s work, the figures are ugly, even mutated; in Tübke’s, the lawyer is portrayed as a marionette and the colors employed are dissonant. As such, both of these works portray Nazis as Other, which fits well within the GDR’s view of itself as the anti-fascist Germany. According to this view, there were no Nazis in the East; they were all in the West. It is a view that—like Tübke’s and Zander’s paintings—points an accusing finger at West Germany and, specifically, at the continuation of high power Nazis in that system.<sup>209</sup>

Heisig’s painting, on the other hand, depicts a former soldier apparently in shock as memories of the war swirl around him. There is a certain pathos to the figure, who can be seen to represent both an entire generation of German men as well as the artist himself. A comparison of

---

<sup>209</sup> A highly publicized example of the continuation of Nazis in power dating from early 1964 is Herr Krüger, a minister in Bonn who was a high court (*Oberamt*) judge responsible for numerous executions in Auschwitz; his first name is not mentioned. Headlines in the *Neues Deutschland* include: “World Opinion on the Fall of the Bonn Minister Krüger,” “New Sensitivity for the Defeat of Revanchism,” and “Predominant Opinion: the GDR Preserves the Respect of the German Name” (24 January 1964). “The GDR Gives New Proof Against the Bonn CDU-Minister Krüger” and “Senior Public Prosecutor of the Federal State to take over the Investigation” (31 January 1964). “Blood Judge Defends SS-Executioner [Krüger]” and “West German VVN Provides Proof Against Stolting” (8 February 1964).

this work with the others suggests that Heisig's past as a member of the SS may have prevented him from leveling accusations at other former Nazis. As he once stated, albeit in reference to another work created around this time: "[*The Fascist Nightmare*] is not thought of as an 'accusation.' I don't feel entitled to it."<sup>210</sup> Instead, he created a work that is clearly critical of war—as is fitting of East German ideology—but that does not point an accusatory finger, at least not overtly.

Significantly, the first painting in the Christmas Dream series has a slightly different title, *The Christmas Dream of the Militarist* (WV17, 1960/62). While this work—like the later one—has no overt references to East or West Germany in the imagery, its title is significant: the term “militarist” echoes within the political framework of the Cold War era, where it was a label often applied in the East to “western war mongers.” It is thus possible that Heisig was referring here not just to the “militarist” mindset of his father's generation, but also to its continuation in West Germany, which had joined NATO only a few years earlier and begun rebuilding its military; even if he did not intend this meaning, it certainly would have been interpreted as such by others.<sup>211</sup> It is therefore significant that he did not use this word in the title of any other paintings in the series, preferring the more neutral term, “unteachable soldier.” This change to a more general—or universal—term parallels a similar change that took place in these years between the overt claims of the prints he made for the National Document and the more subtle critique evident in *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier*.

Interestingly, when viewed through an autobiographical lens, as is so often the case with Heisig's work today, *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier* can be seen to level

---

<sup>210</sup> Heisig in Dietulf Sander, ed., *Bernhard Heisig. Der faschistische Alptraum* (Leipzig: Verlag Philipp Reclam, 1989) 5.

<sup>211</sup> See footnote 173.

criticism at the East as well: it challenges the myth that all Nazis went to West Germany since Heisig himself was a former Nazi who lived in the GDR. Consequently, this painting can be interpreted as subtly challenging the GDR's presentation of itself as the anti-fascist state. Frequently dismissed in the West as a myth or lie, this idea is something many East Germans believed in; it also has its basis in fact.<sup>212</sup> Much of the GDR's ruling elite were Communists of proven anti-Nazi pedigree, having spent the Nazi years in exile or in concentration camps. Similarly, the denazification process was more thorough in East Germany than in West Germany in the first decades after the war. Over the years, however, the anti-fascist pedigree of the GDR's ruling elite spread out to include the East German people as a whole, eliding the fact that they, too, had either supported the Nazis or done little if anything to stop them. Heisig's work thus reminds the viewer that all Germans—not just those living in the West—have a Nazi past. As Heisig himself has stated, he is against the simplification of history. So while he may have felt the GDR was the better Germany in these years, he was nonetheless unwilling to accept it without question.

## 2.6 PERPETRATORS AND VICTIMS

Heisig's rejection of the simplification of history can also be seen in the *Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier* by its emphasis on the suffering of a Nazi soldier rather than a traditional victim such as a Communist or Jew. Although this portrayal may seem problematic to a western audience at first glance, it suggests that Nazism damaged all who came in contact with its

---

<sup>212</sup> This dismissal stems, in part, from the fact that the GDR had not actually been as thorough in the denazification process as they had maintained—although they were still more thorough than the FRG—and, in part, because it was sometimes used by the government as a tool to control people.



ideology, not just those who were in opposition to it. This is a very different portrayal of the Nazis than that found in the West, where they are most frequently depicted as the ultimate evil; it is a view that supports the West's understanding of itself as the ultimate good, but which also, problematically, contributes to the seductive power of the Nazis to the present day. The emphasis on a suffering soldier in Heisig's painting, on the other hand, undercuts this allure. This emphasis may also have been a subtle criticism of the GDR's views on the past and, in particular, its division of the sufferers of Nazism into two official camps: 1) victims of fascism, and 2) fighters against fascism. Before looking more closely at how Heisig's work does this, it is necessary to first take a closer look at these two categories and, especially, at how Jews were treated in East Germany to this point in time.

As Thomas C. Fox has shown in his book, *Stated Memory, East Germany and the Holocaust*, the "Holocaust" was not ignored in the GDR, although it was also not emphasized.<sup>213</sup> Rather than being singled out for special treatment, Jews were seen as one of many victims of the Nazis, all of whom were subsumed into the anti-fascist master narrative. As "victims of fascism," East German Jews received many benefits from the government including free public transportation for life, the ability to retire five years earlier than non-Jews and an assured place at university for their children.<sup>214</sup> They were not, however, compensated for property stolen by the Nazis, nor was it returned to them.

Traditionally Communism has not acknowledged anti-Semitism as a lasting social phenomenon. According to Karl Marx in his 1843 essay, "On the Jewish Question,"

---

<sup>213</sup> Thomas C. Fox, *Stated Memory, East Germany and the Holocaust* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 1999). The term "Holocaust" did not come into being until the 1960s. In what follows, my use of the term is thus occasionally anachronistic.

<sup>214</sup> Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory, the Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1997) 80. Paul O'Doherty, *The Portrayal of Jews in GDR Prose Fiction* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1997) 51-2.

Communism assimilates all difference, including that of the Jews. From this perspective, anti-Semitism was seen as merely a diversion from the real issue, class difference. It was believed that once Jews had been assimilated, anti-Semitism would disappear. During the Third Reich, however, it became clear to many Communists that Jewishness is not always a matter of choice. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 had stated that a Jew was anyone whose parents or grandparents were Jewish regardless of whether or not they considered themselves to be so. In the wake of the “*Kristallnacht*” pogrom of November 1938, many Communists—and especially those who were exiled in the West—declared their solidarity with the Jews as fellow sufferers under Nazism.<sup>215</sup>

The sense of solidarity between many Communists and Jews during the Third Reich continued into the early years of the post-war era in eastern Germany. In fact, many Communists thought that East Germany, as the anti-fascist Germany, would be the natural home for German Jews. In January 1946, the future culture minister of the GDR, Johannes R. Becher, published an essay expressing solidarity with Jews. Julius Meyer, a Communist Party member and leader of the Jews who now lived in East Berlin, was named to the executive committee of the Central Committee for the Victims of Fascism (OdF, *Hauptausschuss für die Opfer des Faschismus*), which was responsible for reparations. Moreover, important members of the German Communist Party, most notably Paul Merker, advocated that the only way Germany could begin to heal was to accept responsibility for the past, fight anti-Semitism and pay reparations to the Jews.

Reparations, however, proved to be a divisive issue in eastern Germany almost from the beginning. In October 1945, Karl Raddatz, the organization secretary of the OdF, sparked an intense and lasting debate in the Soviet Zone with a lecture in which he defined two categories of

---

<sup>215</sup> A special issue of *Die Rote Fahne* was published by German Communists in exile in response to the pogrom. In it, the Central Committee denounced the pogrom and stated that “the German working class stands at the forefront of the battle against the persecution of the Jews.” Herf, 19.

members: “victims of fascism” and “fighters against fascism.”<sup>216</sup> He expressed regret that the organization as a whole used the term “victims of fascism” for all who suffered under the Nazis, thereby obscuring the difference between those who suffered as a result of their political convictions and those who had suffered due to their religious beliefs or race. Raddatz’ motivation for this distinction seems to have been to strengthen the Communist’s claims to leadership based on their having been active resisters of Nazi aggression. Nonetheless, this active/passive binary can be seen as anti-Semitic and was the source of considerable debate during the early post-war years.

It was not until four years later in October 1949—just two days before the founding of the German Democratic Republic—that the Soviet Zone passed a law on reparations, something that the western zones had done already in 1946 and 1947.<sup>217</sup> Despite the heated debates of the previous years, the law made a distinction between Communist “fighters” and mostly Jewish “victims,” privileging the former in terms of restitution and prestige.<sup>218</sup>

The distinction between these two types of victims was a fundamental part of East German memory of the Nazi past, where the emphasis on “fighters against fascism” helped to legitimate the imposition of a dictatorial rule by the Communists. It also stressed the East German citizen’s responsibility to continue fighting fascism in the present and future. It was this latter commitment that the GDR saw as its most significant contribution to those who suffered under the Nazis. Much more important than paying reparations in their mind was making sure that such an atrocity could not happen again. It was this focus on combating the continuation of

---

<sup>216</sup> Herf, 82.

<sup>217</sup> Herf, 87.

<sup>218</sup> Herf, 150.

fascism in the present that set the GDR apart from the FRG, which was less thorough in the de-Nazification process into the 1960s.

In the early 1950s, however, the Eastern bloc was not a hospitable place for Jews to live as the escalation of the Cold War led to a return of anti-Semitic stereotypes in the East that linked Judaism with American imperialism. This conflation can be seen in a number of show trials that took place in these years, perhaps most notably the Slansky trial in Czechoslovakia. Slansky was a powerful figure in the Czech Communist Party who, along with ten others, was executed on November 30, 1952 for “being agents of American imperialism and Zionism.”<sup>219</sup> There was also the so-called “doctors’ plot” in which the Soviet press announced in January 1953 that Jewish doctors had been responsible for the death of leading government officials.<sup>220</sup> Events such as these led to a mass exodus of Jews from the eastern bloc in the winter of 1952-53.<sup>221</sup>

Indeed, supporting Jewish issues became a political liability in East Germany during these years, where it was used by Communists who had spent the war in Moscow—like Walter Ulbricht—to help discredit those Communists who had spent the war years in South America. The latter were more sympathetic to the Jewish cause as a result of their wartime experiences since they had lived in close quarters with Jews in sharp contrast to those who had gone to the

---

<sup>219</sup> Herf, 125.

<sup>220</sup> Herf, 132.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid. Discussing to what extent East Germany was anti-Semitic is a difficult task because of the sensitive nature of the Jewish issue in the West. To date there has not been a book that deals with this topic in a satisfactory manner. Jeffrey Herf’s *Divided Memory, The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (1997) is one of the best of what is currently available. Nonetheless, there are some fundamental flaws to his argument. First, he conflates opposition to Israel with anti-Semitism. Second, he uses articles from the western press to illustrate East Germany’s anti-Semitism in the early 1950s. The West, however, had its own political agenda intent on denigrating the East. Moreover, journalistic reporting is often geared more toward selling papers than balanced reporting or understanding. Paul O’Doherty, on the other hand, points out in his 1997 book, *The Portrayal of Jews in GDR Prose Fiction*, that the “anti-Semitic” trials of the early 1950s often included non-Jews and that there were also high ranking Jews who were unaffected during these years. Although he makes some important points, he nonetheless goes too far in his claims that there was no anti-Semitism in the GDR.

Soviet Union. Anti-Semitism in the USSR had made South America the preferred goal for many Jewish Communists fleeing Europe during the Third Reich. With the outbreak of war in 1939, many non-Jewish Communists also ended up there since the shortest route to Moscow had become untenable, forcing exiles to the West instead. While some continued on to Moscow the long way around, many remained in South America, which was a resting point in the journey. Consequently, the Communists who ended up there came into close contact with Jews and were thus more sympathetic to their plight than those who had spent their time in Moscow. Notably, it was these Communists—such as Paul Merker—who fought for Jewish reparations in eastern Germany in the early years after the war. Arrested in December 1952, he was put on trial and sentenced to prison.

In the wake of the show trials of 1953, blatant anti-Semitism disappeared from East German public life as did hope for a prominent place for Jewish issues in the GDR. This is not to say Judaism was outlawed, but rather that practicing Jews were disadvantaged, albeit treated better than other religious groups as a result of the Holocaust. The handicap that they and other religious groups experienced in the GDR stemmed from a return to the more traditional Communist view that stressed the assimilation of all difference. As a result, those who maintained their difference—be they Jews, Catholics or any other religious group—were viewed with suspicion. Those who renounced their religion in favor of Communism, however, had little difficulty gaining power, prestige or both in the GDR. In fact, there were numerous Germans of Jewish descent who held leading positions in East German politics and culture.

In 1960, an event took place that caused the relative silence on Jewish issues in the latter half of the 1950s to be broken. In this year, Adolf Eichmann—who had been in charge of the transportation of Jews to death camps during the final years of the Third Reich—was captured in

Argentina and brought to Jerusalem for trial, which took place in 1961. The proceedings were broadcast live in countries all over the world. Eichmann defended himself by saying that he had been merely following orders.<sup>222</sup> In the end he was judged guilty on all fifteen counts, including crimes against humanity and crimes against the Jewish people. He was executed on June 1, 1962.

This trial signalled the beginning of East Germany's instrumentalization of the Holocaust against the West.<sup>223</sup> In particular, it provided the GDR with more ammunition to use against the FRG in terms of its lack of dealing with the Nazi past. Already in 1960, the East German historian Heinz Kühnrich published a book titled, *The Concentration Camp State*, which included chapters such as "The SS Marches to Bonn's Police Force" and "Hitler's Generals Command the Bonn Army." In 1961, he published another book titled, *Jewish Murderer Eichman. No Case of the Past*, in which he accused the FRG of protecting Eichmann.

These books fit within a broader effort—begun in earnest in 1957 with the setting up of the Committee for German Unity under Albert Norden—to point out the FRG's failure to come to terms with the Nazi past. For six years, this committee "waged a relentless campaign alleging that ex-Nazis and Nazi war criminals were in place in the Adenauer administration and active in West German judicial, military, economic, diplomatic, and intellectual elites."<sup>224</sup> It is in this context that the playbill for the 1959 performance of *Arturo Ui* discussed earlier was written with its references to the *Blutrichter* in West Germany. It was also in this context that Hans Globke lost his position as Adenauer's right-hand man because of his role in writing the commentary on

---

<sup>222</sup> It is Eichmann's dispassion that led to Hannah Arendt's famous phrase, "the banality of evil." Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963).

<sup>223</sup> According to Fox, the "Holocaust" did not exist in East German historiography throughout the 1950s, where the emphasis was, instead, on heroic resistance. Fox, 22.

<sup>224</sup> Herf, 182. It is unclear why Herf uses the term "alleging" here since it is a proven fact that there were former Nazis in positions of power within the Adenauer administration. This type of wording subtly undercuts the legitimacy of the GDR in Herf's book, which vacillates between slips such as this one and a more nuanced presentation.

the Nuremberg Laws. In fact, his dismissal had been forced by the GDR, where he was put on trial—in absentia—in 1963. This highly publicized trial used the Eichmann trial as its model, and Globke—who came to represent the FRG’s failure at denazification—was even referred to as the “Eichmann in Bonn.”<sup>225</sup>

It was also in these years that Bruno Apitz’s best-selling novel, *Naked Among Wolves*, became a hit movie. As mentioned earlier, it focused on how several Communist prisoners in Buchenwald had successfully saved a Jewish child who had been smuggled into the camp in a suitcase. Based on a real event, this story underscored the fighters/victims binary by showing the Jewish victim as a helpless child who is saved by the actions of the Communists. As such, the film—and the novel—justified Communist rule of Germany in the wake of the Third Reich. Similarly, in Fritz Cremer’s sculpture for the memorial at Buchenwald, there is a small child included in the array of mostly defiant figures. It is the same boy as in Apitz’ novel and thus a visual reminder of the Communists’ achievement that subtly upholds the active/passive binary.

It is at this point in time—the mid 1960s—that Heisig created *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier*. It is also at this point in time that he created the first of what would become several paintings in the GDR to include Jewish figures, *Jewish Ghetto Fighters* (WV24, 1964).<sup>226</sup> Set in an urban environment, this little-known work depicts five figures standing parallel to the picture plane. In the center of the composition, a bald man with a dark beard mans a Gatling gun that is aimed out of the lower right-hand corner of the painting. Behind him a

---

<sup>225</sup> Herf, 184.

<sup>226</sup> A possible impetus for the work was a newspaper article from 1963, “Ghettoaufstand mahnt: Faschismus ausrotten! Feierliche Kundgebung zu Ehren der Helden des Ghettoaufstandes in Warschau,” *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (20 April 1963). Notably, *Jewish Ghetto Fighters* is the only painting in Heisig’s oeuvre from the 1960s to include direct references to the Holocaust. His next painting on this topic, *God is Listening, Mr. Officer*, dates from 1984, at which time East German policies on the Jewish issue had relaxed considerably as the GDR attempted to court “most favored nation” trading status with the US. In the wake of the *Wende*, Heisig has created several paintings about the Holocaust.

street between two tall buildings extends into the distance. To his right, another bearded man feeds bullets into the gun. His eyes are hidden by the soldier's helmet—complete with a Star of David—that he wears. There is also a Star of David on the jacket worn by the woman to his right. She meets our gaze and seems to be in mid speech. Behind her a bearded man in a cap also looks at us with a wary expression. Next to them a fifth figure, also with a beard, is cut off by the picture frame. He appears to have a grenade in his hands.

Placed in context, this painting is surprising in how it portrays Jews. Presumably focusing on the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising from 1943, the figures are shown as active resisters rather than passive victims. Consequently, it disrupts the fighter/victim binary prevalent in both East German rhetoric and culture at the time as evidenced by both Apitz's and Cremer's work.<sup>227</sup>

This painting becomes even more interesting when looked at together with *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier*. As discussed earlier, this latter painting is one of the first in Heisig's oeuvre to include explicit references to the Nazi past. Whether or not it was the first, however, or whether it was, in fact, *Jewish Ghetto Fighters* that was, is unclear; it is also relatively unimportant. Together, they mark the emergence of direct references to the Nazi past in Heisig's painted oeuvre. They also mark the emergence of a "modern" aesthetic in his paintings with their shared use of a late German Impressionist brushstroke. Similarly, both were shown at a small exhibition at the Leipzig Academy in 1964. As a result, they lend themselves to being read as a pair, a reading further emphasized by their similar size and horizontal orientation. Viewed together, they illustrate the victims/fighters binary present in the official East German

---

<sup>227</sup> The representation of Jews as passive figures was not limited to East Germany. In the mid 1960s, Hannah Arendt's book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem, A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963)—and the articles in *The New Yorker* that predated it—sparked a debate about this issue among intellectuals in the United States and Europe. Some have interpreted this book as laying blame on the Jews themselves for failing to resist. Amos Elon, "The Excommunication of Hannah Arendt," *US Penguin Classics*, undated, 1 April 2007 <<http://us.penguinclassics.com/static/html/essays/eichmann.html>>.



view of the Nazi past, but with one major distinction: they invert the equation. In this case, Jews are presented as active fighters against fascism, whereas the former Nazi soldier is portrayed as a victim.<sup>228</sup> As such, they resist the simplification of history that had been promoted by the GDR.

## 2.7 CONCLUSION

Heisig is best known today for his many paintings on war and conflict. These works are most frequently viewed as expressions of the artist's attempts to come to terms with the traumas of his own past as a teenage soldier in the Second World War and are viewed primarily in terms of memory. This view has largely ignored the relationship of these works to the context in which they were created as well as how they developed and changed over time, leading to a significant misunderstanding of his work, which, at least until the late 1970s, was more about criticizing the continuation of fascism in the present than it was about coming to terms with the personal traumas of his past.

As we have seen, Heisig first began dealing overtly with the Nazi past in a series of prints made for the National Document in 1963. These works did not reflect upon his own experiences in the war, but rather made reference to the Nazi past to emphasize the GDR's role as the anti-

---

<sup>228</sup> In contrast to *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier*, which was one of many canvases on the topic that Heisig would paint over the course of the next fifteen years, *Jewish Ghetto Fighters* was a one-time occurrence and is virtually unknown in Heisig scholarship today. When I asked him about it in 2005, Heisig stated he did not like the work because it was inaccurate; they did not have such weapons in the ghettos. Interestingly, he appears to have held onto the painting, however, and reworked it in the 1980s. Now titled, *To Ludwig Renn's, Postwar* (WV257), and dated to 1987, the painting is still recognizable as the earlier work although a number of the details have been altered. Significantly, the Stars of David have been painted out. Since Heisig had returned to Jewish subject matter just a few years earlier in the 1984 painting, *God is Watching, Mr. Officer*, it does not appear that he was trying to hide the Jewish elements of the work. Rather, his explanation about the inappropriateness of the guns seems likely—one has to wonder if this was pointed out to him when the work was exhibited in 1964—and the simplest way to fix it was to remove the Jewish insignia and thus the initial specificity of the work.

fascist Germany. Similarly, the first paintings he created about this past emerged at a time when East German artists were responding to—and criticizing—the continuation of former Nazis in important positions in West Germany. In contrast to his colleagues, however, Heisig’s work tended to function allegorically rather than pointing an accusatory finger, which is presumably the result, in part, of his own past as a teenage soldier in the Hitler Youth Division of the SS. As he stated it himself, he did not feel comfortable making accusations.

In addition to subtly criticizing the West, however, *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier* can also be seen as critical of the oversimplification of history taking place in the GDR. On one level, the painting subtly challenges the view that all Nazis went to the West, since Heisig, himself, had fought for the Nazis but remained in the GDR. On another, and when viewed in conjunction with *Jewish Ghetto Fighters*, it challenges East Germany’s division of suffering into “victims of” and “fighters against” fascism.

As this chapter has shown, Heisig’s preference for the general over the specific in his paintings allows them to function on a number of different levels. It is a strategy that worked well within a system that did not accept direct criticism. Ironically, it is a strategy that also works well today by allowing his work to be viewed outside of the East German context in which it was created. As such, it has contributed significantly to the ability of his work to transcend the politics of the Cold War era to be praised in Germany today as great “German” art. Nonetheless, the current view divests the work of much of its critical potential, which, in light of the continuation of war in the present, is a significant loss. Moreover, it reduces Heisig to a victim of history rather than an active player—or fighter—within it.

### 3.0 A CHANGE IN STYLE

In Germany today, Bernhard Heisig is best known for having a “modern” style, one that combines expressionist, cubist and quasi-surrealist elements within a simultaneous narrative composition. In the 1950s and early 1960s, however, his painting style adhered more closely to the realist aesthetic many Anglo-American scholars expect of Socialist Realism. In *March Days in Paris 1871 I* (1960, WV15), for example, Heisig painted more than twenty Communards in a stiff frontal pose that demonstrates an illusionistic sense of time and space. They look at us and seem to be waiting—many sitting, some standing—as if we are a 19th century camera man about to take their picture. One man, just left of center, seems to be posing: left hand on his abdomen, head held high, he holds a rifle with bayonet to his right side.

Four years later, Heisig created another work on the same theme, *The Paris Commune* (1964, WV30), which is the fourth in what would become the longest-running series in his oeuvre. It shows a striking change from the earlier work not only in style, but also in subject matter. Rather than focusing on the early, hopeful days of the Commune as he did in the earlier work, Heisig depicted here the massacre that took place two months later when French soldiers were sent in to put an end to what was celebrated in East Germany as the first socialist government in history. Communards mix together almost inextricably with French soldiers in a swirl of fighting and screaming that is held together in a strong, albeit subtle grid of horizontal and vertical lines. In comparison to the earlier work, depth and time have been compressed in a

simultaneous narrative composition. This is one of the first paintings Heisig created in the “modern” style for which he is now known; it is also one of his most famous works because of the controversy that surrounded it when it was first exhibited.<sup>229</sup>

Although both of these paintings are frequently mentioned in Heisig literature, the change in style they represent has not been addressed.<sup>230</sup> Instead, the interpretive emphasis has been on the change apparent in their subject matter – from waiting to fighting.<sup>231</sup> This absence stems, in part, from significant errors in the dating of some of Heisig’s early work. As recently as the 2005 Heisig catalog, for example, *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier* (1964, WV25) was thought to be *The Christmas Dream of the Militarist* (1960/62, WV17), thus a formally innovative work was given a date of at least two years earlier. When one corrects this error, however, one sees that a significant change in style took place in the Christmas Dream series between 1962 and 1964, which is the same time frame in which the above-mentioned change took place in the Paris Commune paintings. Although these are the only two series to span these years, the change can also be seen in his painted oeuvre as a whole, which divides into illusionistic works before 1963 and formally innovative ones afterward.<sup>232</sup>

---

<sup>229</sup> As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, the term “modern” is used here to refer to a formally innovative style of realism as opposed to illusionistic one. It should not be read as something in opposition to Socialist Realism, but rather as a variation from within it.

<sup>230</sup> Karl Max Kober mentioned on occasion that a change had taken place in Heisig’s painting style in the mid 1960s, but he did not explain this comment nor link it to specific works.

<sup>231</sup> These are the first two stages of a three-stage development in Heisig’s portrayal of the Paris Commune thematic.

<sup>232</sup> The lack of accurate dating for much of Heisig’s early work contributes to the oversight of the stylistic change in his painted oeuvre. Additionally, there is a series of undated photos of a painting, or paintings, on the Paris Commune (including WV4, WV12) that shows a loose, late-German Impressionist brushstroke that might seem to suggest a hidden interest in a more “modern” style. These photographs—presumably dating from the late 1950s—depict a painting in process, however, rather than a finished product, and thus cannot be considered indicative of a hidden interest in a looser brushstroke any more than the painterly sketches of the academic painter Henri Regnault for *Automedon with the Horses of Achilles*, 1868 can be (see Regnault’s work at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, <[www.mfa.org](http://www.mfa.org)>). In this chapter, and throughout this dissertation, I emphasize those works that Heisig showed in exhibitions because inclusion in an exhibition suggests that a work was finished, if only momentarily so. It also allows work to be more firmly anchored in time.

In this chapter, I will look at how this change in painting style relates to the artistic debates taking place at the national level at this point in time. After briefly outlining artistic developments in East(ern) Germany and, to a lesser extent Leipzig, from 1945 to 1964, I will focus on the legendary Fifth Congress of the VBKD that took place in Berlin in March 1964.<sup>233</sup> This is the only conference of the ten that took place in the GDR's forty year history in which East German cultural policies were openly and vehemently criticized. Consequently, it is a key moment in the history of East German art. It also looms large in Heisig's biography, especially since reunification, where it is credited with his "dismissal" from the position of rector at the Leipzig Academy and thus as proof of both his commitment to artistic openness—his willingness to stand up and fight for it despite the personal cost—and his difficulties in the GDR as a result. Although Heisig did indeed have difficulties with the regime, the relationship was more complex than the current narrative suggests. Archival evidence, for example, shows he did not lose his position as a result of his speech, but rather resigned months before the Congress took place. In addition to correcting this misperception, and providing a more nuanced understanding of Heisig's relationship to the GDR, I will focus on how this speech relates to the change in his painting style that became evident in its wake.

---

<sup>233</sup> I include parentheses in "East(ern) Germany" when I am referring to both East Germany and the Soviet Occupation Zone, i.e. when I am including the four years between the end of the war and the founding of the German Democratic Republic.

### 3.1 ART IN EAST(ERN) GERMANY, 1945-64

After the Second World War, the art scene in Germany recovered with surprising quickness. Galleries and exhibitions opened just weeks after capitulation, displaying new works and old in the bombed-out ruins of major cities like Berlin. Whereas modern art—such as expressionism and surrealism—had been pilloried in the Third Reich, it reemerged in these early years to stand alongside more realistic works in an atmosphere of artistic freedom that extended to all four occupation zones.

Already by the end of 1946, art academies began to reopen. In the Soviet Occupation Zone (SBZ, Sowjetische Besatzungszone), these institutions tended to be under the direction of Communist artists active in the Weimar era such as Hans Grundig in Dresden. This generation of artists—many of whom, like Grundig, were indebted to Expressionism—dominated the East German art scene of the 1950s and was extremely influential on the next generation, most of whom first studied art in the GDR.

Whereas many artists and art connoisseurs welcomed the openness to modernist art of the immediate post-war era, the German people as a whole did not. In fact, 66% of the public rejected the art shown at the *General German Art Exhibition* in late summer 1946 as being too modern.<sup>234</sup> Artists exhibited there included Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Oskar Kokoschka, George Grosz, Max Beckmann, Käthe Kollwitz and Ernst Barlach.

---

<sup>234</sup> Lindner, “Kunstrezeption der DDR,” in Günter Feist, Eckhart Gillen and Beatrice Vierneisel, eds., *Kunstdokumentation SBZ/DDR, Aufsätze, Berichte, Materialien* (Köln: Dumont, 1996) 63. For a more detailed look at the reception of this exhibition, see Bernd Lindner, *Verstellter, offener Blick, Eine Rezeptionsgeschichte Bildender Kunst im Osten Deutschlands, 1945-1995* (Köln, Weimar, Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1998) 70-81. The conservative artistic preferences of the general public had been encouraged by Nazi propaganda during the Third Reich.

While the response to this exhibition did not have an immediate impact on the art scene in the SBZ, it provided justification for a subsequent change in approach that coincided with the escalation of the Cold War. In 1948, tension between the western Allies and the Soviet Union increased dramatically as perhaps best embodied by the Berlin Airlift; by the end of 1949, Germany had been officially divided into two countries. In the visual arts, a similar division was taking shape as the meaning and use-value of art began to be debated and ultimately legislated as part of a cultural Cold War that consigned “modern” art to the West and “realism” to the East.

The first significant public debate about the function of art in society in eastern Germany took place in the fall of 1948, a year before the GDR was founded. In the October issue of *Bildende Kunst*, the main art magazine of the GDR, then the Soviet Occupation Zone, two articles were published titled “Art and Politics” and, conversely, “Politics and Art.” These articles, written by the joint editors of the magazine, Karl Hofer and Oskar Nerlinger, respectively, took opposite stances on the role that art should play in society and mark the beginning of the so-called Formalism debates.<sup>235</sup> Whereas Hofer called for artistic freedom, arguing that it is up to the artist to decide on style and content, including whether or not it is political, Nerlinger argued that no art was free from politics, even that which claimed to be, and therefore all art, as a public medium, should be accessible to the people.<sup>236</sup> It was this latter view with its emphasis on an easy-to-understand realism that was backed by the Soviet Union and that

---

<sup>235</sup> This debate, which took place in both East and West Germany, can also be seen as a resumption of the Expressionism debate of the 1930s between Georg Lukacs, Ernst Bloch, and Bertolt Brecht on what art’s relationship to society should be. It also finds an echo in the Dr. Faustus debate of 1952-53, which focused on the negative—and thus inappropriate for some—portrayal of the protagonist in Hans Eisler’s libretto *Dr. Faustus* (1952).

<sup>236</sup> Oskar Nerlinger, “Politik und Kunst,” in *Bildende Kunst 10* (1948). “Man will nicht sehen, dass es überhaupt keinen Standpunkt ohne politische Wirkung geben kann, dass jedes Verhalten, auch das ‘unpolitische,’ eine politische Wirkung hat. Man beruft sich auch die Demokratie, auf die Freiheit der Kunst. Dieser Ruf kommt immer dann aus der ästhetischen Kunstaristokraten-Ecke, wenn ihre Kunst vom Volk abgelehnt wird. ....”

won out in the East in these early years.<sup>237</sup> Art, it was argued, should play an important role in reeducating the German people, who had been compromised by twelve years of Nazi ideology.

The second half of the Formalism debates—which were more accurately a campaign by this point—took place in 1951. In January an article titled, “Directions and Misdirections of Modern Art” was published in the *Tägliche Rundschau*.<sup>238</sup> It condemned all art created after the 19<sup>th</sup> century, even that by socially committed artists like Käthe Kollwitz, whose realism it found too pessimistic.<sup>239</sup> Kollwitz’ art, while understandable for the time period in which it was created, was deemed unsuitable for the GDR, which was the embodiment of Socialist victory. What would people think about the GDR if its art displayed such pessimism? Any question as to the State’s position ended later that year when, in November 1951, Walter Ulbricht, the head of the GDR’s Communist government (the SED, Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschland), stated, “We do not want to see any more abstract pictures in our art schools... Gray-in-gray painting is an expression of capitalist failure and stands in the sharpest contradiction to the new life found in the GDR.”<sup>240</sup>

At this point in time, Heisig, who had begun studying art in Leipzig in 1948, dropped out of school and became an independent artist, which means he supported himself solely through

---

<sup>237</sup> In the following month the cultural officer of the Soviet military administration, Alexander Dymshitz, published a condemnation of “freedom in art” in the article, “Über die formalistische Richtung in der deutschen Malerei,” in the SMAD newspaper, *Tägliche Rundschau* (24 November 1948).

<sup>238</sup> N. Orlow, “Wege und Irrwege der modernen Kunst” *Tagliche Rundschau* (20 January 1951), as quoted in *Kunstkombinat DDR, Daten und Zitate zur Kunst und Kunstpolitik der DDR 1945-1990*, eds. Günter Feist and Eckhart Gillen (Berlin: Museumspädagogischen Dienst, 1990) 19.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid. “Käthe Kollwitz sah in den Arbeitern und in den Werktätigen überhaupt nur den leidenden Teil des Volkes... Was aber soll man von Leuten sagen, die viele Jahre nach Käthe Kollwitz das große Vorbild der Arbeiter und Bauern in der Sowjetunion sowie das Vorbild des erfolgreichen Aufbaus der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik unter der Führung der Arbeiterklasse vor Augen haben und die Schöpfer des neuen Lebens als ‘unglückliche’ Menschen darstellen!”

<sup>240</sup> Walter Ulbricht in his speech to the Volkskammer, *Neues Deutschland* (1 November 1951) as quoted in *Kunstkombinat*, 21. “Wir wollen in unseren Kunstschulen keine abstrakten Bilder mehr sehen. Wir brauchen weder die Bilder von Mondlandschaften noch von faulen Fischen und ähnliches [...] Die Grau-in-Grau Malerei, die ein Ausdruck des kapitalistischen Niederganges ist, steht in schroffstem Widerspruch zum neuen Leben in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik.”



his art. The impetus for his decision was the “release” of his teacher, Max Schwimmer, from the Leipzig Academy (HGB, Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst), where, under the leadership of Kurt Massloff, a conservative Socialist Realism had become the order of the day. In particular, a realistic, optimistic art based on 19<sup>th</sup> century models was being promoted and the emphasis was more on proper politics than on artistic quality. While Schwimmer had the right politics, his openness to modern art and good reputation among students was perceived, apparently, as a threat to Massloff’s goals. It is interesting to note, however, that although Heisig left the Leipzig Academy in the summer of 1951, his leaving had more to do with the rancorous atmosphere brought on by the Formalism Debates than a desire to create modern art; his earliest painting, *Circle of Young Field Biologists* (WV1, 1952), which dates from the following year, shows no signs of a modern style.<sup>241</sup>

Under Massloff’s guidance, the Leipzig Academy emerged as the artistic center of a conservative, illusionistic Socialist Realism in the GDR at the Third German Art Exhibition in Dresden in the spring of 1953, where it garnered the most praise of any “school” with works such as Harald Hellmich und Klaus Weber’s *The Youngest Fliers* (fig. 3-1, 1953).<sup>242</sup> This painting looks up to the top of a hilltop where a group of well-dressed boys and girls play with model airplanes and laugh together in the summer sun. The largest boy, standing just to the right of center, looks off into the distance as he is about to release the plane in his hand; several of the others watch him expectantly. The meaning of this work is clear and easy to understand: In the GDR, life is good, children are happy and healthy, and in them resides much promise. These

---

<sup>241</sup> In a letter to Schwimmer, Heisig wrote about the tense atmosphere in the Leipzig Academy shortly before he left. He mentioned a work of his that had been painted over and the difficulty former Schwimmer students had (versus Massloff’s students) in getting a diploma. He called it an “Affentheater” and stated that “Nun handelt er sich nur noch um den Versuch eine Ecke zu finden, wo man noch etwas Luft holen kann.” Letter from Bernhard Heisig to Max Schwimmer, 24 July 1951. Stadtbibliothek Leipzig: Schwimmer Nachlass.

<sup>242</sup> This is in fact the origin of the term “Leipzig School,” which is one of the reasons why artists like Heisig, Tübke and Mattheuer later rejected it.

children can also be read metaphorically as the young GDR itself. Not only easy to understand, this work is also realistic, optimistic, and focuses on people, all essential elements of a Soviet-inspired Socialist Realism.

Although this exhibition was heralded as the break-through of Socialist Realism in East Germany, seen retrospectively, it also marks its apex in the GDR, at least in terms of the illusionistic model imported from the Soviet Union. With the death of Stalin in March 1953 and the Worker's Uprising that June, the government relaxed its grip on the arts in what was termed the New Course. As a result, artists were publicly able—when not exactly encouraged—to experiment with modern art for a few years in the mid 1950s. Picasso, in particular, was thought to be a good role model for the merging of Communist ideology with a modern artistic style and was the subject of many articles in *Bildende Kunst* between 1955 and 1956.<sup>243</sup>

In this more relaxed atmosphere, the Leipzig Academy altered its course. Conservative professors hired at the beginning of the 1950s left, and more open-minded artists returned, including Heisig, who began teaching at the Academy in 1954.<sup>244</sup> It was also in these years that Heisig began publishing fairly critical art reviews in *Bildende Kunst*, which I will return to later in this chapter. His painting style, however, remained realistic, as evidenced by *1848 in Leipzig* (WV7), the second major painting in his oeuvre.

The beginning of the end of this thaw in East Germany's cultural policies was marked, ironically enough, by Nikita Khrushchev's de-Stalinization speech two years later at the 20<sup>th</sup>

---

<sup>243</sup> Under Herbert Sandberg's guidance, *Bildende Kunst* ran a series of articles debating Picasso's value for East German artists in 1955 and 1956. The first was Heinz Lüdecke, "Phänomen und Problem Picasso," in *Bildende Kunst* 5 (1955).

<sup>244</sup> Heisig received his diploma in 1959 so that he could be promoted to professor. This was largely the result of a policy change in the GDR that was aimed at making sure those in the Academies had the proper credentials. In the early years after the war, such paperwork was unnecessary. Rather than writing a thesis, Heisig was required to take an exam. *Protokoll über die erweiterte Diskussionssitzung am 9. Dezember 1958*. HGB Archive. According to Sonja Kurella, Massloff wanted Heisig and Tübke as teachers at the Leipzig Academy, seeing in them the future of art in Leipzig. Lutz Dammbeck, *Dürers Erbe*, documentary film, 1996.

Party Conference of the Soviet Union in February 1956. This speech led to revisionist discussions throughout the eastern bloc. In the GDR, many Communist intellectuals, especially in the universities, began to criticize the repressive methods of governing employed by the East German State under Ulbricht. They called for academic freedom and for the freedom to have open discussions without fear of punishment. Critical of Stalinist methods, they wanted to reform socialism and give it a human face; in short, many wanted a “third path” between Stalinist Communism and western Capitalism.

Whereas many East German intellectuals, including within the Party itself, welcomed Khrushchev’s speech, it apparently came as a surprise to the hardliners of the Party, including Ulbricht, whose dictatorial power was undermined by it.<sup>245</sup> The topic of de-Stalinization was barely addressed at the SED conference the following month. Then in June, Ulbricht tentatively began to encourage discussions along the lines of the 20<sup>th</sup> Party conference. By August, however, he was trying to put the brakes on such talks, fearing a total loss of control.

With the Hungarian Revolution in October/November 1956, Ulbricht was able to reestablish a firm hand on East Germany. Khrushchev, who had sent in military tanks to quell the uprising, was no longer open to experimentation and was thus willing to support Ulbricht’s conservative stance.<sup>246</sup> Ulbricht made his position on the issue of reform clear in December 1956, when he stated in the Party’s main newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*, “The most important lesson we can learn from the events in Hungary is that there is no third path!”<sup>247</sup> This was followed by a crackdown on revisionism that led to committed Communists like Wolfgang

---

<sup>245</sup> Hermann Weber, *Kleine Geschichte der DDR* (Köln: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1980) 87-94.

<sup>246</sup> According to Johanna Granville, Ulbricht survived the Hungarian crisis for a variety of reasons including the Soviet Union’s need for a strong leader in East Germany, which was a crucial location in the Cold War. Granville, “The Last of the Mohicans, How Walter Ulbricht Endured the Hungarian Crisis of 1956,” *German Politics and Society* 22 (Winter 2004) 88-121.

<sup>247</sup> *Neues Deutschland* (30 December 1956), as quoted in Weber, 92.

Harich and Walter Janka being put through show trials and imprisoned.<sup>248</sup> By the beginning of 1958, opposition within the SED had been quelled.

This crackdown in the political realm was accompanied by a new freeze in the arts. Perhaps the first significant sign of this change was the removal of Herbert Sandberg as the editor of *Bildende Kunst* between the May and June issues in 1957; an artist himself, Sandberg had encouraged the many articles about Picasso that had been published in the magazine in the mid 1950s. Four months later, in October 1957, the SED held a cultural conference in Berlin titled, *The Ideological Fight for a Socialist Existence*. It introduced a new, harder position in the arts in which modern art, including expressionism, was rejected. It also announced Alfred Kurella as head of the commission for cultural questions in the Politburo, thus making him the most influential cultural functionary in the GDR until he left office six years later in 1963.<sup>249</sup> Two months later, in December 1957, the relatively modern art shown at the Regional Art Exhibition in Halle was ripped apart in the press in what some have called the next stage in the Formalism Debates.<sup>250</sup>

Over the course of the next couple of years, art publications and official proclamations emphasized the importance of the Soviet Union and Socialist life as models for art, the results of which can be seen in the catalog for the Fourth German Art Exhibition held in Dresden in the fall of 1958. The images are innocuous and illusionistic, albeit showing slight traces of post-impressionist brushstroke and a Gauguin-like reduction of details. There are portraits, still lifes and landscapes, but history paintings are notably lacking. The focus is instead on the everyday,

---

<sup>248</sup> Harich was a philosophy professor at Humboldt University in Berlin. He also worked at the liberal Aufbau Verlag, which was run by Walter Janka. Both were highly respected intellectuals in East Germany and critical of the regime in the wake of Khrushchev's 1956 speech. There were in fact allegations that the two had sought a putsch.

<sup>249</sup> Hager, who became secretary of the Central Commission in 1963, replaced Kurella in taking responsibility the GDR's cultural policies. Kurt Hager, *Erinnerungen* (Leipzig: Faber & Faber, 1996) 258.

<sup>250</sup> *Kunstkombinat*, 35.

which perhaps explains why this exhibition was deemed a disappointment even by Ulbricht, who was looking for a new Socialist art.

The desire for a specifically Socialist type of art and the inability to predict what form it would take was an ongoing problem in the GDR, and one that Heisig would refer to in his 1964 speech. No one could say what the new Socialist art should look like since it had not yet been created, although cultural functionaries claimed to know what it was not: anything related to modern art. Instead of giving artists the freedom to experiment with modern styles in their search for something uniquely Socialist, and thus to assume the responsibility to society the government proclaimed they had, cultural functionaries fell back instead on the Soviet model.<sup>251</sup> And yet the results—as with the Fourth German Art Exhibition—were increasingly unsatisfactory to both artists and politicians alike.

In April 1959 a major cultural conference held in Bitterfeld, just north of Leipzig, established the view on art that would dominate official cultural discussions for years to come. The Bitterfeld Way called for artists—as well as writers—to work in factories to better understand the workers they portrayed, and for workers to try their hand at creating art and serving on selection committees for exhibitions. Although implemented from above, many of the ideas behind the Bitterfeld Way originally came from below. In the immediate wake of the Second World War, several Communist artists in Halle, for example, had banded together under the motto, “artists in factories!”<sup>252</sup>

While the Bitterfeld Way has been denigrated in the West, where the focus has been on the many works of low quality that it produced, its basic principles were embraced by many East

---

<sup>251</sup> Heisig mentions this in his speech at the Fifth Congress in 1964: “Because theoreticians and critics cannot define what art will be, they reach for the cure-all stamp [of Socialist Realism]. . .”

<sup>252</sup> “The Ferry” (Die Fähre) in Halle was an artists’ group that combined artistic experimentation with the motto, “artists in factories!” *Kunstkombinat*, 12.

German intellectuals, including Heisig.<sup>253</sup> It also defined East German art in its wake and contributed ultimately to the creation of many of the works that are now praised in the West. It did this in two ways. First, by educating the masses about art, it created a larger and more discerning audience for it, thus enabling painters like Heisig to shift from a simple, easy-to-understand realism to more artistically and intellectually challenging works.<sup>254</sup> Second, its emphasis on collapsing the distance between life and art helped artists—as Heisig would state it in a speech he gave in December 1959—to avoid the “artistic suicide” taking place in the West, where the emphasis on artistic autonomy had isolated the artist from society and taken away his purpose.<sup>255</sup> Instead, the Bitterfeld Way charged artists to make their art relevant to the people, a principle that Heisig—among others—adhered to until 1989, if not the present day.

In the immediate wake of the Bitterfeld conference, Leipzig rose again to prominence for its conservative Socialist Realist painting style, this time as embodied in the work of Heinrich Witz. His painting, *The New Beginning* (1959, fig. 3-2), was one of the first created from a commission with a major company, in this case IG-Wismut. In a simple realistic style, it shows two men shaking hands over a dinner table populated with glasses and a bottle of champagne and surrounded by other well-dressed men and women. According to the 1995 exhibition catalog *Auftrag: Kunst*, the two men are brigade leaders deciding to put aside their competition with each

---

<sup>253</sup> According to Martin Damus, the Bitterfeld Way had three main tasks: 1) to raise the artistic-aesthetic level of the workers, 2) to integrate art into the workers’ lives by listening to their opinions, and 3) to integrate art criticism with this new art. Martin Damus, *Malerei der DDR, Funktionen der Bildenden Kunst im Realen Sozialismus* (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH, 1991) 176. For evidence of Heisig’s interest in the Bitterfeld Way, see chapter 4.

<sup>254</sup> Werner Mittenzwei, *Die Intellektuellen: Literatur und Politik in Ostdeutschland 1945 bis 2000* (Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003) 168.

<sup>255</sup> Heisig’s speech at the Fourth Congress of the VBKD, 1959, AdK Archiv: Kurella Nachlass 330. “...in den künstlerischen Selbstmord, wonach der meisterlich und nach allen Regeln der Kunst vorgenommen Zertrümmerung der Erscheinungsbilder ein Künstlertyp übrig bleibt, der ohne gesellschaftliche Aufgabe, schrecklich allein gelassen und gezwungen von der eisernen Logik einer Rolle, den Menschen nicht mehr darstellen kann.”

other so that they can work together in the future.<sup>256</sup> As such, it is a painting that stresses collegiality, which was promoted in East Germany as a positive alternative to the individualism pursued in the West.

Perhaps not surprisingly, this painting was not only highly praised by members of the Politbüro, it also won a major art prize the following year.<sup>257</sup> It presumably also contributed to Witz's being chosen to replace Heisig as the chairman of the Leipzig branch of the VBKD in December 1959. Consequently, Witz was responsible for the Sixth Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig in 1961, where Heisig first emerged as a painter in East Germany with the two Paris Commune paintings discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

Ultimately Witz's power in Leipzig was short-lived, however, due in large part to the poor quality of his paintings, which were heavily—and publicly—criticized by his colleagues.<sup>258</sup> In 1962, he was replaced by Tübke as chairman of the Leipzig branch of the VBKD, after which point he basically disappeared from the Leipzig art scene.<sup>259</sup>

Whereas Leipzig remained committed to a conservative Socialist Realist style in painting through the early 1960s, it was a different story in Berlin. During the cultural thaw of the mid 1950s, younger artists at the Akademie der Künste (AdK) like Harald Metzkes, Manfred Böttcher and Ernst Schroeder, rejected a Soviet-inspired Socialist Realism in favor of a more formally innovative style. In *Removal of the Six-armed Goddess* (1956, fig. 3-3), for example, Metzkes strongly compressed the depth of field and outlined the forms with black indicating an

---

<sup>256</sup> “1959, Heinrich Witz, Der neue Anfang,” from *Auftrag: Kunst, 1949-1990* (Berlin: Deutsche Historisches Museum, 1995), as found on <<http://www.dhm.de/ausstellungen/auftrag/59.htm>> (February 12, 2006)

<sup>257</sup> Art Prize of the FDGB (Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund), 1960.

<sup>258</sup> The Bitterfeld Way is most often associated in the West with paintings like this one by Witz rather than for its basic principles, thus its negative reputation.

<sup>259</sup> Witz left his position as chairman to assume the position of first secretary of the Zentralen Parteileitung. *Bechluß – Protokoll der 25. Bezirksvorstandssitzung des VBKD Leipzig vom 23.5.1962*. HGB Archive. The ZPL recommended Tübke.

interest in the work of Paul Cezanne and possibly Beckmann. Not insignificantly, it was painted in 1956, the same year of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization speech and can thus be interpreted as a metaphor for the removal of a god-like figure from Communist discourse.

Even during the subsequent freeze in cultural policies seen at the end of the 1950s, many artists in Berlin—as well as Dresden and Halle—continued to create work that borrowed stylistically from modern art, although for the most part they were not shown publicly at the time. In 1960, for example, Metzkes created *Polytechnical Instruction* (fig. 3-4), a painting that combines a Bitterfeld Way-inspired theme with a cubist collapsing of space. Heisig, by contrast, was creating conservative realist paintings like *March Days in Paris 1871* discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

The significant differences in painterly style between Leipzig and Berlin were partly the result of differing artistic traditions. Unlike Berlin—and Dresden, for that matter—Leipzig did not have a strong painting tradition before 1945, but rather was known for book illustration and printing. As a result, it was particularly well suited for the implementation of a political style of painting based on the Soviet model of Socialist Realism in the wake of 1945 since there was no well-established tradition of modern art to stand in the way. Massloff in the Leipzig Academy and Paul Fröhlich—a personal friend of Ulbricht's—in the local branch of the SED contributed significantly to the emphasis on politics and illusionism there in the 1950s. Similarly, Kurella, who had worked in Leipzig for several years before becoming head of the commission for cultural questions in the Politburo, was personally invested in its art scene. The result was that



even in the cultural thaw of the mid 1950s, there was very little artistic experimentation among artists in Leipzig, especially in painting, where illusionism continued to dominate.<sup>260</sup>

The differences between Berlin and Leipzig were also encouraged, if not intentionally, by the East German system itself, which divided the country into fifteen political districts, or *Bezirke*.<sup>261</sup> Each district had its own branch of the VBKD for taking care of local artistic issues including commissions, which meant that national rules were interpreted and implemented by figures at the local level. Consequently, individual personalities played an important role in how art developed in each district, and there was considerable incentive to work together in order to have a stronger voice at the national level. There was also a regional art exhibition held in each of the districts every few years. These exhibitions provided artists with an outlet for their work and an overview of what their colleagues were creating. Moreover, it was a stepping stone for inclusion in the German Art Exhibition in Dresden, later renamed the German Art Exhibition of the GDR, which was the most important show for contemporary art in East Germany. As a result, most of the districts developed an artistic style that was unique to them; Leipzig, for example, became known for intellectually complex simultaneous narrative paintings, whereas Berlin tended toward a lyrical simplicity based on French modernism.

Of the fifteen districts, the four most important in terms of art were (East) Berlin, Leipzig, Dresden and Halle. They were the only ones to have art academies, and each academy was assigned a particular role: Berlin and Dresden were for painting, Leipzig for graphics, and Halle—former home of the Bauhaus (Dessau)—for the applied arts. Despite these official

---

<sup>260</sup> This is not to say there were no artists who experimented with modern styles in their work. Werner Tübke, for example, clearly does so in *Versuchung* and *Hiroshima*. As such, the fact that Heisig did not create works in a modern style is not merely the result of his being in a more conservative environment, but also of his general inclination. While Heisig was open to modern art in theory, it does not seem to have played a role in his painted work until the mid 1960s.

<sup>261</sup> (East) Berlin, Cottbus, Dresden, Erfurt, Frankfurt/Oder, Gera, Halle, Karl-Marx-Stadt, Leipzig, Magdeburg, Neubrandenburg, Potsdam, Rostock, Schwerin, and Suhl.

designations, however, Leipzig emerged as the unofficial center of East German painting in the GDR almost from the beginning. In the 1950s, it was praised for Socialist Realist works like those by Hellmich, Weber and Witz, while in the 1970s and 1980s it was praised for a “modern” style as embodied by Heisig, Mattheuer and Tübke. Significantly, the change in Leipzig’s art scene from illusionistic to modern took place between the 6<sup>th</sup> Regional Art Exhibition in 1961, organized by Witz, and the 7<sup>th</sup> Regional Art Exhibition held in 1965. This is the same time period in which the change in Heisig’s style took place, a fact I will return to later.

In the 1950s, however, it was Halle that was the center of modern art in East Germany. Like Leipzig, Halle did not have a strong painting tradition before 1945, but in contrast to Leipzig it did have a strong investment in modern art in general as a former home to the Bauhaus. Moreover, it did not share Leipzig’s political importance, the latter being the “secret” capital of the GDR because of its many international trade fairs. As a result, politicians did not play as active a role in its art scene. During the 1950s it was above all Willi Sitte—later known as the ultimate “State Artist”—who was the center of criticism for works like *Flood Catastrophe on the River Po* (fig. 3-5, 1954), which shows his interest in modern artists like Picasso and Renato Guttuso.

In 1960, Berlin joined Halle as a “trouble spot” for modern art. In this year, *Galerie Konkret* showed a small exhibition of work by fourteen young artists from Berlin, including Metzkes. Organized and paid for by the old-school Communist and highly celebrated sculptor Fritz Cremer—who will play an important role in my discussion of the Fifth Congress later—this exhibition was closed down after just a few days because political functionaries considered the art shown to be too modern.

Although the closing of this exhibition can be seen as another defeat for “modern” art in the ongoing debates about the role it should be allowed to play in East Germany, it also marked the beginning of a change in the East German art scene that would ultimately lead to the official acceptance of stylistic experimentation a decade later. This change—which was hotly contested throughout the 1960s—resulted in part from the continuing impact of Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization speech on old-school Communists like Cremer, and in part from the emergence of a younger, more experimental generation of artists onto the East German art scene at this time.

Khrushchev’s speech at the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress in 1956 had deeply unsettled many older Communists in the GDR, including Cremer, who became increasingly outspoken about the need to reform the East German system. Even in the cultural freeze of the late 1950s, he spoke out against artistic dogmatism.<sup>262</sup> As a proven Communist who was not only revered in the GDR—where he created, among other things, high-profile monuments for the Buchenwald and Ravensbrück concentration camps—but also internationally, Cremer was a particularly thorny problem for East German cultural functionaries, both because his reputation made him virtually untouchable, and because his criticisms could not be simply thrown out as anarchic.<sup>263</sup>

In the 1960s, Cremer spoke out about the inappropriateness of the Soviet model of art for German artists, first, because it was too similar to that of the Nazis’, and second, because it was too simple for the German people. The latter, he argued, were much more educated as a whole than the Russian populace.<sup>264</sup> It was also in these years that he began actively helping the

---

<sup>262</sup> In a speech he gave at the opening of a Willi Lammert exhibition at the AdK in March 1959, for example, Cremer warned art theoreticians against being too narrow. Speech reproduced in *Bildende Kunst* 6 (1959). As cited in *Kunstkombinat*, 39.

<sup>263</sup> Lea Grundig called Cremer “den bedeutendsten Künstler der DDR” in her letter to Kurt Hager. Grundig, *Lieber Genosse Kurt Hager*, 3/27/64. Bundesarchiv-SAPMO: DY30/IVA2/2.024

<sup>264</sup> A report written by Dr. Eberhard Bartke on January 21, 1964 and sent to Hager at the Politbüro about Cremer’s comments at a meeting between the MfK, AdK and VBKD. Writing from memory rather than a transcript, which was not yet available, Bartke summarized Cremer’s words as follows: “we need a 20<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> Parteitag in the

younger generations of artists onto the public stage, which had been dominated by Weimar-era artists since the late 1940s.

Just over a year after the controversial exhibition at *Galerie Konkret*, Cremer used his clout as secretary of the VBKD to put together another show of young artists, this time from across the GDR. Unlike the earlier small-scale exhibition, this one was held at the Academy of the Arts in Berlin (AdK, Akademie der Künste), one of the GDR's most important cultural institutions. From the more than three hundred artists who submitted work, seventy one were chosen for the exhibition, *Young Artists: Painting*. It was the first major show of young artists in the GDR, heralding a generation change in the visual arts that was taking place throughout Germany in the early 1960s. While many of the artists from this exhibition would later make a name for themselves in the GDR, *Young Artists: Painting* was heavily criticized at the time for being too modern and for not reflecting an optimistic view of the GDR. Repeatedly threatened with being shut down, it managed to stay open for its full duration only due to Cremer's near-legendary status in the GDR, together with the support of two other East German cultural greats, Anna Seghers and Hanns Eisler. Significantly, the artists shown in this exhibition were primarily

---

realm of culture [this is a reference to the two speeches Khrushchev gave calling for de-Stalinization, ae]. It cannot continue on the way it has. No one has the courage to say that openly, but I do. Soviet art is not a model for us... It is [an art for] a working class that originally came from illiterates. We have a working class that comes from a high education. Soviet art is basically a bourgeois art.... We need to study and take into consideration the experiences of comrades Matisse, Leger, Picasso and Guttuso. It is impertinent to maintain that Picasso does not advance socialist Realism..." Bundesarchiv-SAPMO: IV A 2/2.024/37. ["Wir brauchen einen XX. und XXII. Parteitag auf dem Gebiet der Kultur. So, wie bisher, geht es nicht weiter. Niemand hat den Mut, das offen zu sagen, ich habe ihn. Die Sowjetische Kunst ist kein Vorbild für uns, sie ist kleinbürgerlich. Sie ist lediglich Nachholbedarf einer Arbeiterklasse, die ursprünglich aus Analphabeten bestand. Wir haben eine Arbeiterklasse, die einen hohen Bildungsstand hat. Die Sowjetische Kunst ist eine im Grunde bürgerliche Kunst... Wir müssen endlich die Erfahrungen der Genossen Matisse, Leger, Picasso, und Guttuso studieren und berücksichtigen. Es ist eine Unverschämtheit zu behaupten, daß Picasso nicht zum sozialistischen Realismus vorgedrungen wäre..."]

from Berlin and Dresden; there were only two artists from Leipzig, neither of whom is particularly well known today.<sup>265</sup>

Despite Cremer's exhibition—or perhaps in response to it—the Fifth German Art Exhibition in Dresden in 1962/63 was stylistically conservative. Its motto was, “there is nothing to be learned from Modernism.”<sup>266</sup> The most highly praised painting of the show was *Couple at the Beach* (1962, fig. 3-6) by the Berlin artist Walter Womacka (b. 1925), who was also vice president of the VBKD at the time.<sup>267</sup> This relatively small painting focuses on a young man and woman at the beach, the rolling waves of the ocean visible behind them. They are both fully clothed, albeit barefoot, and sit or lie directly on the sand. The dark-haired woman, seated on the right-hand side of the painting, looks off to her left as if lost in thought. The young man, who lies beside her, looks at her face while gently touching the fingers of her right hand with his own. As one visitor described it in the comments book, “The love relationship between the boy and the girl is pure and natural... I also like the colors, their freshness and strength.”<sup>268</sup> It was a painting that fit well the late 1950s/early 1960s emphasis in official art on workers enjoying the fruits of their labor.

It was at this exhibition that Heisig first really emerged onto the East German art scene at the national level. While technically he had shown a work at the Fourth Dresden Art Exhibition

---

<sup>265</sup> According to the catalog, of the approximately seventy artists who participated, only two were from Leipzig: Kurt Dornis (b. 1930) and Heinz Mueller (b. 1924). The largest number of artists came from Berlin with twenty three, followed by Dresden with sixteen. These larger numbers correspond with their official role as the centers of painting in East Germany. Like Leipzig, Halle had only three artists for a total of four works in the exhibition. It is possible Leipzig did not have many artists in this exhibition because they were preparing for the Sixth Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig, which opened in November 1961.

<sup>266</sup> *Kunstkombinat*, 47. “Vom ‘Modernismus’ gibt es nichts zu lernen.”

<sup>267</sup> *Couple at the Beach* was one of the GDR's most reproduced paintings. In Ulrich Plenzdorf's 1973 book, *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.*, the main character refers to both the work and its ubiquity: “Zuerst nahm ich mir die Bilder vor, die er hatte. . . Ich will nichts weiter darüber sagen. Wer es kennt, weiss, welches ich meine. Ein echtes Brechmittel, im Ernst. Dieses prachtvolle Paar da am Strand.” Plenzdorf, 79

<sup>268</sup> A 19-year-old sailor from the People's Marines, as quoted in Lindner, *Verstellter*, 129. “Die Liebesbeziehungen zwischen dem Jungen und dem Mädels sind sauber und natürlich. Nichts ist übertrieben, auch die Farben gefallen mir wegen ihre Frische und Kräftigkeit.”

in 1958, it was only a small pencil drawing.<sup>269</sup> At the Fifth in 1962/63, by contrast, he exhibited three paintings, including the first work in the Christmas Dream series and the third from the Paris Commune series. It is important to note that all three of these works were illusionistic in style.

Shortly after this exhibition, cultural policies in the GDR relaxed again with the announcement of the New Economic System (NÖS, Neues Ökonomisches System) at the Sixth Party Conference of the SED in January 1963. In the wake of Khrushchev's second de-Stalinization speech in 1961 and the building of the Berlin Wall in August of that year, the SED had decided to focus on improving the standard of living in the GDR through a modernization of industry. It also tried to improve its relationship with intellectuals by allowing more open discussions, although these discussions were not always without consequences as will soon be shown.

It was during these years—which came to a sudden end with the Eleventh Plenum of the SED in December 1965—that the Fifth Congress of the VBKD took place. It was also during these years that Heisig changed his style from a realism based on 19<sup>th</sup>-century models to one that was formally more complex.<sup>270</sup>

---

<sup>269</sup> Heisig exhibited the pencil drawing, *Meine Mutter*, at the Fourth German Art Exhibition in 1958.

<sup>270</sup> It was also in these years that the controversial Kafka Conference took place in Lidice, where it was suggested that the alienation of the individual from society was not a condition limited to capitalism. This interest in displaying the negative side of life can be seen in a number of the speeches given at the Fifth Congress, including Heisig's.

### 3.2 THE FIFTH CONGRESS OF THE VBKD (MARCH 23-25, 1964)

The discussion over the role modern art should be allowed to play in East Germany reached an explosive peak at the Fifth Congress of the VBKD in Berlin in March 1964, most notably in the speeches given by Hermann Raum, Cremer, and Heisig.<sup>271</sup> All three spoke on Tuesday, March 24<sup>th</sup>, which was the first day of the three-day conference. Although each had a different presentation style and touched upon different aspects of East German art and its policies, common to all was the call for: 1) openness to western artistic styles, and 2) an end to treating artists and the public like “children.”<sup>272</sup>

The first day began with a keynote address by Lea Grundig, who would become the new president of the VBKD at the end of the congress. In her speech, which had been approved by the Party ahead of time, Grundig examined what the Expressionist past had to offer East German artists, thus marking a liberalization of the cultural policies of the GDR. It is therefore, as the (West) German art historian Ulrike Goeschen has pointed out, “all the more shocking that three speakers would then publicly criticize cultural policies on this same official stage.”<sup>273</sup>

Hermann Raum was the first of the three. A young art historian from Rostock, he gave the speech directly following Grundig’s. His was an intellectually compelling lecture in which he called for stylistic freedom in the visual arts, arguing that it is the intent or meaning of the work

---

<sup>271</sup> The VBKD held a major conference every few years to discuss key issues facing East German artists. Speakers were selected by the local branches of the VBKD from its own membership and were given a general topic to discuss. Heisig, for example, was assigned to speak on “Vorstellung über den Realismus” at the Fifth Conference. *Bericht über die 5. erw. Bezirksvorstandssitzung des VBK-L*, 3/11/64. SächsStAL: VBK-L 58. The members selected were generally active participants in the VBKD at the local level and thus best able to represent local concerns at the conference. As such, it is significant that Heisig was selected to speak at this—and most other—conferences.

<sup>272</sup> Heisig, for example, states in his speech, “the artist is being treated like a child not allowed onto the street [of modern art] for fear of getting run over...”

<sup>273</sup> Ulrike Goeschen, *Vom Sozialistischen Realismus zur Kunst im Sozialismus, Die Rezeption der Moderne Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft der DDR* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2001) 143. “Deshalb wird es um so schockierender gewesen sein, dass gleich drei Redner offene Kritik an der Kunstpolitik auf dieser offiziellen Bühne übten.”

rather than its form that should determine whether or not it is good.<sup>274</sup> In particular, he argued against the Cold War division of the arts. Official art criticism since the early 1950s, he pointed out, had placed everything into two drawers, realistic and modern, but the exact contents of each had changed several times. Form does not equal ideology, he argued, and pointed to the difficulties that Nazi art raised for such a formula, since they, too, used 19<sup>th</sup> century models of Realism. To adopt a style, therefore, is not to adopt the ideology behind it, and thus the two-drawer model of art should be abandoned.

Raum continued by stating that the last twenty years had been artistically potent and that the potential for these forms had not been reached in the West. In the East, however, such ideas could be changed from “art for art’s sake” to “art for us.”<sup>275</sup> Rather than assuming that the people could never understand Picasso’s work and thus limiting them to relatively realistic and optimistic works like his dove pictures—a stance that Raum called arrogant—he argued that the people can be educated, and that it is the artists’ duty to do so. The West, in contrast, was not doing so, he stated, and this would be their artistic downfall; moreover, in contrast to the West’s emphasis on accusations, the East’s was on rebuilding and on optimism. *It is therefore the intent—the humanism—that makes something Socialist Realist*, he insisted. Polemically Raum asked if East German artists were too weak to work through the current difficulties, what he called artistic puberty. He ended by pointing out that the Soviet Union’s rocket program had begun with the adoption of western technology, which they then perfected and took to the stars.

---

<sup>274</sup> Hermann Raum’s speech at the Fifth Congress of the VBKD, as reproduced in Goeschen, 410-418.

<sup>275</sup> Goeschen, 413. “...dass aus der ‘Form an sich’ eine Form für uns wird.”



Fritz Cremer spoke next and began by praising Raum, calling him a “brilliant art theoretician” and expressing wonder that he had never heard of him before.<sup>276</sup> “That which I have to say,” he stated to laughter, “is not much different, just a bit more primitive.”<sup>277</sup> He then launched into a fifteen-minute critique of the current artistic situation in East Germany in a tone that was both commanding and self-deprecating. It was an impassioned speech that clearly resonated with the audience, who interrupted him numerous times with applause and calls of “very true!”

Making a reference to the recent summons from the Ministerium für Kultur (MfK) for “an open discussion about art,” Cremer stated brazenly, “we need a *true* discussion, not an artificial one.”<sup>278</sup> He then called for a “reexamination of the consequences of the era of the cult of personality on the visual arts.”<sup>279</sup> In his opinion, the Stalinist era had led to a way of thinking about art that was unrealistic, in particular, the focus on illusionism and optimism to the exclusion—and denigration—of everything else. He argued, instead, for a critical realism for socialism, something “that will serve the further development of our socialist society.”<sup>280</sup> Similarly, he argued for a nuanced view of modern art and the elimination of condemnatory labels like abstraction, formalism, and decadence.

---

<sup>276</sup> Fritz Cremer’s speech at the Fifth Congress. AdK Archiv: VBKD 67, 63. “Zunächst einmal möchte ich sagen, dass ich mich darüber wundere, dass wir einen so grossartigen Kunsttheoretiker unter uns haben.”

<sup>277</sup> Ibid. “Das, was ich sage, ist nicht viel anderes, nur ein bisschen primitiver.”

<sup>278</sup> Ibid. “Unser Minister für Kultur, Hans Bentzien, hat kürzlich gesagt, dass wir das offene Gespräch über die Kunst suchen... Wir brauchen tatsächlich einen echten Meinungsstreit und keinen künstlichen.”

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 64. “Wir brauchen... auch auf dem Gebiet der Kunst die wiederherstellung Leninscher Normen. Was meine ich damit? Ich meine damit, dass eine Überprüfung der Folgen aus der Periode des Personenkults auf dem Gebiet der Kunst notwendig ist.”

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 65. “Wir brauchen... ein kritischer Realismus auf einer neuen, höheren Stufe auch zur Breite dessen gehört, was wir sozialistische Kunst nennen, und der Weiterentwicklung unserer sozialistischen Gesellschaft sehr wohl dienlich sein könnte.”

“We need to understand that our art is for civilized people, for the literate, not the illiterate,” he stated to applause.<sup>281</sup> “We need an art that provokes the civilized and literate people of our century to ask the question, ‘capitalism or socialism?’ and that gives [them] the right and the responsibility to decide for [themselves] between these two societal systems... We need an art that gets people to think, not an art that takes the thinking from them.”<sup>282</sup> This latter comment was met with applause and calls of “very true!”<sup>283</sup> He would later return to the subject of art’s audience and state, “we do not need an art for ‘ordinary people’ (*Volkstümlich*). The people are not ‘ordinary,’” moreover such an art was what the Thousand Year Reich had propagated.<sup>284</sup>

“We need an art that gives every single artist the freedom to decide the substance and form of his art. We need the search for truth in art, and we need the unconditional independence of the artist.”<sup>285</sup> This, too, was met with applause and calls of “very true!”

As for a “realism without boundaries,” Cremer was uncertain but did not see why it was viewed as a danger to socialism.<sup>286</sup> What was needed, in the final analysis, was an art that sought truth in its entirety, not just on the surface, and the end of division and dogmatism. “We do not

---

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 67. “Wir brauchen die Einsicht, dass sich unsere Kunst an zivilisierte Menschen, an Alphabeten und nicht an Analphabeten wendet.”

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., 68. “Wir brauchen eine Kunst, die den zivilisierten Menschen und Alphabeten unseres Jahrhunderts die Frage ‘Kapitalismus oder Sozialismus’ provoziert und ihm das Recht und die Verantwortung gibt, selbständig über diese zwei verschiedenen gesellschaftlichen Systeme zu entscheiden... Wir brauchen eine Kunst, die die Menschen zum Denken veranlasst, und wir brauchen keine Kunst, die ihnen das Denken abnimmt.”

<sup>283</sup> Ibid. “Sehr richtig!”

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., 69. “Wir brauchen keine volkstümliche Kunst. Das Volk ist nicht ‘tümlich’ meint Brecht, und schliesslich haben wir im tausendjährigen Reich eine solche Periode von Muff und Staub verlogener Kleinbürger und heroischer Volkstümlei hinter uns.”

<sup>285</sup> Ibid., 68. “Wir brauchen die freie Entscheidung über Stoff und Form jedes einzelnen Künstlers für seine Arbeit. Wir brauchen Wahrheitssuche in der Kunst, und wir brauchen die unbedingte Eigenverantwortlichkeit des Künstlers.”

<sup>286</sup> Ibid. “Brauchen wir einen Realismus ohne Ufer? Ich weiss es nicht. Wieso aber hierin etwas Revisionistisches und den Sozialismus gefährliches liegen soll, verstehe ich wahrhaftig nicht.” “Realismus ohne Ufer” is a reference to Robert Garaudy’s 1963 book of the same title. It promoted a broader view of realism and was dismissed by political functionaries as revisionism.

need art... to be a poster for Socialism. We need an art that radiates [Socialism's] new feeling for life," in whatever outward form that takes.<sup>287</sup>

Cremer's speech was followed by a scheduled lunch break. There was a palpable excitement in the air. The three speeches that morning had all signaled a new, more liberal direction in East German art, each more progressive than the previous – from Grundig's State-approved reassessment of Expressionism to Raum's measured critique of the polarization of art in the Cold war era to Cremer's brazen attack of the current state of art in East Germany. These speeches set the tone for the day, and Cremer's, in particular, would color each of those delivered in its wake, as well as Raum's before him. His position within the program as one of the first speakers of the conference suggested to some that what he said, while surprising, had nonetheless been approved. Moreover, there was no public rebuke until the following day.

Whereas Raum and Cremer gave their speeches before the lunch break, Heisig gave his toward the end of the day, the twelfth of fourteen speakers in the wake of Grundig's keynote address. He began by stating that he wanted to make a couple of comments about some terms that he felt needed readdressing because they were threatening to become dogma. He then stated—in what can be interpreted as either rhetorical modesty or actual uncertainty—that he felt uncomfortable following the “excellent speeches” that morning, since he would not be able to present his with the same emotional force.<sup>288</sup> He would nonetheless try to help shed light on the issue by approaching it from another angle. In the speech that followed—which was punctuated by applause and, occasionally, laughter—he, like Cremer and Raum before him, argued against

---

<sup>287</sup> Ibid. “Wir brauchen in der sogenannten freien Kunst im Gegensatz zur sogenannten angewandten Kunst keine Reklame für den Sozialismus. Wir brauchen eine Kunst, die ein neues Lebensgefühl ausstrahlt...”

<sup>288</sup> Heisig's speech at the Fifth Congress of the VBKD, 1964, as reprinted in Goeschen, 424-9. “Ich mache dies nach den zwei ausgezeichneten Diskussionsbeiträgen heute Morgen etwas ungern, weil ich es nicht mit dieser selben emotionalen Kraft hervorbringen werde.”

dogmatic extremes, the ossification of artistic policy, and treating artists and the public like “children.” Within this framework he made two main points:

1. Artists should determine what art is, not theorists, journalists or commissions, and
2. There should be no more taboos in art: neither modern artistic styles, nor the negative side of life, should be excluded from artistic production.

Due to the importance of this speech to understanding both Heisig’s views on art at this time, as well as his subsequent reception, I will quote from it at length.

...Our situation today developed out of an attempt to protect artists from the extremes of artistic autonomy threatening the West, and to help orient us toward the new socialist present. This enabled us to look at tradition anew, and to find inspiration there for our new societal mission—such as the importance of the human figure for artistic expression.

In the attempt to lead artists out of the isolation of artistic autonomy [however]... another kind of isolation has been created. Out of fear, artists have been cut off from a large part of contemporary art, for example, modern art in western Europe, which—again an extreme—is called rotting fruit on the dying tree of Imperialism. The account is simple: art belongs to the superstructure.... In some branches of art, however, mostly where economics plays a role, the connection to class is no longer overriding. Architecture, book illustration, and the commercial arts have developed a class-indifferent character.<sup>289</sup> It is hardly possible, for example, to tell the difference between a modern skyscraper in Moscow and one in New York<sup>290</sup>.... I would like to see this [opening up to modern artistic styles] in our own realm [painting and sculpture].

....There is a feeling among many artists today that the interpretation of our cultural policies [specifically, of the Bitterfeld Way] is marked by ossification and stagnation.... In the effort to protect him from dangerous influences, the artist is being treated like a child not allowed onto the street [of modern art] for fear of getting run over.... [This leads both to] an uncritical overvaluation of western art as the forbidden fruit and to provinciality.... One overcomes such a situation not through ignorance, repression or isolation, but rather by engaging with it. Modern art is not poison [as is often stated], it is the art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.... [The decision as to what is valuable out of this tradition] cannot be made for the artist by a commission... it must be decided upon by the artist [alone] in his responsibility... to society...

The entire person, his joys, desires, longings, dreams, as well as the tragic elements, his fear, imperfection, pain—in short, life and death—are the content of artistic

---

<sup>289</sup> While perhaps surprising to Western readers, this comment about a class-indifferent character was not one for which Heisig was later criticized.

<sup>290</sup> The Soviet Union had embraced new and progressive elements in industrial construction already in 1955. Damus, 185.

engagement. Also here nothing should be repressed, and yet... the engagement with the dark side of life is judged to be... inappropriate for socialist reality... This shows an hysterical relationship to life....

I believe that the cause for this failure to address all sides of life can be found in the theoretical interpretation of the term Realism... Critics have been given the impossible task of predicting what the new [socialist] art will look like.... It is a question of how mastery should develop; [should it naturally unfold through the artistic process] or is it just a matter of rules and technical know how? ...Because theoreticians and critics cannot define what art will be, they reach for the cure-all stamp [Socialist Realism, and thereby stop thinking about these questions]... It is just as difficult to find a talented critic as a talented artist....

To interest the people [in art] we need an art that is interesting, one that thrills and delights or annoys and provokes, one that is in any case interesting.... And why is it that there is always an official interpretation [guides, tours, etc.] to exhibitions rather than letting people interact with the work themselves?

The artist is also the critic of his time. We [the artists] need to address these issues if we are to be justified in claiming leadership of them. We must make the better arguments.

We [also] need to be careful about replacing one dogma with another. There are many ways of approaching art... We should be allowed the room to experiment with ideas in our art and not condemned for them, for only in this experimentation will something important develop... In *Neues Deutschland*, I read an article that stated, "Sectarian backstabbing, writing off and final prescriptions are alien to our assessment of art." That is correct and should be emphasized, especially since we encounter these phenomena only too frequently, at least in my experience as an artist in Leipzig. It is too bad that representatives of the Regional Leadership of the Party in Leipzig and other important organizations are not here...

Just a few comments on Professor Grundig's speech. In what was clearly an attempt to hinder and fight against paralysis, a view of realism was shown that is again only the subjective interpretation of the speaker, which is of course always the case. I do not want to speak here against the opinion... But I can see other artistic possibilities that stand in direct opposition to this opinion, and I think we need to be careful to protect ourselves from going from one extreme to another; from implementing a different dogma to get rid of the first one. That means that it should be prevented that a person who is passionately engaged with his artistic problems and thinks he has the truth on all points—and I do not mean here Professor Grundig—that he will naturally surround himself with a group of colleagues who share his opinion and, under certain circumstances, they will appear to terrorize opinion. We want, however, that our discussion about art, about the quality of our art, leaves open a range of possibilities so that in a true discussion, whereby the idea of "lack of quality" is excluded, those things that are worthy of rising to the top rise to it. Thank you.<sup>291</sup>

\* \* \*

---

<sup>291</sup> See the full speech, in German, in the Appendix.

While Heisig's speech—like Raum's and Cremer's—was met with repeated applause from its audience of mostly artists and art historians, not everyone was approving. That night cultural functionaries and high-ranking VBKD members gathered together to figure out how they could win back the conference. Speeches for the following day were changed: some were cancelled, others rewritten and still others added. Only the most politically reliable were allowed to speak.

The Berlin artist Walter Womacka, Vice President of the VBKD and creator of *Couple at the Beach* discussed earlier, opened the second day with a speech in which he focused primarily on Cremer. At the very end, however, he turned to Heisig, calling his talk from the previous day an example of “intellectual dishonesty.”<sup>292</sup> He pointed out that Heisig had given a brilliant performance, but was angered because, as he saw it, Heisig had given a similarly brilliant performance at the Fourth Congress in 1959—a speech I will turn to shortly—“but there he said exactly the opposite!”<sup>293</sup> After quoting a long passage from this earlier speech that he interpreted as being against modern art, Womacka again accused him of dishonesty, this time in the earlier speech, erroneously pointing out that Heisig had just become “a public official and professor” at the time.<sup>294</sup> “Such behavior,” Womacka concluded the speech, “is called, quite simply, demagoguery!”<sup>295</sup>

---

<sup>292</sup> Transcript of Womacka's speech from the Fifth Congress of the VBKD. AdK Archiv: VBKD 67. “Intellektuellen Unredlichkeit.”

<sup>293</sup> Ibid. “Der Beitrag kam gut an, er war blenden vorgetragen. Aber ich musste an seinem blendend vorgetragenem Beitrag beim IV. Kongress denken. Da hat er nämlich genau das Gegenteil behauptet!”

<sup>294</sup> Ibid. Womacka is mistaken here. Heisig was leaving his position as chairman of the VBK-L in 1959, not assuming it. He did not become a Professor until the 1961/62 academic year. The decision to make him a professor, however, was made in late January 1960, thus only a month after his speech. *Protokoll über die Leitungssitzung vom 26.1.60*. HGB Archive.

<sup>295</sup> Transcript of Womacka's speech from the Fifth Congress of the VBKD. AdK Archiv: VBKD 67. “Aber um noch einmal auf den Kollegen Heisig zurückzukommen: Eine solche Verhaltensweise bezeichnet man bei uns schlicht und einfach als Demagogie!”

Womacka was not the only one who saw Heisig's speech at the Fifth Congress as a significant change in his views on art. In one of the many meetings held during the five-week investigation that followed the conference to determine whether or not punitive action was required, Heisig was accused of making "an abrupt change of opinion" and a "180 degree turn in his artistic views."<sup>296</sup> Similarly, at the conference, Gerhard Bondzin pointed out that Heisig's speech did not seem to match his art, thus suggesting that the change in his painting style—away from a simple realism—mentioned at the beginning of this chapter became public only in the wake of this conference. And yet when Bondzin reiterated Womacka's observation that Heisig had abandoned the conception he had forwarded in his 1959 speech, Heisig interrupted him from the audience to say that this was not the case.<sup>297</sup> Before continuing with the fallout from this conference, then, we need to take a closer look at Heisig's views on modern art to this point in time. Why did Womacka and Bondzin see Heisig's 1964 speech as a change in his views, but Heisig did not?

### 3.3 HEISIG'S VIEWS ON ART, 1954-64

Before turning to Heisig's speech in 1959, which is easy to misinterpret, it is important to first establish what his views on art were up to that point in time. The earliest evidence stems from a

---

<sup>296</sup> *Bericht vom Auftreten der Leipziger Genossen auf dem V. Kongress*, Leipzig, den 2. April 1964. SächsStAL: SED-L 362. "...eine Schwenkung seiner künstlerischen Auffassung um 180 Grad.... Dieser Eindruck eines abrupten "Gesinnungswandels" der Leipziger Künstler..."

<sup>297</sup> Bondzin stated, "I have to say that Professor Heisig's speech amazed me, since—as colleague Womacka has already stated—he stood behind a conception in the Fourth Congress and tried to realize this conception in his work, and then yesterday presented a standpoint that has nothing more to do with this conception." At this point Heisig called out from the audience, "I never gave up the conception, also not today." ("Zuruf: Ich habe die Konzeption nie aufgegeben, auch jetzt nicht.") Transcript of Bondzin's speech from the Fifth Congress of the VBKD. AdK Archiv: VBKD 67.

series of five articles of varying length he published in *Bildende Kunst* between 1954 and 1957. All of the articles focus on the art scene in Leipzig, and all but one are reviews of exhibitions. At the time he wrote the first of them, he was twenty-nine years old and had just begun teaching at the Leipzig Academy in the more liberal cultural atmosphere of the New Course. He was also on the jury for the regional art exhibition in Leipzig for the second year in a row, a position he would continue to hold until the GDR's collapse in 1989/90.

A close look at these articles reveals a young artist who is surprisingly critical of the East German art scene and his colleagues, several of whom he singled out for praise or criticism, the latter being more frequent. Moreover, the first of these articles was published a year after Leipzig had emerged to great acclaim as the center of Socialist Realism in East Germany at the Third German Art Exhibition in Dresden in 1953, so Heisig was, in essence, criticizing the very art that political functionaries had just finished celebrating.

Spending little time with sculpture, he focused primarily on painting and graphics in these articles. In the first one, published in May/June 1954, he faulted artists for being too fearful, for clinging to used formulations and mere craftsmanship rather than finding the “creative moment” in their work.<sup>298</sup> He laid the blame for this on the current “rigid” system with its emphasis on studying artistic tradition rather than life. He explained this in more detail in the article he wrote two years later, stating that the older generations—those currently teaching art and running the VBKD—were basically self-taught and had had to repeat the study of craftsmanship where it had been neglected.<sup>299</sup> As a result, he believed, one extreme had developed into another and the youngest generation (of which he was a member) was being

---

<sup>298</sup> Heisig, “Zur Kunstausstellung in Leipzig 1954,” *Bildende Kunst* 5/6 (1954): 81. “Abgesehen von wenigen Ausnahmen fehlt allgemein das bildgestalterische Moment.”

<sup>299</sup> This is presumably a reference to the fact that many of these artists came of age in the liberal environment of the Weimar era. Heisig, “Junge Künstler in Leipzig,” *Bildende Kunst* 3 (1956): 128.



taught that aesthetic guidelines should replace the living model. Moreover, they were being taught that art is something “dead serious.”<sup>300</sup>

For Heisig, praiseworthy art united craftsmanship, artistic inspiration, and a socially relevant subject matter. He criticized those artists who emphasized craftsmanship to the detriment of subject matter or who focused merely on the “deathly noting of naturalist details.”<sup>301</sup> He also expressed “regret” that political themes remained mostly the result of State commissions rather than personal artistic choice and remarked that this state of affairs needed to be overcome.

In the second article, printed in June 1955, Heisig stated that “a diluted, disciplineless Impressionism still dominates” painting in Leipzig.<sup>302</sup> He pointed out the abundance of landscapes and still lifes in the exhibition, which, he believed, many artists were using as “neutral zones” without realizing that even these genres do not offer escape from making spiritual-artistic decisions.<sup>303</sup> He then turned to history painting and faulted the dominance of subject matter in these works to the detriment of a painterly execution and deeper meaning. As he would explain in more detail in an article from the following year, a work of art is not good just because of its subject matter, nor is art merely the result of craftsmanship: “historically accurate, well-drawn works do not necessarily result in an artistic statement.”<sup>304</sup>

For Heisig, today as in the 1950s, meaning (*Inhalt*) is the key to a good work of art, and he makes a clear distinction between it and subject matter (*Stoff*). Meaning requires the artist to come to terms with the subject and make a personal connection with it. As such, it is inextricably

---

<sup>300</sup> Ibid. “Folgerichtig entstand, wie unsere Ausstellungen beweisen, bei der Jugend die Vorstellung, dass die Kunst eine toderne Sache sei, der beizukommen nur mit größter Wissenschaftlichkeit gelingen könne...”

<sup>301</sup> Heisig (1954): 82. “...der mörderlichen Konstatierung naturalistischer Details...”

<sup>302</sup> Heisig, “Zur Leipziger Bezirkskunstausstellung 1955,” *Bildende Kunst* 6 (1955): 476. “Zur ausgestellten Malerei: nach wie vor muss im allgemeinen ein verdünnter, disziplinos gewordener Impressionismus erhalten...”

<sup>303</sup> Ibid.

<sup>304</sup> Heisig (1956): 130. “Der historisch getreu erfasste Vorgang, zeichnerisch richtig auf die Fläche gebracht, ergibt nicht notwendigerweise eine künstlerische Aussage.”

bound with the artist's identity and is what makes the subject matter relevant for the present day. Moreover, the form of a work of art emerges from its meaning, thus, as Heisig stated in the third article, "there is no art work with good content [ie, meaning] and bad form or vice versa."<sup>305</sup>

What was lacking among many Leipzig artists, then, according to Heisig, was meaning, the personal coming to terms with the subject matter in terms of one's own historical and social moment rather than mere historical illustration. As examples of what history painting should be, he pointed to Goya, Delacroix, and Picasso: "Alone, these artists took the term [history painting] far beyond its restricted borders [of 19<sup>th</sup> century historically antiquated 'rightness' combined with academic polish]. They did not relay history, but rather reinterpreted it in the sense of a passionate resistance, and their painting is to their time, like their ideas, revolutionary."<sup>306</sup>

As for Leipzig artists, Heisig singled out Claus Moritz' *Dance Café* for praise in two separate articles. Although the subject matter is not historically important, Heisig found the work to be "a well-rounded achievement. Without exaggeration or brilliance, [Moritz] paints with a naïve joy."<sup>307</sup> For Heisig, this work had set aside stuffy artistic rules and, as a result, was more lively and relevant to the present than much of the art being created at that time.

In the five-page article he published in 1956, *Young Artists in Leipzig*, Heisig explained his understanding of art—the distinction between subject matter and meaning described above—and criticized the ossified and isolated nature of art in the GDR. He pointed out that most young artists then working in Leipzig were trained at the Leipzig Academy, but stated that "beyond the usual collegial contacts, there is little overlap among artists, and groups with similar artistic

---

<sup>305</sup> Ibid. "...so gibt es... keine Kunstwerke mit gutem Inhalt und schlechter Form oder umgekehrt."

<sup>306</sup> Ibid. "Allein, diese Künstler greifen weit über die begrenzten Bezüge dieses Begriffs hinaus. Sie interpretieren keine Historie, sondern deuten sie neu im Sinne einer leidenschaftlichen Auflehnung, und ihre Malerei ist zu ihrer Zeit, wie ihre Ideen, revolutionär."

<sup>307</sup> Heisig (1955): 477. See also Heisig (1956): 128-9. "Eine abgerundete Leistung bot der vierundzwanzigjährige Klaus Moritz mit seinem *Tanzcafé*. Ohne hochzustapeln oder brillieren zu wollen, malt er mit naiver Freude..."

views are not to be found.”<sup>308</sup> He blamed this condition on the “rigid structures” of the VBKD.<sup>309</sup> He also saw the official art exhibitions—such as those he had been writing about—as sending artists down the wrong path because many were starting to paint for the exhibitions rather than for themselves. Due to their large scale and the political importance placed upon them, these official exhibitions tended to level the quality of art shown. Heisig had complained of this already in his first article, where he pointed out that Heinz Plier’s “unlively, schematic, [and] wooden” painting, *Heinrich Heine Visiting Karl Marx*, had been allowed into the exhibition largely because of its subject matter.<sup>310</sup> As a corrective, he called for “a number of smaller, more objective exhibitions with fewer commitments to encourage the youth to be more open and experimental. That might even help to create an artistic atmosphere that would make the adventure of art lively again instead of just the exercising of rules.”<sup>311</sup> He then stated that the goals and wishes of artists are unanimous: to be left alone for a few years to work without restriction.

In all of these articles, it is clear that Heisig was committed to improving art in East Germany and that he saw the two—art and society—as inseparably linked. He also argued for the freedom to experiment in art and urged artists to take control and fulfill their responsibility to society. As such, these articles have much in common with the speech he gave in 1964. Similarly, in both he placed the current artistic situation within its historical framework to better understand how it came into being.

---

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 128. “Über die Grenzen des üblichen kollegialen Kontaktes hinaus existieren zwischen den Künstlern wenig berührungspunkte, und Gruppen mit gemeinsamen künstlerischen Absichten sind nicht zu finden.”

<sup>309</sup> Ibid. “...die starre Struktur des Verbandes Bildender Künstler...”

<sup>310</sup> Heisig (1954): 82. “unlebendig, schematisiert, hölzern.”

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 131. “Dagegen könnte eine Anzahl kleiner, sachlich und weniger verpflichtend inszenierter Ausstellungen gerade die künstlerische Jugend ermuntern, offener und experimentierfreudiger zu werden. Vielleicht würde das helfen, wieder so etwas wie eine künstlerische Atmosphäre zu schaffen, in der statt eines Exerzierens von Regeln das Abenteuer der Kunst lebendig wäre.”

For a man who had dropped out of art school only a couple years earlier, and who had not yet had any works accepted for the major exhibition in Dresden, Heisig demonstrated surprising self confidence in these articles, which level criticism at both his colleagues and the system itself.<sup>312</sup> Moreover, he called upon the younger generations (himself included) to take the lead in artistic matters, clearly seeing the older generation as part of the problem.

Whereas one might expect him to have gotten in trouble for such views, the opposite was in fact the case, suggesting the GDR was more open to internal critique than is often thought in the West: in 1955, he received a medal for outstanding achievement, and in 1956, he was elected Chairman of the Leipzig branch of the VBKD. This made him—then thirty-one years old—the first of the younger generation to hold this position in Leipzig.<sup>313</sup>

After three years in office, Heisig was replaced by Heinrich Witz at the Fourth Congress of the VBKD in December 1959.<sup>314</sup> It is at this conference that he gave the speech that

---

<sup>312</sup> The artist Ursula Mattheuer-Neustadt, who has known Heisig since 1949, wrote an article about him in 2005 in which she stated that he was much more advanced as an artist than she and her husband, Wolfgang Mattheuer, when they met even though he was only a year or two older than they. She credited it to his having grown up the son of an artist, having already studied art some before the war, and his personality (“seine Neigung zur grossen Geste”). *Marginalien* (February 2005): 3-19, here 6-7.

<sup>313</sup> Witz and Tübke, also of his generation, followed in 1959 and 1962, respectively.

<sup>314</sup> Gillen suggests this change may have been the result of a power play: “As chairman of the Leipzig VBK, [Heisig] was, despite his tactfully skillful acts, replaced by Heinrich Witz in 1959.” Eckhart Gillen, *“Schwierigkeiten beim Suchen der Wahrheit.” Bernhard Heisig im Konflikt zwischen ‘verordnetem Antifaschismus’ und der Auseinandersetzung mit seinem Kriegstrauma.* diss., Universität Heidelberg, 2004,

15. Archival files, interviews, and autobiographies, however, suggest that Witz and Heisig were actually working together in these years, along with other artists from their generation, to change the cultural scene in Leipzig for the better. Thus, the change of power from Heisig to Witz seems to have been a natural one and, perhaps, even part of a coordinated effort by younger artists to take control of the art scene. According to Anneliese Hübscher, who taught Art History at the Leipzig Academy in the Ulbricht era, Witz was the one who got them all thinking about wresting art from the politicians by playing the politicians’ own game. Interview with Anneliese Hübscher, Summer 2005. According to Heinz Mäde, “Mittags oder abends sassen wir – Kollegen des Verbandes und des Hochschule – im Ringcafé. Hier wurde die Lage diskutiert und über Vorhaben gesprochen. Es ging sehr kollegial und freundschaftlich zu unter uns, und wir hatten oft mit manchem Scherz über die Stränge. Die wichtigsten Figuren hat H.B. [Harry Blume] in einem Gruppenbild zusammengefasst [*Atelierbild*]. Der führende Kopf war damals H.W. [Heinrich Witz], ein kluger und geschickter Rhetoriker mit dem heissesten Draht zur Leipziger Parteizentrale, von ihr akzeptiert, geschätzt und gefördert. Diese Anerkennung bekam ihm nicht. Ich merkte, wie alles, was er dachte und arbeitete oberflächlicher wurde... Die Partei liess ihn nach dem enttäuschenden Ausgang des Richtungsstreites nicht gleich fallen...” Heinz Mäde, *Das Durchweg Unliterarisch Erzählte Leben Eines Mannes im Deutschland des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Langendorf/Untergreisslau: Saale-Druck Naumberg GmbH) 244-5. According to Mattheuer-

Womacka would cite five years later as evidence of a complete about-face in his thinking on modern art. At first glance, it does indeed seem to demonstrate a significant difference in his views on modern art from those expressed in his controversial speech 1964 as well as from those expressed in his articles in the mid 1950s. He seems to criticize works by Western artists like Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg, and Ellsworth Kelly, works “where paint is hurled at, dripped on, shot, and sprayed at the canvas, where montages of old sacks are presented as art and large surfaces of color are expected to move, please, call to, and quiet the viewer.”<sup>315</sup> A closer reading, however, reveals that Heisig’s scathing critique was not of modern art per se, but rather of the “art for art’s sake” view dominant in the West and existent in the East. It is a fine distinction that is easy to miss.

In the 1959 speech, which was later published in condensed form as, *There is No Art for Art’s Sake*, Heisig attacked the dogma of artistic “laws” that had been taken from late bourgeois modern art, such as flatness, color, line, and the relationship of forms to each other.<sup>316</sup> This emphasis on formal issues to the exclusion of subject matter (in the traditional sense), as Heisig

---

Neustadt, Witz was part of the group of young artists—including herself and presumably Heisig—who would meet and have lively discussions. “He was intelligent and well read, a good conversationalist with witty ideas that he sometimes presented with the accompaniment of a guitar... politically he was a staunch dogmatist and as such a receptive student of the Party with their orientation toward Soviet Socialist Realism... he was not a good painter. Besides Kurt Massloff, [it was] he [who] gave Leipzig the reputation of being a stronghold of this doctrine... later a different way took root... so the Party let him go... [it was] quite brutal.” *Marginalien* (February 2005): 8-9. [“Er war intelligent und belesen, ein guter Unterhalter mit witzigen Einfällen, die er manchmal mit Gitarrebegleitung vortrug. Aber politisch war er ein strenger Dogmatiker und als solcher ein gelehriger Schüler der Partei mit ihrer Orientierung auf den sowjetischen Sozialistischen Realismus. Und er war kein guter Maler. Leipzig brachte er, neben Kurt Massloff, in Verruf, eine Hochburg dieser Doktrin zu sein... dann später einen anderen Weg einschlugen, während Heinrich Witz sich nicht lösen konnte und von der Partei fallengelassen wurde...”]

<sup>315</sup> Heisig’s speech as printed in *IV. Kongress des Verbandes bildender Künstler Deutschlands* (Berlin: VBKD, 1959) 96. “...wo Farbe auf die Leinwand geschleudert, getröpft, geschossen, gespritzt wird, wo Montagen von alten Säcken sich als Kunst präsentieren wollen und große Flächen, in einer Farbe gehalten, allein durch ihre Ausdehnung den Beschauer erschüttern, erfreuen, aufrufen, beruhigen sollen.” A comparison with a typescript of the speech suggests Heisig made changes to it before it was printed. In the typescript, he says only, “gibt es also Bilder, die in einer Farbe—monochrom nennt man das—gehalten sind, der Länge nach abgeschnitten werden müssen, weil hier die Ausdehnung der Farbe eine Rolle spielen soll.” *Speeches from the 1959 VBKD Kongress*. AdK Archiv: Kurella Nachlass 330. It was this article that Womacka was looking at when he wrote his speech criticizing Heisig.

<sup>316</sup> AdK Archiv: Kurella Nachlass 330, 138.

explained it, had led to the crisis currently being experienced in the western system. In particular, it had led to the alienation of the artist from society. According to Heisig, the snobbish art press in the West mystifies artists and their work, setting them up as loners whose art can only truly be understood in the future. From this idea, he continued, the thought developed that the artist is working for the future rather than the present, and it was not long before one started to believe that any art that is approachable—let alone liked by the masses—is to be mistrusted. Heisig went on to state that it is clear that,

from this position, the laws of art are sought out only in the ontological realm. From Impressionism came Expressionism; from Cezanne, Cubism, etc. The societal component was an abstraction because of the emphasis on spiritual individuality. From here the way led logically and carefully through many exciting shades and interesting varieties to artistic suicide, where, after the prescribed demolition of appearances, the artist is... left horribly alone without a societal purpose and, forced by the iron logic of his role, is no longer able to portray the human being...<sup>317</sup>

Heisig went on to explain that Socialism had put the brakes on this early enough to prevent such suicide in the East by giving artists a socially directed mission – reaching the people. It was nonetheless difficult, since many artists in the GDR had grown up with these so-called laws, which continued to hold sway over many of them. He pointed out that “we are at a point where we need to clarify what art is for us, or more precisely, what art can be based on societal experience...”<sup>318</sup> He then went on to say that,

---

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., 137. “Aus dem Imperionismus [sic, Impressionism] entwickelte sich des Expressionismus, aus Gezáune [sic, Cezanne] der Kubismus usw. Die gesellschaftliche Komponente war auf der Grundlage geistigen Einzelgängertums ein Abstraktum. Nun führte der Weg konsequent und gründlich über viele reizvolle Abschattierungen und interessante Spielarten in den künstlerischen Selbstmord, wonach der meisterlich und nach allen Regeln der Kunst vorgenommen Zertrümmung der Erscheinungsbilder ein Künstlertyp übrig bleibt, der ohne gesellschaftliche Aufgabe, schrecklich allein gelassen und gezwungen von der eisernen Logik einer Rolle, den Menschen nicht mehr darstellen kann.” This report was clearly typed from a sound recording of the speech by someone who knew little about art.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 138. “Wir sind an dem Punkt, wo wir klarstellen müssen, was für uns Kunst ist, genauer gesagt, was für uns aus dem gesellschaftlichen Erfahrungsbereich Kunst werden kann.”

the greatest masterpieces of art [from the past] shine through and remain alive [today] primarily because of their ideological relationship and not the result of rules and laws in the abstract... [Flatness] is not an abstraction. It is not there for itself, but rather is a kind of analogy to reality for the artist...<sup>319</sup>

Heisig was pointing all of this out, he stated, because he believed that the “laws of art” had become a kind of fetish for many artists in East Germany and were threatening to hypnotize them in a dangerous way.<sup>320</sup> He admitted that that had been the case for himself as well.<sup>321</sup> But, as he explained it, the rules of flatness so proudly proclaimed by architects today, those which forbid any sense of “perspectival space” because it would damage the flatness of the wall, are not the same rules to which Raphael, Michelangelo, Tiepolo or virtually any other mural painter adhered.<sup>322</sup> According to Heisig, this ontological view of art had led to the tragic situation that artists faced in the West and could be prevented in the GDR only “with a decided turn away from repeated dogmas and laws.”<sup>323</sup>

For the final few minutes of his speech he turned his attention to teaching in the art academies, stating that a good teacher is the result of both artistic skill and ideological commitment. Having only one or the other is not enough. He then suggested that the hiring

---

<sup>319</sup> Ibid., 139. “...die grossen Meisterwerke der Künste durchleuchtet und lebendig erhält, primär das Resultat ihrer ideologischen Bezogenheit ist und nicht das Ergebnis von Regeln und Gesetzen in abstrakto... die Fläche... ist nicht an sich da, sondern stellt für den Maler eine Art Analogie zur Wirklichkeit dar.”

<sup>320</sup> Ibid., 140. “Ich sage das hier, weil ich meine, dass die bürgerliche Kunsttheorie... einiges Regel- und Formelwerk hinterlassen hat, das von vielen Künstlern als vermeintlich unabdingbare Gesetze der Kunst zu einer Art Fetisch gemacht worden ist, der die Künstler auf eine gefährliche Weise zu hypnotisieren in der Lage ist. Und ich schliesse mich da gar nicht aus; denn mir ging ziemlich lange ebenso.”

<sup>321</sup> Ibid. Heisig includes himself here as a way of softening the criticism. It is unclear to what extent it is merely a rhetorical device versus an actual admission. The only evidence of experimentation with modern art appears in his 1955 sgraffito for the Sportforum (WV2) in Leipzig. The linear style suggests he was looking to Picasso, albeit his more realistic work. Heisig also exhibited a lithographic self portrait in 1956 that was expressionist in style.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid. “perspektival Raumwirkung.”

<sup>323</sup> Ibid., 141. “...nur eine entschlossene Abwehr von überhalten Dogmen und Gesetzmässigkeiten weiterhilft.” That he is referring here to Western rules is made clear in the next sentence—which appears only in the Kurella copy—“Hanging onto and parroting old, used rules results at best in a weak diminutive creation, a baby Picasso, a baby Beckmann or a baby Leger.” (Heisig uses the diminutive “-chen” here: Picassochen, Beckmännchen, Legerchen, which makes the original text more amusing.) AdK Archiv: Kurella Nachlass 330, 141.

policy at the Academies be more transparent and that the VBKD play a role in these choices (rather than leaving it to the politicians), before ending with the following statement: “We should attempt to solve our problems objectively and without prejudice, and above all we should work together in the knowledge that what we, as visual artists in society, want to portray will be found in proportion to what we have to offer.”<sup>324</sup>

This speech reveals that Heisig was not so much for or against modern art as he was committed to the collapsing of the distance between life and art as proposed by the Bitterfeld Way. In fact, Heisig seems to have played an important role in spreading the Bitterfeld Way’s message to the younger generation of artists in Leipzig as suggested by official reports from the day.<sup>325</sup> It is a position he continued to hold in 1964, although his concern by then had turned to its ossification and to East German artistic policies in general that had made experimentation with western art taboo. In both speeches, Heisig speaks against artistic dogmatism. Moreover, in both—as in the articles he published in the mid 1950s—he leveled criticism at his colleagues and the system and argued for ideological commitment. As such, it becomes clear upon closer analysis that Womacka and Bondzin were wrong: Heisig’s speech from 1964 did not mark a fundamental change in his thinking on modern art, nor was it more critical.

---

<sup>324</sup> Ibid., 143. “Wir sollten versuchen, diese Probleme sachlich vorurteilslos, vor allem aber gemeinsam anzugehen, in dem Bewußtsein, dass das, was wir in der Gesellschaft als bildende Künstler darstellen wollen, sich in der Proportion zu dem befinden wird, was wir zu bieten haben.”

<sup>325</sup> *Begründung zum Vorschlag für die Auszeichnung mit der “Medaille für ausgezeichnete Leistungen” anlässlich des 1. Mai 1960*, April 19, 1960, SächsStAL: VBK-L 155. “...[Bernhard Heisig] leitet die Kommission für Nachwuchsfragen. Er setzt sich beispielhaft ein für die Forderungen unserer jungen Künstler bei der Durchsetzung der Bitterfelder Linie.”



### 3.4 IN THE WAKE OF THE CONGRESS

Within this context, it is easy to see why Heisig may have been surprised by the reaction he received for his speech at the Fifth Congress. Not only had he always been fairly critical toward the East German art world, he had apparently said nothing in the 1964 speech that he had not previously said in public, albeit in smaller venues. Moreover, at a meeting to discuss the contents of the conference held a day before it began, Heisig told the group that he planned to discuss the issue of “no more taboos” and would be grateful for any information as to whether this was an acceptable topic for the congress.<sup>326</sup> While there is no mention of his having received a response, in one of the investigative meetings held after the Congress, Heisig stated that Siegfried Wagner had answered him and had said that he had not understood his question; the concern was not about whether something is acceptable to say, but rather that everything is said.<sup>327</sup> According to Heisig, Wagner told him after the speech that he had thrown out some important problems but that the form the speech had taken was problematic.<sup>328</sup> Indeed, another report suggests that for many it was *how* Heisig delivered his speech that was the real problem, “the tone of his lecture was very cynical and ironic.”<sup>329</sup>

---

<sup>326</sup> *Protokoll Aktivtagung am 23.3.64*, 5. AdK Archiv: VBKD 70.

<sup>327</sup> *Bericht über die Auseinandersetzung in der erweiterten Parteileitungssitzung der Bildenden Künstler zum Auftreten des Genossen Professor Bernhard Heisig auf dem Kongress des Verbandes Bildender Künstler*, 4/3/64. SächsStAL: SED-L 362. “Genosse Siegfried Wagner habe ihm darauf geantwortet, dass er die Frage nicht verstehe. Es käme nicht darauf an, dass alles richtig sei, was gesagt wird, sondern das alles ausgesprochen wird.” According to the same report, “Genosse Heisig erklärte... dass ihm Genosse Womacka in der Zwischenzeit angerufen und einen Termin für eine persönliche Aussprache angekündigt habe, um sich bei ihm zu entschuldigen.” When I asked him about this, Womacka denied having made such a call. Interview with Womacka, December 2005.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>329</sup> *Information über den 5. Kongreß des VBKD in Berlin durch den Vorsitzenden Günter-Albert Schulz*, Rat des Bezirkes, Abteilung Kultur, Leipzig, April 2, 1964. SächsStAL: SED-L 362, 3. It is unclear whether Heisig was cynical and ironic or whether this was simply the perception of the writer of the report based on his disagreement with the contents of the speech. Another report written by the SED-L on April 10, 1964, stated Heisig’s speech was “noch zynischer, provokativer und überheblicher” than Cremer’s. Lauter, *An die Grundorganisation des VBK-L*, April 10, 1964. SächsStAL: SED-L 362.

And yet the tone of Heisig's speech from 1964 appears no more sarcastic than that from 1959, which showed a similar, if not stronger, element of irony that caused the audience to laugh on repeated occasions not unlike they did in 1964. Certainly the switch from criticizing dogmatism as found in the West to criticizing dogmatism as found in the East played a role in the difference in reception. And yet Heisig also leveled strong criticism at the eastern system in the 1959 speech. One has to question, then, to what extent Cremer's impassioned and brazen critique affected the reception of Heisig's—and Raum's—speech? To what extent was the furor Heisig and Raum experienced the result of displaced anger and feelings of betrayal that could not be taken out on Cremer directly due to his near legendary status?<sup>330</sup>

As already discussed, on the second day of the congress Womacka criticized Heisig for the supposedly abrupt change in his views. Similarly, Gerhard Bondzin noted a discrepancy between Heisig's words and his art.<sup>331</sup> The focus of the condemnations, however, was Raum and, especially, Cremer. In fact, a couple of speakers—notably from Leipzig—actually defended Heisig at the conference. Harry Blume criticized his cynicism but agreed that there was a certain narrowness in the art scene in Leipzig, while Gerhard Kurt Müller—who would replace Heisig as rector of the Leipzig Academy shortly thereafter—stated that while he was often personally at odds with him, Heisig had also said some things that were true.<sup>332</sup> Nor was Heisig even

---

<sup>330</sup> Cremer's speech was published shortly thereafter in a West German newspaper. At the Politburo's urging, Cremer wrote to them about it, but rather than take back what he said at the conference, he stated that the speech was not for western manipulation. Like Heisig, he did not take back his core statements; his letter clarifies that his criticism was not aimed against the GDR but rather toward improving it from within. Siegfried Wagner, *An Alle Mitglieder und Kandidaten des Politbüros* (with attachment), 4/8/64. Bundesarchiv-SAPMO: DY30/IVA2/2.024/37.

<sup>331</sup> Womacka's and Bondzin's comments were apparently the result of a discussion among the *Parteiaktiv* held on the first night of the Congress: "Heisig's performance was viewed in the *Parteiaktiv* as a political attack and a 180 turn in his views since Comrade Heisig had represented a program of Socialist Realism at the Fourth Congress and in his work (especially at the Fifth German Art Exhibition in Dresden)." It was decided that this needed to be dealt with during the second day of the Congress. *Bericht vom Auftreten der Leipziger Genossen auf dem V. Kongreß des Verbandes Bildender Künstler*, Leipzig, am 2. April 1964. SächsStAL: SED-L 362.

<sup>332</sup> *Information über den 5. Kongress des VBKD in Berlin durch den Vorsitzenden Günter-Albert Schulz*, 4/2/64. SächsStAL: SED-L 362. "Zur Rede von Heisig habe er ausgeführt, dass er oft in Diskussion als Kontrahent von

mentioned in the letter that Kurt Hager sent to the Politbüro on March 25 that described the events of the conference.<sup>333</sup>

Similarly, in the letter that Grundig sent to Hager two days later, Heisig played a subordinate role. Her criticism focused instead on “the politically hostile ideology [promoted] by Fritz Cremer and Raum.”<sup>334</sup> She did, however, ask that “[Heisig’s] particularly unpleasant speech be reviewed because of its cynicism and nasty innuendo,” which she found to be “particularly poisonous.”<sup>335</sup> That Heisig had singled her out for criticism at the end of his speech presumably played a role in this request.<sup>336</sup>

In the weeks that followed, Heisig was the focus of several reports and at least one meeting, all of which were at the local level, albeit prompted by the Poliburo and the Ministry for Culture in Berlin.<sup>337</sup> On April 2, an extended meeting of the Leipzig branch of the VBKD took place to discuss the Congress and, in particular, the attitude of the Leipzig delegation, including Heisig. The tone for the meeting was set by the recent assessment of the Ideological Commission of the Politbüro, which viewed the Congress as “a Havemann-like attack against the Party begun by Comrade Fritz Cremer.”<sup>338</sup> The results of this meeting were summarized in a six-

---

Heisig aufgetreten wäre. Aber an einigen, was er gesagt hat, wäre etwas Wahres daran.” In the *Bericht* mentioned in the previous footnote, it states that Prof. Müller had stated “er hätte bereits seit Jahren Differenzen mit Prof. Heisig, würde ihn aber als Persönlichkeit achten.”

<sup>333</sup> Bundesarchiv-SAPMO: DY30/IV A 2.901/37.

<sup>334</sup> Lea Grundig, *Letter to Kurt Hager*, 3/26/64. Bundesarchiv-SAPMO: DY30/IVA2/2.024/37. “Ich schreibe das alles so ausführlich, damit der Einbruch der polit. feindlichen Ideologie durch Fritz Cremer zusammen mit Raum verständlich wird.”

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.* “Ich würde sehr empfehlen, den seines Zynismus und seiner üblen Anspielungen wegen, besonders unangenehmen Beitrag des Gen. Bernhard Heisig Leipzig zu überprüfen. Er scheint mir in seinen versteckten Angriffen besonders giftig.”

<sup>336</sup> According to Heisig, Lea Grundig did not like him initially. It was not until she saw his painting *Jewish Ghetto Fighters* in the mid 1960s, he states, that she softened toward him. (Grundig was Jewish and had escaped to Palestine during the Third Reich.) Interview with Heisig, Summer 2005.

<sup>337</sup> *Einschätzung des 5. Kongresses des VBKD und seiner Vorbereitung*, 4/11/64. Bundesarchiv-SAPMO: DY/IVA2.901/37.

<sup>338</sup> *Bericht über die Auseinandersetzung in der erweiterten Parteileitungssitzung der Bildenden Künstler zum Auftreten des Genossen Professor Bernhard Heisig auf dem Kongress des Verbandes Bildender Künstler*, 4/3/64.

page document dated to the following day, *Report on the Confrontation in the Enlarged Party Leadership Meeting of Visual Artists on the Performance of Bernhard Heisig at the Congress*. As its title suggests, much of the report focuses on Heisig, who was seen as “having used the tribunal of the Congress to cast doubt on the cultural politics of the Party and to distort the Party’s relationship to artists.”<sup>339</sup> Not only had he pursued the goal of negating and discrediting the Party’s leadership, the report states, he had also promoted the leadership claims of the artistic intelligentsia as well as the “hypocritical catchphrase” of artistic freedom.<sup>340</sup>

The report then shifts to criticisms uttered by the VBK-L Party Secretary Gerd Thielemann in the meeting: “Apparently incited by Comrade Raum’s presentation and especially Comrade Cremer’s against-the-Party line political-aesthetic program, Comrade Heisig polemicized against the handling of artists by the Party.”<sup>341</sup> He thinks that “artists are being treated like small children who are not allowed onto the street so that they won’t be run over... At the same time [he] promoted an ‘expanded Realism’...”<sup>342</sup> In the discussion that followed,

---

SächsStAL: SED-L 362. “...Angriff des Genossen Fritz Cremer begonnen, der mit den Positionen Havemanns übereinstimmt.” Robert Havemann (1910-82) was a chemistry professor at Humboldt University in Berlin. A committed Communist, he was critical of the East German government and its tendency to try to control every facet of one’s life. His lectures in the cultural thaw of the mid 1960s—later published as “Dialectic without Dogmatism – Natural Sciences Against Communistic Ideology”—were aimed at reforming Communism. In particular, he called for more freedom and for constructive discussions of problems. This Marxist view of Communism was shared by Harich in the mid 1950s and later by Cremer, Raum and Heisig in their speeches at the Fifth Congress. Unlike Harich, Havemann only lost his job; he was not thrown in jail. This difference in treatment suggests a significant change in the political atmosphere of the GDR between the mid 1950s and the mid 1960s.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid. “Genosse Heisig hat die Tribüne des Verbandskongresses benutzt, um die Richtigkeit der Kulturpolitik der Partei in frage zu stellen und das Verhältnis der Partei gegenüber den Künstler grob zu entstellen.”

<sup>340</sup> Ibid. “...der heuchlerischen Losung von der künstlerischen Freiheit...”

<sup>341</sup> Ibid. “Offensichtlich angespornt durch die Darlegungen des Genossen Raum und das gegen die Linie der Partei gerichtete politischästhetische Programm des Genossen Cremer begann Genosse Heisig eine Polemik gegen die Behandlung der Künstler durch die Partei...”

<sup>342</sup> Ibid. “...er behauptete, die Künstler würden wie kleine Kinder behandelt, die man nicht auf die Strasse liesse, damit sie nicht überfahren werden... Gleichzeitig propagierte Genosse Heisig die Forderung nach einem ‘verweiterten Realismus’...”

“Heisig’s own comments... confirmed that it is about the infiltration of modernism under the disguise of revolutionary phrases.”<sup>343</sup>

The report then states that the Ideological Commission in Leipzig together with the VBK-L had had to deal with Heisig in this regard several times in recent months. “The heart of the criticism was Comrade Heisig’s expressed doubts about the Party’s politics on fundamental questions, [doubts] that basically challenge the Politbüro’s [views on art as expressed in a] consultation with artists in March.”<sup>344</sup> Of particular note in this regard was Heisig’s introduction for a Festschrift written for the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Leipzig Academy, where, apparently, he “consciously left the Party’s cultural politics with the argument: The anniversary of the Leipzig Academy is of importance not only to the GDR, but also at a national and international level, and demonstrates peaceful coexistence in the realm of ideology and culture.”<sup>345</sup> If this quote is accurate—and one needs to be careful with this type of source—then Heisig referred directly to Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization speech with the term “peaceful coexistence.”<sup>346</sup> If this is indeed the case, then it signals a revisionist mindset. No wonder the Party was upset!

Regardless of whether or not Heisig actually wrote this, however, clearly some thought he had. Nor was this the only problem. Heisig had also been in trouble recently for his “subjective distortions of Party decisions” in his leadership of the Leipzig Academy and for the

---

<sup>343</sup> Ibid. “Die in der Diskussion durch Genossen Heisig selbst geäußerten Auffassungen bestätigten, dass es in der Tendenz um das Einschleusen des Modernismus unter dem Deckmantel revolutionärer Phrasen geht.”

<sup>344</sup> Ibid. “Der Kern der Kritik bestand darin, dass Genosse Heisig Zweifel gegenüber der Politik der Partei in Grundfragen äusserte und die Ergebnisse der Märzberatung des Politbüros mit Künstlern dadurch praktisch infrage stellte.”

<sup>345</sup> Ibid. “Im Entwurf seiner Einleitung zur Festschrift für die 200-Jahrfeier der Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst verliess er bewusst die Positionen der Kulturpolitik unserer Partei mit dem Argument: Das Jubiläum der Hochschule sei nicht nur ein Ereignis von Republik-Bedeutung, sondern von nationaler und internationaler Bedeutung und propagierte praktisch die friedliche Koexistenz im Bereich der Ideologie und Kultur.”

<sup>346</sup> One needs to be careful with attributing these words to Heisig since it is unclear if the report writer is actually looking at Heisig’s work or merely quoting from memory; errors in these reports are not infrequent. In the document in the Kober Nachlass, there is no mention of “peaceful coexistence,” although it may be a different version. On the other hand, it seems unlikely someone as astute as Heisig would use such a politically loaded term in his work.

“similarly unprincipled behavior [he displayed] in a number of... discussions related to his artistic activities and teaching.”<sup>347</sup> As a result of all the criticism mounting against him, “[Heisig] apparently gave up his position and even gave a self criticism...”<sup>348</sup> This would have been shortly before the Congress took place. It is unclear whether the term “position” here refers to Heisig’s position in the confrontation or, as I will return to later in this chapter, his function as rector of the Leipzig Academy. As for the self criticism—which would have predated the Congress—there is currently no evidence of one beyond its mention in this report. It is the next sentence, however, that hits upon the real problem: “And then he used the Congress to renew his old position against the Party in a dogmatic way and showed that his self criticism was ultimately disingenuous and double tongued.”<sup>349</sup> Like with Cremer, the Party felt betrayed.

The report continues with Heisig’s response to these allegations, much of which I referred to earlier, before broadening its focus to other comrades of the Leipzig delegation who had not taken the Party’s position. Werner Tübke and Wolfgang Matheuer, it stated, had expressed a similar sentiment to Heisig in that they had seen nothing dangerous in Cremer’s speech. And while they were critical of the Congress as a whole, they did not distance themselves openly from Heisig’s and Cremer’s position the way that others like Thielemann had. The report then went on to explain that one of the reasons for the wavering position of a number of Leipzig artists was the fact that in recent years their “false positions”—while receiving sharp criticism in Leipzig—had been tolerated in Berlin.<sup>350</sup> When Cremer took the stage, the report

---

<sup>347</sup> Ibid. “Die Kritik am Verhalten des Genossen Heisig richtete sich auch gegen subjektivistische Entstellungen der Beschlüsse der Partei bei der Führung der Hochschule... Eine gleiche prinzipienlose Verhaltensweise zeigte er in einer Reihe von anderen Diskussionen, die seine eigene künstlerische Tätigkeit und seine Lehrtätigkeit betrafen.”

<sup>348</sup> Ibid. “Auf Grund der gegen ihn vorgetragenen Argumente gab er seine Positionen scheinbar auf...”

<sup>349</sup> Ibid. “Nunmehr benutzte er den Kongress dazu, um seine alten, gegen die Partei gerichteten, Positionen in dogmatischer Weise erneut vorzutragen und bewies damit, dass die durch ihn jeweils geübte Selbstkritik im Grunde unehrlich und doppelzünglerisch war.”

<sup>350</sup> Ibid. “falsche Auffassungen...”

stated, these artists “smelled fresh air” and believed they could denounce the narrow view of art that dominated Leipzig.<sup>351</sup>

Interestingly, the “Leipzig problem” appears in another report written about the Congress. It, too, begins with Heisig, but then spends more than half of its 3.5 pages on two other artists from Leipzig who had spoken at the Congress as well as the artistic situation in Leipzig more generally. Harry Blume, it related, had stated that Heisig had not spoken for Leipzig and that the cynicism of his presentation was problematic. He then went on to warn, however, that modernism needs to be taken as seriously as naturalism, clearly weighing in against the “vulgarization” of the term Socialist Realism as represented by Leipzig artists like Weber and Witz.<sup>352</sup> Blume also stated that one needs to express criticism with the Party, not against it, a comment to which I will return later in this chapter in terms of Heisig’s self criticism. In a similar vein to Blume, Müller stated that every *Bezirk* has a certain “stable smell,” emphasizing the differences that existed between the various districts in the GDR.<sup>353</sup>

This second report also suggests an interest in coming to terms with the issues at hand rather than merely laying blame. In fact, the final page of the report becomes self reflective:

Leipzig has undergone a defeat at this congress. Why? ...it appears that there is a certain narrowness in artistic views in Leipzig and especially in the interpretation of the term Socialist Realism... We need to investigate whether a false attitude by cultural functionaries or maybe in the positioning of the artists themselves has led to “artistic narrowness,” and whether the accusation of narrowness even fits.<sup>354</sup>

---

<sup>351</sup> Ibid. “Als dann Genosse Cremer auftrat, witterten sie Morgenluft...”

<sup>352</sup> *Bericht vom Auftreten der Leipziger Genossen auf dem V. Kongress des Verbandes Bildender Künstler*, 4/2/64. SächsStAL: SED-L 362. “Modernismus,” “Naturalismus,” “Vulgarisierung.”

<sup>353</sup> Ibid. “...jeder Bezirk [hätte] gewissermassen einen ‘Stallgeruch.’”

<sup>354</sup> Ibid. “Leipzig hat auf dem Kongress eine Niederlage erlitten. Woran liegt das? Es gab verschiedene Auffassungen in der Delegation. Im Beitrag der Genossen Heisig und Blume und vielen Gesprächen kam zum Ausdruck, in Leipzig gäbe es eine gewisse Enge in der Kunstauffassung, besonders der Auslegung des Begriffes sozialistischer Realismus... Es gilt jetzt für uns, zu untersuchen, ob diese Auffassung einer falschen Einstellung der Kulturfunktionäre oder vielleicht auch die Haltung der Künstler selbst zu einer ‘künstlerischen Enge’ geführt hat, oder ob der Vorwurf der Enge überhaupt zutrifft.”

It then points out that according to the views of Socialist Realism expressed by Grundig, Raum, Sitte, and others, which are more differentiated toward modern art, Comrades Heisig, Blume, and Müller are right in their assertion that Leipzig is “narrow.” “We need to seek out truly loyal artists to represent the themes of our times. We need to consistently promote quality works. We must also conduct open conversations in artists’ studios.”<sup>355</sup> In Halle and Dresden, the report points out, there is a much better relationship between artists and the Party, the result of the building of studios in both cities, regular personal discussions with the artists, and their recognition. The final sentence of the report is significant: “In these questions there are a few things that need to be corrected in Leipzig.”<sup>356</sup>

What this report suggests is that Heisig was not alone in his views. Moreover, he had support among his colleagues in Leipzig. In fact, both reports indicate a broader problem in Leipzig that needed to be addressed, a fact that I will return to in the next chapter. Nonetheless, Heisig was not allowed off the hook. On Wednesday, June 10, 1964, just under three months after his speech at the Fifth Congress of the VBKD, he gave an official self criticism at the *Parteiaktivtagung* held in Berlin’s artists’ club, “Seagull.” The surviving transcript is a testament to Heisig’s rhetorical skills that helps to explain how he was able to survive the vagaries of artistic policy in the Ulbricht era despite being at the center of several controversies.

The general tone of the self criticism is apologetic and begins with acknowledgment of wrong doing. “Although [my speech at the Fifth Congress] was planned and given with the intention to help push things in the realm of art forward, the implementation was incorrect on

---

<sup>355</sup> Ibid. “Wir sollten uns wahrlich loyaler künstlerischem Suchen zur Gestaltung der Themen unserer Zeit (!) gegenüber verhalten. Wir sollten konsequenter qualitätsvolle Arbeiten fordern. Wir müssen aber auch mehr als bisher offene Gespräche in den Ateliers führen.”

<sup>356</sup> Ibid. “In diesen Fragen gibt es in der Stadt und im Bezirk Leipzig Einiges zu korrigieren.”



important points.”<sup>357</sup> He then goes on to refute the inadvertent distortions of Party views that appeared in his speech, distortions which he explains as stemming largely from his ignorance of the Party’s more recent resolutions on art. He takes back, for example, the accusation he had made at the Fifth Congress that the Party considers all late bourgeois art as rotting fruit, stating that “the Party has already corrected this oversimplification itself.”<sup>358</sup>

He also clarifies his position on modern art. “I did not mean the wholesale adoption of the apparatus and forms of western art, and I certainly did not mean artistic play separate from societal engagement. It is about . . . the legitimate keeping open of possibilities to get to know new methods of expression that can be used for Socialist Realism.”<sup>359</sup> As he explains it, the form of art is “not decisive for its stimulation.”<sup>360</sup> He also clarifies his view on the artists’ role in society, stating that he had not been calling for “a maximum of artistic freedom in the sense of an artist being responsible to only himself,” but rather for “a higher measure of responsibility.”<sup>361</sup>

The second major “mistake” he admits to having made in the speech is viewing individual occurrences of artistic dogmatism as indicative of East German artistic policy as a whole. Distancing himself through the use of the third person, he clarifies that “because the author was not well enough aware of Party resolutions, he didn’t realize that appearances of

---

<sup>357</sup> Gillen, 435. “Obwohl es mit der Absicht, die Dinge im Bereich der Kunst voranzutreiben zu helfen, konzipiert und vorgetragen war, waren die Ausführungen in wichtigen Punkten unrichtig.” A written copy of Heisig’s self criticism, taken from an audio recording of the event, can be found in the AdK Archiv: VBKD 70.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid. “Unrichtig war z.B. die Bemerkung, dass die Partei die Kunst des Spätbürgertums pauschal als faulende Frucht bezeichnet. Die Partei hat diese Beurteilungssimplifizierung, die vor einigen Jahren eine Rolle spielte, selbst korrigiert.”

<sup>359</sup> Ibid., 436-7. “Hiermit war allerdings nichts die Übernahme der Apparaturen und des Formelwerks der westlichen Kunst gemeint, noch sollte einer von jedem gesellschaftlichen Engagement gelösten Kunstspielerei das Wort geredet werden. Das war niemals meine Position und ich habe dies oft genug bewiesen. Es ging daher auch nicht um ideologische Koexistenz, sondern um das legitimierte Offenhalten von Möglichkeiten, neue Ausdrucksträger kennenzulernen, um sie zum Nutzen des sozialistischen Realismus verwenden zu können.”

<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 437. “Es ist beweisbar, dass der Formcharakter eines Kunstwerkes noch nicht entscheidend für seinen Anregungsgehalt ist.”

<sup>361</sup> Ibid., 435-6. “...es dem Autor nicht um ein Höchstmass an sogenannter künstlerischer Freiheit ging; etwa im Sinne eines sich nur selbst verantwortlichen Künstlertyps. Es ging um ein höheres Mass an Verantwortung.”

dogmatism need to be localized rather than generalized.”<sup>362</sup> It is an error he does not repeat in the self criticism. Instead, he gives specific examples: He explains his continuing fear of artistic dogmatism by pointing to recent remarks by a worker at the Ministerium [für Kultur] who stated that in the future Hemingway and other western authors would no longer be published. He then points out the “differentiated view” of the Party and the fact that this person—like himself in his speech at the Congress—must not have been aware of recent changes in Party policy.<sup>363</sup>

Rather than disavow the core statements of his original speech as one might expect from an official self criticism, Heisig in fact subtly argued them anew.<sup>364</sup> This can perhaps best be seen in the example of the worker at the Ministerium above, as well as in his acknowledgement that “the Party has long since formulated a differentiated judgement of the art of the late bourgeoisie.”<sup>365</sup> To illustrate the latter, he points to the positive influence of various capitalist artists on Socialist Realism such as Picasso on Guttuso, Hemingway on Soviet authors, and the importance of Futurism and Ravel to the creation of various masterpieces of Socialist Realism. In doing so, Heisig subtly showed that he was in agreement with the Party (or they with him!), he had simply not realized it when he was giving his speech at the Congress. His error was thus not the way he viewed art, but rather his misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the Party’s views together with the polemical tone with which he delivered the speech, which set him in opposition to the Party. As he admits, even were his observations correct, the tone of his criticisms would have prevented their discussion. As such, Heisig’s self criticism seems to take Blume’s call to “work with the Party” to heart.

---

<sup>362</sup> Ibid., 436. “Da dem Autor die Auffassung der Partei nicht genügend bekannt war, verstand er es nicht, dogmatische Erscheinungen zu lokalisieren, sondern verallgemeinerte sie.”

<sup>363</sup> Ibid., 437. “differenzierte Beurteilung.”

<sup>364</sup> For a different interpretation on this point, see Gillen, 167.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid., 437. “...die Partei eine differenzierte Beurteilung der Kunst des Spätbürgertums längst formuliert hatte.”

A comparison with Raum's self criticism shows how careful Heisig was in his, and how contradictory art policies were at this point in time. Rather than emphasize what he did wrong at the Congress, Raum defended himself, calmly arguing his point in a self criticism that was approximately three times the length of Heisig's. He pointed out that people were well aware of his views on art before he was asked to prepare the Congress speech and that he had been given neither feedback on his ideas nor guidance on how to present them at the Congress despite having asked for it. Moreover, he had received applause, and the ideas he had expressed in it were, by and large, those now being officially promoted, as proven by recent issues of *Bildende Kunst*. He pointed out his committedness to the GDR and its art and the importance of discussing these issues in the open. In terms of things done wrong, he admitted to having formulated some things incorrectly. He also stated he should have discussed other problems that were more important rather than the ones he chose to focus on, and, most importantly, that he should have distanced himself from Fritz Cremer when the latter praised his speech but went on to say things with which Raum did not agree.<sup>366</sup> Throughout the self criticism he posed two rhetorical questions: how does one, as a member of the Party, handle oneself during a difference of opinions? And where do artists go from here?

Interrupted several times by a disapproving committee, Raum's self criticism was later summarized as follows: "Dr. Raum does not understand the essence of the criticism against him. He acknowledges that he must have done something wrong since he is being criticized for it but went on to explain at great length what he had meant and how it had been misunderstood."<sup>367</sup> It was decided that Raum needed to be dealt with further.

---

<sup>366</sup> Raum's second speech at the Congress, given on the second day, is missing from the VBKD folder at the AdK.

<sup>367</sup> *Information über die Parteiaktivtagung der bildenden Künstler zur Auswertung der 2. Bitterfelder Konferenz und des 5. Verbandskongresses am 10.6.1964 in Berlin*. Bundesarchiv-SAPMO: DY 30/IV A 2/ 2024/37, 66-8. "Im

In contrast, Heisig's self criticism was positively viewed as "the first step towards serious reflection."<sup>368</sup> It is unclear, however, whether he received a lesser penalty as a result. At the end of his self criticism, he stated that he considered the "strenge Rüge" (strong reprimand) decided upon during the investigation to be appropriate.<sup>369</sup> With the exception of one report in his Stasi file, however, there is no archival evidence to support he actually received this punishment.<sup>370</sup> Was it literally erased from the Party books five years later when it would have expired? And would such an erasure have extended to his personal file at the Leipzig Academy, which bears no mention of it? Or might his skillful self criticism have gotten him out of it? Or, perhaps Ulbricht's comment not to make a martyr of him?<sup>371</sup>

While it is unclear whether or not Heisig received a "strenge Rüge" at this point in time, it is clear that he did not lose his position as rector of the Leipzig Academy as a result. Archival evidence reveals that Heisig actually resigned the position several weeks before the Congress

---

Gegensatz dazu [i.e., to Heisig's self criticism] zeigte das Auftreten des Genossen Dr. Raum, dass er das Wesen der Kritik an ihm noch nicht begriffen hat. Er erklärte zwar, dass er wohl etwas falsch gemacht habe, wenn er jetzt vor allen dafür kritisiert werde, versuchte dann jedoch des langen und des Breiten zu erläutern, was er gemeint habe und wie falsch es verstanden worden sei."

<sup>368</sup> Ibid. "Man muss die Kritik des Genossen Heisig als einen ersten Schritt ernsthaften Nachdenkens werten."

<sup>369</sup> There were three types of penalty: Reprimand, Strong Reprimand, and Exclusion. *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschland*. undated. 30 October 2005 <<http://www.netzwelt.de/lexikon/SED.html>>.

<sup>370</sup> I have found only one archival document that suggests Heisig got a "strenge Rüge." It is a handwritten report for the Stasi by Bertallo from 1974. According to Gillen, Bertallo was the Leipzig artist Oskar Erich Stephen. Gillen, 145. Bertallo states: "Von 1964-69 würden Heisig keine... Funktionen übertragen, eine 1964 [auch?] gesprochene Parteistrafe 'strenge Rüge' würde 1969 gelöscht!" BStU Leipzig: Bernhard Heisig 000071. One needs to be careful with Stasi reports, however, as they are frequently rife with errors. These are private reports based on the personal understanding (and feelings) of the writer. More reliable sources such as Heisig's personal file at the HGB contain no mention of this punishment. This absence is even more remarkable in light of a comment by the East German art historian Wolfgang Hütt: "[such a] punishment was not just entered into the Party files... 'it accompanied my career, was part of my personal file at the university.'" Gillen, 168. Nonetheless, current scholarship assumes Heisig received the "strenge Rüge." See Karl-Siegbert Rehberg, "Expressivität zwischen Machtkalkül und produktiver Verunsicherung. Bernhard Heisig als 'Motor' und Integrationsfigur der Leipziger Malerei," in Eckhart Gillen, ed., *Bernhard Heisig, Die Wut der Bilder* (Köln: Dumont, 2005) 294, and Gillen, 168-9.

<sup>371</sup> According to Heisig in an interview with Gillen on October 15, 2000, Ulbricht made this pronouncement during the second conference of the Bitterfeld Way when he "caught wind of" the investigations taking place in the wake of the Fifth VBKD Congress. Heisig states that "suddenly the situation changed literally over night. Everyone was nice." Gillen, 169. The Bitterfeld Way conference took place on April 24-25, 1964.

took place.<sup>372</sup> In fact, he resigned before he was even asked to give a speech at the Congress.<sup>373</sup> Perhaps this resignation is what the SED report was referring to when it stated, “he apparently gave up his position” in light of the criticism he received for the introduction he had written for the *Festschrift* for the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Leipzig Academy. If so, it would appear that Heisig had had enough of the political struggle and wanted, as he stated it in his resignation letter, “more time to spend on my work as a painter and graphic artist.”<sup>374</sup> The unfortunate timing of the changeover in power—just a week after the Congress—has led many people to assume it was the punitive result of his speech.<sup>375</sup> Not surprisingly, this view has come to

---

<sup>372</sup> There are three archival documents dating to before the Congress that mention Heisig’s resignation or replacement. In a signed letter to the MfK, Heisig wrote, “Der Wunsch, mich als Maler und Grafiker wieder intensiv meiner Arbeit widmen zu können und mein angegriffener Gesundheitszustand zwingen mich, die vor etwa drei Jahren übernommene Funktion des Rektors der Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst Leipzig niederzulegen.” Letter from Heisig to Binder, February 19, 1964. HGB Archive. When asked about this letter on January 24, 2005, Heisig and his wife told Gillen they did not remember it and suggested it was falsely dated. *WdB*, 318, 328. Archival evidence, however, confirms the date. In a second letter, signed and sent to the MfK several weeks later, Heisig referred to his resignation letter by date and recommended G.K. Müller as his replacement. Letter from Heisig to Binder, March 9, 1964. HGB Archive. A third letter confirms Müller as Heisig’s replacement. Letter from Thielemann to Binder, March 12, 1964. HGB Archive.

<sup>373</sup> Heisig—along with twelve others—was asked to prepare a speech for the Fifth Congress on February 24, 1964, thus five days after the date on his resignation letter. *Sekretariatssitzung des VBK-L*. AdK Archiv: VBKD 58. On March 11<sup>th</sup>, he was assigned a specific topic, “Ideas about Realism.” *5. erweiterte Bezirksvorstandssitzung des VBK-L*. AdK Archiv: VBKD 58.

<sup>374</sup> Letter from Heisig to Binder, February 19, 1964. HGB Archive. The idea that Heisig may have wanted more time for his work is supported by Willi Sitte, who stated in his 2005 autobiography, “Heisig wollte sich großen Wandbildaufträgen widmen, die sich freiberuflich besser bewältigen ließen.” Gisela Schirmer, *Willi Sitte: Farben und Folgen, Eine Autobiographie mit Skizzen und Zeichnungen des Künstlers* (Leipzig: Faber & Faber, 2003) 156. Indeed, Heisig created at least four murals in the year following his resignation as rector of the Leipzig Academy, more than at any other point in his career. Archival evidence also supports the fact that there was little time for one’s own art when working as a rector. Meeting minutes from March 17, 1966 announce G. K. Müller’s desire to resign from this position—less than two years after assuming it—so he could have more time for his art. In the discussion that followed, it was acknowledged that the seeming incommensurability between being both a rector and a practicing artist was a problem that needed to be solved since frequent turnover did not look good. *Parteileitungssitzung 17.3.1966*, HGB Archive. Further evidence that Heisig was overworked as rector can be found in a document titled, *Kommunique zur 21. Sekretariatssitzung des VBK-L am 14. Mai 1962*, which announces it would recommend that “Kollegen Prof. Heisig wegen arbeitsüberlastung als Bezirksmitglied zu entbinden...” HGB Archive. See also *Protokoll der Parteilg.sitzung vom 11.5.62*. HGB Archive.

<sup>375</sup> Even in the GDR, some thought the two events were related. In a Stasi report written a decade later, “Horst” wrote that Heisig had “positioned [himself] over the cultural politics of our country... That was presumably the reason for his resignation from the teaching staff of the Hochschule.” Horst, “Heisig, Bernhard,” 23 October 1974. BStU Leipzig: 000065. [“über die Kulturpolitik unseres Staates aufgestellt... Das war wohl mit der Grund seines Rucktritts aus dem Lehrkörper der Hochschule.”] Use of the word “wohl” shows that the author assumes—but is not positive that—the two events are related. A second document states, “Comrade Prof. Heisig read a long self critical

prominence in the wake of reunification, where it has been used to overemphasize the problematic nature of Heisig's relationship with East German cultural functionaries.<sup>376</sup>

Whether he received a "strengere Rüge" for his speech at the Fifth Congress or not, it nonetheless marks a serious break with the Party, at least from their perspective, and one that

---

statement in which he stated that his discharge as rector of the Hochschule... and the Party punishment given him were just." *Information über die Parteiaktivtaug der bildenden Künstler zur Auswertung der 2. Bitterfelder Konferenz und des 5. Verbandkongresses am 10.6.1964 in Berlin*. Bundesarchiv-SAPMO: DY 30/IV A 2/2024/37. ["Genosse Prof. Heisig verlas eine längere selbstkritische Stellungnahme, in der er erklärte, dass er seine Absetzung als Rektor der Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst und die ihm erteilte Parteistrafe für richtig halte."] A comparison with his speech, however, shows that Heisig did not mention his position at the Leipzig Academy, just the "strengere Rüge." *Excerpt from a Tape Recording from the Party Aktivtagung on Questions About the Visual Arts on June 10, 1964 in the 'Seagull,'* June 13, 1964. AdK Archiv: VBKD 70. See also the 1974 Stasi report from Bertallo mentioned in an earlier footnote.

<sup>376</sup> The idea that Heisig lost his position as rector of the Leipzig Academy because of this speech has become a defining moment in his biography since reunification. It first emerged in Heisig scholarship in the catalog for the 1989 Retrospektive exhibition, which states, "Because of this speech, Heisig was vehemently attacked and dismissed [*abgesetzt*] in its wake as rector of the Leipzig Academy 'because of not fulfilling his teaching duties toward students,' the official reason. He can, however, continue his teaching." *Retrospektive*, 100. Where this "official reason" comes from is not stated. Was it from an archival source, word of mouth, or simply the usual explanation given for such things? The author, Freya Müllhaupt, no longer remembers. *Email from Freya Müllhaupt*, May 3, 2007. The idea that Heisig was stripped of his position as rector of the Leipzig Academy is repeated in all major Heisig catalogs since then, including *Wut der Bilder*. The catalog for the latter acknowledges the existence of the resignation letter, which I uncovered in the HGB Archive in September 2004, but it is downplayed or dismissed throughout. In the biography, for example, Heisig is cited as saying he did not remember such a letter; the suggestion is that it was improperly dated. ("Heisig und Gudrun Brüne können sich an ein Rücktrittsgesuch zu diesem Zeitpunkt nicht erinnern und vermuten eine Fehldatierung." *WdB*, 318). No mention is made of the second letter from Heisig located in the same archival file or of the one from Thielemann that confirm the original letter's date (see footnote 372). Instead, the implication throughout continues to be that Heisig was stripped of his position. In Rehberg's article, a bolded headline announces, "Heisigs Fall als Rektor" (*Heisigs Sturz als Rektor*). *WdB*, 293. Acknowledging the new-found letter, he states that if the controversial speech was not the direct cause of Heisig's dismissal, it must have been something similar. ["Zwar mögen die Konfliktlinien dieselben gewesen sein, aber der Auslöser für den erzwungenen Amtsverzicht wäre doch ein anderer... (WdB, 294)] Similarly, Gillen refers to Heisig as being "let go" [*Entlassung*], while Kaiser refers to his "loss" [*Verlust*] of the position. *WdB*, 241, 274. Despite acknowledging the letter, the catalog as a whole thus suggests that Heisig lost his position rather than voluntarily gave it up. Moreover, in the official information given to journalists, it states, "Dismissal as rector in 1964 due to 'not fulfilling his teaching duties toward students,' the official reason, in truth, however, because of his concept of art, which was not to be reconciled with Socialist Realism." *Bernhard Heisig Biografie*, part of the official press package for the K20 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen. ["Absetzung als Rektor 1964 wegen 'Nichterfüllung der erzieherischen Aufgaben gegenüber Studenten,' wie es offiziell hieß, in Wahrheit aber wegen seiner mit dem sozialistischen Realismus nicht zu vereinbarnten Kunstauffassung."] Significantly, the press packet given out by the Leipzig Museum did not include this information. This suggests either a predisposition by the people responsible for the press packet in Nordrhein-Westfalen—a bastion of Western art—to view Heisig as an artist at odds with East Germany, or a desire to present him as such in an effort to gain him an audience there.

could have resulted in his being thrown out of the SED or worse.<sup>377</sup> The threat was therefore real, as were the attacks on his character that took place during the five-week investigation that followed. And yet as Heisig stated, he had said nothing new in this speech and had even checked with someone the day before he gave it to make sure it was an acceptable topic.

Perhaps the unexpectedly severe response explains the thematic change in the Christmas Dream series of paintings—discussed in the previous chapter—from a bespectacled man looking at the toy tank on his stomach in 1960/62 to a man who stares out of the picture frame in shock in 1964. Memories of the Second World War—perhaps awoken from similar feelings of helplessness in the wake of the congress—swirl around the figure as he looks at something beyond them, perhaps at the present investigation, the judgement that awaits, or the crumbling of a utopic ideal. Like the time he was stranded in the valley of the Ardennes without fuel and in clear sight of American bomber planes, there was little he could do during the investigation except hope for the best. The unpredictable and sometimes arbitrary nature of East German rulings left his fate in the air. While he had spoken for the betterment of the GDR, such sentiments had not helped Harich, Janka, or many other committed Communists who had been imprisoned for expressing constructive criticism.<sup>378</sup>

Similarly, the turn from waiting to a scene of bloodshed in the Paris Commune series can be seen as a response to the severity of the reaction to his speech at the Congress, as can the change in artistic style it embodies. As he explained it in his article from 1956, the form of a work of art is tied to its content, or meaning, which is the making personal of the subject matter.

---

<sup>377</sup> In 1963, the artists Roger Loewig (Berlin) and Siegfried Pohl (Leipzig) were sentenced to jail for “agitation against the State” for artwork they had shown in private exhibitions. Lothar Lang, *Malerei und Graphik in Ostdeutschland* (Leipzig: Faber & Faber, 2002) 55.

<sup>378</sup> The political climate of the mid 1950s was more severe than the mid 1960s, which presumably explains why the punishments were harsher for Harich and Janka.

In the Paris Commune, his attention turned from waiting in 1961 to conflict in 1964, thus the subject matter can be seen as an allegory for his own experiences in the wake of the Fifth Congress. The late German Impressionist brushstroke and the collapsing of rational space better capture the frustration and chaos of that moment in time, and perhaps also represent a realization on Heisig's part that the GDR was not the fair and rational society it purported to be.

Just as *The Paris Commune* can be seen as an allegory for his experiences in the GDR at this time, so too can *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier*. Significantly, it is the first painting in which Heisig made explicit references to the Nazi past. Perhaps this subject matter enabled him—ironically enough considering the current tendency to read all of Heisig's work in terms of the Second World War—to confront his confusion and shock about the present in the guise of the past. In the wake of his speech at the Fifth Congress, he certainly would not have addressed any negative feelings or doubts about the present in a direct fashion, nor would he ever do so in his art.

### 3.5 CONCLUSION

The change in Heisig's painting style took place during the volatile years following Khrushchev's speech at the 22nd Party Conference of the Soviet Union in November 1961. This speech, the second advocating de-Stalinization, led to more thorough changes in the East German system than the first in 1956. The changes were helped by the existence of the Berlin Wall. Built in August 1961, the Wall helped to stabilize the GDR by taking away the immediate



threat of West Germany, which had been a beacon to discontented East German citizens.<sup>379</sup> The SED was thus able to turn its attention away from stemming the tide of “absconders” to making the GDR a more liveable place for its citizens, as can be seen in the New Economic System (NÖS) in 1963.

In art, these years mark the emergence of a younger, more experimental generation of artists onto the East German art scene. Committed to the GDR, these artists did not have the same emotional attachment to the Soviet Union as did their elders and were thus less willing to overlook the similarity between Soviet art and that of the Nazis. Encouraged by the cultural thaw of the mid 1950s, many did not stop experimenting with modern artistic styles during the subsequent freeze, although it was not until Cremer began rallying for them in the early 1960s that their work began to be publicly exhibited.

The first half of the 1960s was also marked by a certain fickleness in artistic policy. In Leipzig, Heinrich Witz was a shooting star at the turn of the decade who then disappeared virtually overnight. His fate may have been a lesson to other artists in Leipzig that in the end only good art—one based on artistic rather than political standards of quality—will triumph; clearly giving political functionaries what they wanted was not enough.<sup>380</sup> Significantly, by the

---

<sup>379</sup> In sharp contrast to the West, many intellectuals in East Germany—including Heisig—saw the Berlin Wall as a necessary evil. “Der Mauerbau,” in *Mittenzwei*, 169-172. Interview with Heisig, Summer 2005.

<sup>380</sup> A report summarizing a discussion among artists that took place in June 1965 emphasizes this reading: “Ersthafte Bemerkungen gibt es in der Richtung... dass die VI. Bezirkskunstausstellung überwertet wurde und dass mit dem Nichtannehmen einiger Bilder für die Republikausstellung sehr plötzlich deutlich geworden wäre, dass die Malweise, z.B. von Heinrich Witz, Claus Weber und anderer nicht vollinhaltlich der Forderung nach sozialistisch-realistischer Kunst in hoher künstlerischer Qualität gerecht wird und ein Suchen nach Vertiefung des sozialistischen Ideengehalts und höherer künstlerischer Umsetzung für alle Künstler auf der Tagesordnung steht.” Barth, *Information über die Lage im Bereich der bildenden Kunst und über Argumente, die in Gesprächen auftreten, in Vorbereitung auf das Gespräch des Sekretariats mit bildenden Künstlern*, 18 Juni 1965. SächsStAL: SED-L 362. Meeting minutes from January 18, 1962 suggest that there was discontent with the Sixth Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig even before the exhibition closed. At this meeting, Weber’s work was dismissed as a possible standard. As Heisig stated it, “Es liegt nicht am Stoff, ob ein Bild gut oder schlecht wird. Das aufgreifen eines Stoffes kann also nicht als Kriterium für ein Kunstwerk gelten.” He later added that “Kriterium für jeder Künstler ist die Kraft eine Fabel zu erfinden. Durch Kraftvolle Fabel wird Stoff zum Thema.” *Protokoll Pareiteiljahr der Dozentengruppe*

time of the 7 BKA-L in 1965, many artists in Leipzig had begun experimenting with more formally innovative styles, thus paralleling on a larger scale the change in Heisig's work.

The inconsistencies of these years can also be seen in Cremer's exhibitions in Berlin and the fact that he could go from creating a small-scale controversial exhibition at the *Galerie Konkret* to creating a much larger one at the *Akademie der Künste*. This is presumably what some artists in Leipzig were referring to when they complained that art policy in Leipzig was much stricter than in Berlin. The inconsistencies can also be seen in the fact that despite Cremer's vocal stance on modern art, he was called upon to give a speech at the Fifth Congress; to a lesser extent, this can also be seen in Heisig's case. Moreover, the speeches given at the Fifth Congress advocated an openness to modern art that can be found in *Our Contemporaries (Unsere Zeitgenosse)*, a large-scale and highly praised official exhibition held only a few months after the Congress.<sup>381</sup>

In the wake of Khrushchev's speech, artists' discontent with the Soviet model, which many saw as too similar to Nazi art, became more vocal. Presumably such discussions affected Heisig, who until that time had been committed to a simple realism in his art, albeit open to artistic experimentation and western artistic styles in theory. This latter openness can be seen not only in the articles he wrote, but also in the fact that he founded a painting class at the Leipzig Academy shortly after becoming its rector in 1961. Titled "color design" to avoid any problems that might result from Leipzig's designation as a center for graphic arts, this class was a creative exchange between Heisig—who was still predominantly a graphic artist at the time—and several

---

*am 18.1.1962*. Thank you to Rita Jorek for providing me with this document. Apparently a meeting took place later that year in which several artists of the younger generation including Tübke and Heisig tried to convince Witz to not to exhibit his painting *Labutin* at the DKA because they felt it needed more work. Witz refused. Heinrich Witz, *Unofficial Meeting Minutes*, July 11, 1962. HGB Archive: Witz Nachlass.

<sup>381</sup> This exhibition opened on October 3, 1964 at the National Galerie in East Berlin.

younger and more experimental artists, most notably Hartwig Ebersbach.<sup>382</sup> Two of these younger artists—Ebersbach and Heinz Zander—showed “modern” paintings along with Heisig, Tübke, and Mattheuer at the controversial Seventh Regional Art Exhibition in 1965 that will be discussed in the next chapter. One can presume these artists fed off each other thus contributing to the seemingly sudden emergence of a modern style in Leipzig.<sup>383</sup>

This class, together with discussions about art then taking place, the fall of Witz from favor, and the fruition of the Bitterfeld Way—which, after five years had begun to change audiences’ views on art—presumably contributed to the change in artistic style shown in Heisig's paintings beginning in 1964. It is presumably also in these years that Heisig stumbled upon the print by Picasso that opened his eyes to the value of modern art for his own work while working on a series of murals for the Hotel Germany; these murals must also be seen as a contributing factor to the change in his style.<sup>384</sup> But the final straw—or, perhaps, the catalyst—seems to have been the Congress itself. At the center of a five week investigation and threatened with expulsion from the Party, Heisig presumably suffered emotional duress that found an outlet in his paintings. The subject matter (*Stoff*) was made personal (*Inhalt*), and the new emphasis on conflict rather than waiting emerged in a new, more modern form. In the end, however, whatever the reasons for the change in Heisig's painting style may be, a close investigation of his oeuvre

---

<sup>382</sup> “Damals, als ich in den Sechzigern zum Rektor gewählt wurde, durfte die Leipziger Kunsthochschule keine Malklassen unterhalten. Wer Malerei studieren wollte, sollte das—nach Meinung des Ministeriums—in Dresden tun. Über den Trick der sogenannten farbigen Gestaltung habe ich dann, ehe man das in Berlin bemerkte, eine Malklasse eingeführt.” Conversation with Bernhard Heisig in *Revolution im geschlossenen Raum. Die andere Kultur in Leipzig, 1970-1990* (Leipzig: Faber & Faber, 2002) 48.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid. “In dieser Zeit kam die erste Gruppe von Studenten der Malerei, zu der z.B. auch Ebersbach gehörte. Ebersbach war einer der Begabtesten in dieser Zeit. Damals malte er eine vielfigurige grosse Kreuzigung – ein wirklich gutes Bild und ein politisches Reizthema. Das hatte sich bald herumgesprochen, und Studenten, die das unbedingt sehen wollten, versuchten eines Sonntags sogar, die Tür zum Atelier aufzubrechen.”

<sup>384</sup> Significantly, Heisig created several paintings in 1965 titled, *Picassoides* (WV36-39). These show a similar use of space as Heisig’s Hotel Germany murals and his Paris Commune paintings from these years.

and the context in which it was created reveals an artist deeply embroiled in the art and issues of his time.

#### 4.0 ART IN THE CRUCIBLE: LEIPZIG, 1965

In the year following his controversial speech at the Fifth Congress, Heisig was at the center of two more debates. Both of them focused on his art, which was now clearly looking to the “formalist” art of the West. The first debate began in early 1965 and centered on a series of murals he created for the Hotel Germany in Leipzig and, especially, on a mural titled *Schwedt*. The second focused on his painting *The Paris Commune*—the first in the series to focus on the battle itself—which was shown at the Seventh Regional Art Exhibition that fall.

While the controversy around *The Paris Commune* is well known in current scholarship, the one around *Schwedt* is not. In fact, Heisig’s architectural art as a whole is mentioned only in passing, if at all, despite its having played a prominent role in his work during the Ulbricht era. In a CV dating from April 6, 1972, for example, Heisig listed his main areas of artistic production as “painting, graphics, illustration and architectural art” and mentioned eleven murals for the latter, including his work for the Hotel Germany.<sup>385</sup> Indeed, Willi Sitte, a good friend of Heisig’s at the time, believes today that Heisig left his position as rector of the Leipzig Academy in 1964 because of an interest in mural work: “Heisig wanted to dedicate himself to commissions

---

<sup>385</sup> Heisig, *Lebenslauf*, April 6, 1972. AdK Archiv: Kober Nachlass 14/3. “Meine Arbeitsgebiete liegen im Bereich der Malerei, der Grafik, der Illustration und der baugebundene Kunst.” These four areas are also listed as his main areas (*Hauptgebiete*) in a small “catalog” for an exhibition of his lithographs held in Erfurt in 1966.

for large murals... They were not only more lucrative [than working as a rector], they also brought him interesting artistic experiences with plaster reliefs and sgraffito...”<sup>386</sup>

In this chapter, I will look at both of the controversies surrounding Heisig’s art in 1965. In particular, I will focus on the works themselves, the terms of the debates, and how they fit within the larger cultural context of the day, particularly in Leipzig. As will be shown, these debates are characteristic of a larger discussion taking place in East Germany at the time—as developed in the previous chapter—about what art should be. These discussions frequently placed artists and theoreticians at loggerheads with political and cultural functionaries, especially in Leipzig, where an orthodox realism had dominated art since the early 1950s. Heisig’s murals and *The Paris Commune* mark a decided turn away from this kind of realism that was both new to his art and characteristic of a change that took place in Leipzig more generally in these years. By focusing on the terms of these debates, this chapter will also offer a glimpse into the complicated inner workings of East Germany’s cultural bureaucracy and the importance of art in the GDR.

---

<sup>386</sup> Gisela Schirmer, *Willi Sitte: Farben und Folgen, eine Autobiographie mit Skizzen und Zeichnungen des Künstlers* (Leipzig: Faber & Faber, 2003) 156-7. “Heisig wollte sich grossen Wandbildaufträgen widmen, die sich freiberuflich besser bewältigen liessen. Sie waren nicht nur lukrativer, sondern brachten ihm auch interessante künstlerische Erfahrungen mit Gipsintarsie und Sgraffito für die Wandgestaltung ein.” One must, of course, be careful with such sources, since memory is prone to change with time. Sitte, for example, mistakenly states that Albert Kapr replaced Heisig as rector when, in fact, it was Gerhard Kurt Müller. Kapr became rector a couple years later on September 1, 1966. *Parteileitungssitzung am 28.3.1966*. HGB Archive. Nonetheless, Heisig created at least four murals in the year after he resigned as rector, which is more than at any other time in his career. He was also very well paid for them. Compare monetary amounts in Gabriele Kihago, “Probleme der baugebundenen Kunst – nachgewiesen an den neuen Hotels in Leipzig,” Thesis, Pädagogischen Institut “Dr. Theodor Neubauer” (Erfurt), 1968, 22, with *Ermittlungsbericht*, 10/22/74. BStU Leipzig: Bernhard Heisig 000043.

## 4.1 THE HOTEL GERMANY MURALS

Karl-Marx-Platz, better known before and after the GDR as Augustusplatz, was one of the most important city squares in Leipzig. Almost completely destroyed in World War II, it was rebuilt gradually over the course of four decades beginning in the latter half of the 1950s.<sup>387</sup> Hotel Germany was the third building constructed in this historic square. Located on the eastern edge near the recently completed Opera House and Post Office, it was built in just seventeen months between 1963 and 1965, “the largest project in the hotel building program for the 800-year anniversary of Leipzig, the metropolis of trade fairs (*Messemetropole*).”<sup>388</sup> Like the Post Office next to it, Hotel Germany had seven floors and a modern construction, including a metal-and-glass façade.

A crucial element of the hotel, considered a “Travel Hotel of the First Order” and thus a showcase for East German design and thinking, was its artistic decoration.<sup>389</sup> With the exception of Fritz Kühn, a sculptor from Berlin, all of the artists were from Leipzig. Among the many works of art commissioned were seven large murals for the *Bettenhaus*, or building with beds. These murals were located on the wall just to the right of—and perpendicular to—the elevator on each floor and were created by four artists of the younger generation who had emerged onto the

---

<sup>387</sup> Only two buildings were left standing as of May 1945, one of which—the university church—was later destroyed to make room for a new building. Originally the plan was to rebuild the square much the way it had been before the war. The change to creating an entirely new square—albeit sharing the same basic size and shape of the old—did not take place until the early 1950s, at which point Leipzig had been designated one of the GDR’s most important cities for rebuilding. Karl Marx Platz was designated a square for Socialist demonstrations. Thomas Topfstedt and Pit Lehmann, eds. *Der Leipziger Augustusplatz, Funktionen und Gestaltwandel eines Großstadtplatzes* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 1994). Significantly, Heisig was actively involved with the decoration of nearly every building in the square, including the Opera House, the Gewandhaus, and Karl Marx University. Today only his work for the Hotel Germany can be seen in this square.

<sup>388</sup> Gerhard Winkler, *Leipzig Hotel Deutschland* (Leipzig: Seemann, 1967), unpaginated. “Zu diesem Zeitpunkt war es innerhalb der Neugestaltung des Stadtzentrums das größte Objekte des Hotelbauprogrammes in der 800jährigen Messemetropole Leipzig.”

<sup>389</sup> Wolfgang Scheibe, “Hotel ‘Deutschland.’” In: *Deutsche Architektur*, H. 8, 14 Jg. (August 1965) 454-463, here: 454. “Gefordert war ein Reisehotel 1. Ordnung mit einem Komfort nach internationalen Standard.”

East German art scene only a few years earlier: Wolfgang and Ursula Mattheuer, Bernhard Heisig, and Hans Engels.<sup>390</sup> In accordance with the national theme of the hotel, each work showed an important East German city: Weimar, Leipzig, Eisenach, Schwedt, Berlin, Rostock, and Halle. The last four were created by Heisig, although *Berlin* was created at a slightly later date and thus falls outside the confines of this chapter.

In *Rostock* (WV32), Heisig focused on the city's importance as the GDR's principal seaport. Boats and fish are prevalent throughout the swirling, abstracted image, which seems to draw upon the School of Paris. Toward the center of the work is a red building with a gabled roof and gothic arches, which refers to the University of Rostock, one of the oldest universities in northern Europe. Below it stands a gray stone and limbless tree, beneath which the name of the city appears. These images divide the composition roughly in half. The left-hand side focuses on a more historic Rostock. There is a fisherman in a yellow slicker and black hat standing next to a sword fish and small sailing boat. Next to him on the left-most edge of the painting, a large ship—a galleon—sails toward a harbor in the distance. The right-hand side of the image refers to modern-day Rostock as a center for industry. Birds soar above modern industrial boats, behind which iron towers appear. In the foreground a figure in a welder's mask bends down in front of a pile of pipes, presumably working on a ship.

*Halle* (WV31) shows a similar understanding of the city's value to East Germany, but is divided, compositionally, into three sections much like a triptych. The central image focuses on the city marketplace and its sculpture of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Baroque composer, Georg Friderich Händel. Nearby the city's name is clearly visible. The image on the left focuses on a worker standing next to a large metal beam in front of a cityscape, a reference to the construction taking

---

<sup>390</sup> Of the seven original murals, six can still be seen in what is now the Radisson SAS Hotel Leipzig.



place in Halle-Neustadt in the mid 1960s. The image on the right shows four figures stacked on top of each other. The two at the bottom have rifles in hand, while the one at the top blows into a trumpet. This is a scene from the story of “the little trumpeter,” a reference to the founding of the GDR’s youth organization, the Freie Deutsche Jugend (FDJ), in Halle.

*Schwedt* (WV33), which polarized opinion in the debate that followed, similarly focuses on the city’s importance to East Germany, where it was a “symbol for the new, the forwards pushing GDR” because of its large plants for petroleum processing and for nitrogenous fertiliser.<sup>391</sup> Heisig refers to this in his mural through the incorporation of numerous chimneys and other factory buildings. The importance of the worker in this industrial landscape, however, is not lost. The right half of the picture—and with it the composition as a whole—is dominated by the face of a working woman. She holds the long handle of a tool in her fists, perhaps a sledgehammer, and looks out of the right-hand side of the image as if toward a goal. On a more literal level, she seems to be looking out a window of the hotel (fig. 4-1), a fact that subtly emphasizes the relationship between art and architecture desired by political functionaries at the time.<sup>392</sup> The worker appears earnest, strong and proud – a person with an important mission. The strong red, blue, yellow, and green tones and the artistic play of the abstracted forms conveys an optimistic feeling.

In both tone and style, these murals—optimistic, organic abstractions—are markedly different from Heisig’s oil paintings. These differences stem, in part, from the unique challenges of the medium itself. Sgraffito, the technique used for all three, is one that requires decided

---

<sup>391</sup> Marga Tschirmer, *Schwedt wird international*. In: *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, July 25, 1965.

<sup>392</sup> MfK, *Entwurf Verordnung über das Auftragswesen in der baugebundenen Kunst*, 6/1/65. AdK Archiv: VBKD 5613. “Beim Aufbau von Stadtzentren, neuen Wohnkomplexen sowie von Industriezentren, denen Gesellschaftsbauten angeschlossen sind, und bei Einzelbauvorhaben ist eine Synthese von Architektur und bildende Kunst als ein wichtiges Merkmal der sozialistische Nationalkultur anzustreben.” See also MfK Barthke, *Stellungnahme des ZV des VBKD zum Entwurf einer gesetzlichen Regelung des Auftragswesens in der baugebunden Kunst*, 9/20/65. AdK Archiv: VBKD 5613.

movements on the part of the artist, who actually carves into the wall while the various layers of plaster are still wet. Since each of the layers is a different color, the surface needs to be scratched or cut down to the level of the color desired. The artist therefore needs to have the image in mind before he starts as well as the order of the colors in the wall before him since cutting below the desired layer cannot be easily repaired. The illusionism and detail of an oil painting is simply not possible.

The difference in the style and tone of these murals can also be seen as a response to the dictates of the commission itself:

The designs on all of the floors must have a uniform character. Appropriate to the concept, the theme of the national landscape in combination with the progressive traditions of the past and present should be presented in a simple allegorical readability.... In order to achieve... [this] readability, [artists] should work [in a] linear-graphic [way] where possible. In this, the entire surface must give a sense of emotion.<sup>393</sup>

In comparison to Heisig's murals the other artists on the project created works that were much less colorful. In fact, theirs were largely black and white with color used only as an accent. Engels' *Weimar* (fig. 4-2) is the most linear of the murals, with the majority of the composition made from a simple black line. As such, white dominates the composition, which includes references to Cremer's Buchenwald Monument, the German National Theater, and a sculpture of Goethe and Schiller. Several large, abstracted blocks of yellow help break up the image and move the eye through the work. There is also a red triangle—symbolizing Communism—just to the right of center. Overall, the image is easy to read and light in tone.

---

<sup>393</sup> *Schreiben der Ständigen Kommission Kultur, Arbeitsgruppe Dokumentation, vom 23.5.1964, Vorschläge für die künstlerische Ausgestaltung des 'Hotel Deutschlands' entsprechend der Beratung am 22.5.64. SächsStAL: VBK-L 114. "Die Gestaltungsweise in allen Etagen muss einen einheitlichen Charakter tragen. Entsprechend der Grundkonzeption soll in einfacher sinnbildhafter Ablesbarkeit das Thema der nationalen Landschaft in Verbindung mit progressiven Traditionen der nationalen Geschichte der Vergangenheit und Gegenwart künstlerisch gestaltet werden.... Um die einfache sinnbildhafte Ablesbarkeit zu erreichen, sollte dabei nach Möglichkeit linear-graphisch gearbeitet werden. Emotional muss dabei die gesamte Fläche als gestaltet empfunden sein."*

Presumably Engels' second mural for the project, *Trier*, had a similar style. Although this second work plays a more prominent role in the debate that follows, an image does not seem to have survived. For reasons that will soon be revealed, the original was replaced by Heisig's *Berlin* sometime between 1965 and 1967.<sup>394</sup> Uniformly condemned as bad—both artistically and ideologically—*Trier* was the only one of the seven murals to be destroyed in the wake of the debate. Coincidentally, it was also the only West German city depicted, presumably chosen because it is the birthplace of Karl Marx and thus of Communism. As one of Germany's oldest cities, it may have been intended also as an acknowledgment that one day Germany would be united under Socialism.<sup>395</sup>

The Mattheuers' murals are, like Engels', largely black and white, albeit much darker in tone as a result of their greater emphasis on black. They also use less color and darker shades. In *Eisenach* (fig. 4-3), artistic inspiration is clearly taken from the woodcut medium. The faces of most of the figures, for example, are black, with the details excised in white. Color is limited to the center of the image, where dark shades of red and yellow appear in two German flags and the flames of a fire. Surprisingly, it was these works that received the most praise from political functionaries in the debate that followed.

In each of these murals, the dictate of the commission to create linear-graphic work was heeded, although not all of them are simple and easy to understand. Indeed, Heisig's are the most difficult to read because of his playful use of form. Yet the swirling, organic shapes, together with their bright colors, conveys a sense of joyous optimism lacking in the other artists'

---

<sup>394</sup> *Berlin* appears in Winkler's 1967 booklet, *Leipzig Hotel Deutschland*.

<sup>395</sup> A rival to Alexandria and Rome in the ancient world and capital of Gaul in the Middle Ages, the city of Trier was founded in 16 BCE by Augustus Caesar, although it was conquered forty-two years earlier by his grand-uncle Julius Caesar. Excavations and legends suggest it may have been established as an Assyrian settlement 2,000 years before that. John Dornberg, "Trier – Germany's Oldest and 'Most Splendid City,'" *German Life* 4/5 (1997), 1 April 2007 <[http://www.germanlife.com/Archives/1997/9704\\_01.html](http://www.germanlife.com/Archives/1997/9704_01.html)>.

murals.<sup>396</sup> It is these two aspects of Heisig’s work—their semi-abstract style and optimistic tone—that polarized opinion in 1965, placing them, and especially *Schwedt*, at the center of a heated debate about what is appropriate in terms of style for architectural art. It was a debate triggered, apparently, by the comments of just one man.

On February 11, 1965, less than two weeks after all but one of the murals in the *Bettenhaus* were finished, they were lambasted as a whole in a five-page report written by Alfred Kurella. Head of the Cultural Commission of the Politbüro until 1963 and Vice President of the Academy of Arts in Berlin, Kurella was a powerful figure in East German cultural politics.<sup>397</sup> He was also personally invested in the art scene in Leipzig and had played an instrumental role in bringing national attention to works by the younger generation of its artists—most notably Werner Tübke—in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Presumably this investment—and, more specifically, a sense of betrayal of his support—informs the animosity in his report about the murals.

In *Thoughts about the Murals in the “Hotel Germany” (Leipzig)*, Kurella began by stating that these murals

depict a true invasion of modernism and the theory of “realism without shores” into our artistic life...<sup>398</sup> How could the creation of these images take place without the commission giver and the governmental control noticing and preventing [their] unbearable deviation from the art view and politics of the Party and government?<sup>399</sup>

---

<sup>396</sup> Both Mäde and Meißner commented at the time on the sense of optimism these works convey.

<sup>397</sup> Kurella lost his position as head of the Cultural Commission in 1963, at which point he gave an official self criticism. The significant stir his criticism of the Hotel Germany murals caused, however, suggest that he was still a powerful figure in 1965. At this point in time, he was Vice President of the Academy of Arts in Berlin.

<sup>398</sup> “Realism without Shores” is a reference to a book of the same name by Roger Garaudy. It promoted a broader view of realism and was dismissed by political functionaries as revisionism.

<sup>399</sup> Alfred Kurella, *Gedanken über die Wandbilder im “Hotel Deutschland” (Leipzig)*, 2/11/65, SächsStAL: SED-L 362. “Die Wandbilder im ‘Hotel Deutschland’ in Leipzig stellen einen ernsten Einbruch des Modernismus und der Theorie des ‘Realismus ohne Ufer’ in unserer Kunstleben dar. ... Wie konnte es kommen, dass die Herstellung dieser Bilder erfolgte, ohne dass die Auftraggeber und die staatlichen Kontrollinstanzen die untragbare Abweichung von der Kunstauffassung und –Politik von Partei und Regierung bemerkten und verhinderten?”

He then demanded written explanations from those responsible for overseeing these commissions and called for meetings with the artists involved as well as the Artists' Association at the regional (VBK-L) and national (VBKD) levels.

As he saw it, murals throughout history—until the “period of decadence,” in any case—were created in the same style as the paintings of the day.<sup>400</sup> The murals in the Hotel Germany were thus an attempt, in his opinion, “to smuggle in the whole nonsense of formalist, anti realist, abstract, symbolic ‘art’ under the watchword of ‘architectural art’ [*Kunst am Bau*].”<sup>401</sup>

In terms of the murals themselves, he found the two by the Mattheuers to be “relatively acceptable,” although “unnecessary formalist simplification” had led them to be ultimately “unsatisfactory.”<sup>402</sup> Engels' work, on the other hand, he found “fully unqualified.”<sup>403</sup> The “primitive means” of the work was, in his opinion, “below the level of childrens' drawings.”<sup>404</sup> A particular source of ire was the image of Marx and Engels in *Trier*, which he saw as a display of “impudent cheek.”<sup>405</sup> He recommended it be covered up for the duration of the international trade fair that was taking place that spring, after which its fate would be decided.

Kurella's strongest criticisms, however, were aimed at Heisig's work and take up an entire page of his report. He found Heisig's murals as a whole to be

---

<sup>400</sup> Ibid. “bis zur Periode der Dekadenz.”

<sup>401</sup> Ibid. “...einige Künstler... versuchten, unter der Losung ‘Kunst am Bau’ den ganzen Unfug formalistischer, antirealistischer, abstrakter, symbolischer ‘Kunst’ bei uns einzuschmuggeln. Die hier vorliegende Werke machen ähnliche Versuche...”

<sup>402</sup> Ibid. “Relativ annehmbar sind die 2 Wandbilder von *Mattheuer*... Mattheuer verstärkt unnötig die formalistische Vereinfachung der Gegebenheiten der Wirklichkeit... unbefriedigend gelöst...”

<sup>403</sup> Ibid. “Völlig unqualifiziert”

<sup>404</sup> Ibid. “Hier wird mit bewusst primitivsten Mitteln gearbeitet, die noch unter dem Niveau von Kinderzeichnungen liegen...”

<sup>405</sup> Ibid. “unverschämte Zumutung”

the most serious demonstration against our view of art... Here is the principle of intentional *deformation, mutilation and making ugly of reality* and the use and frequent mixing together of single *deformed fragments*... carried too far. Only with effort can one recognize, in principle, the arrangement of these fragments of pure *formal effects* or *decorative impressions* (“rhythmically” distributed flecks of formless color detached from objects). In... “Schwedt,” this anti-realism brings to expression (perhaps unbeknownst to the artist) a *hostility toward technology*. The *rhythmic* and *harmonious image* of the system of pipes, capacitors, [and] towers that portay... a modern petroleum-chemical factory, is turned into an intentional chaos of unharmonious, broken, squashed, unrhythmic fragments of technical details. Here were *Luddites* at work!<sup>406</sup>

The same goes for almost all of Heisig’s other images or their parts. Especially repulsive is the right-hand section of the image “Halle”: A yellow *trumpet*, a naturalistic *thing* without its human carrier (clearly the little trumpeter is meant!), towers... over a tangle of broken forms that are arranged across the surface “graphically”...<sup>407</sup>

Kurella then goes on to interpret what these images mean for East Germany and thus his reason for attacking them. What he sees in Heisig’s work is

on the one side, a life view foreign to us, a “time consciousness” that is not ours but rather is nearer to western pessimistic world views like existentialism. On the other side, what is arrived at here is a foreign *view of art*. Here is an art promoted (and practiced) that refuses to illustrate reality and promotes [instead]... an anti-reality... In short, these images are *conscious* illustrations of the theory of “realism without shores,” that is being made into a platform by a [number] of our artists.<sup>408</sup>

---

<sup>406</sup> The term “*Maschinenstürmer*” may have also been a play on Ulbricht’s criticism of some of Heisig’s earlier paintings on the Paris Commune, which will be discussed later in this chapter: “die Kommunarden haben gestürmt, nicht geschlafen!”

<sup>407</sup> Ibid. “Am ernstesten ist die Demonstration gegen unsere Kunstauffassung in den 3 Bildern von *Heisig*. Hier ist das Prinzip absichtlicher *Deformation, Verstümmelung und Verhässlichung der Wirklichkeit* und Verwendung und beliebige Durcheinandermischung einzelner *verformter Fragmente* von Stücken der Realität auf die Spitze getrieben. Nur mit Mühe kann man im Prinzip der Anordnung dieser Bruchstücke zum Zweck rein *formaler Effekte* oder *dekorativer Wirkungen* (“rhythmisch” verteilte, vor den Gegenständen gelöste formlose Farbflecken) erkennen. In dem Bild ‘Schwedt’ bringt dieser Anti-Realismus eine (dem Künstler vielleicht unbewusste) *Technikfeindschaft* zum Ausdruck. Das *rhythmische* und *harmonische Bild* des Systems von Röhren, Kondensatoren, Krakingtürmen, Schweltürmen, das ein moderner Erdöl-Chemie-Betrieb jedem zerbrochen, zerquetscht, unrhythmisch gemachter Fragmente technischer Details verwandelt! Hier waren *Maschinenstürmer* am Werk! Ähnliches gilt für fast all anderen Bilder Heisigs oder ihre Teile. Besonders abstoßend ist der rechte Teil des Bildes ‘Halle’: Aus einem Gewirr zerbrochener Formen, die auf der ganzen Fläche ‘grafisch’ angeordnet sind und nur noch Andeutungen von Wirklichkeitselementen enthalten... ragt oben links eine grell gemalte gelbe *Trompete* heraus, ein naturalistisches *Ding* ohne seinen menschlichen Träger (offenbar ist der kleine Trompeter gemeint!)”

<sup>408</sup> Ibid. “Was hier zugrundeliegt ist, scheint mir, einerseits eine uns fremde Lebensauffassung, ein ‘Zeitbewusstsein,’ das nicht das unsere ist, sondern westlichen pessimistischen Weltanschauungen wie dem Existenzialismus nahesteht. Andererseits liegt hier eine fremde *Kunstauffassung* vor. Hier wird eine Kunst propagiert (und praktiziert) die es ablehnt, Wirklichkeit abzubilden, und fordert, dass der Künstler der Wirklichkeit grundsätzlich eine Gegen-Wirklichkeit gegenüberstellt, die Naturformen absichtlich zerbricht, verformt, ihnen die

And yet, beyond the affront to East German art policies that Heisig's work embodied for Kurella, the real reason may have been more personal. Kurella seems to have seen great hope for the future of East German art in the realism of artists like Tübke and Heisig and was thus displeased by the recent change that had taken place in Heisig's art:

The misfortune is that Heisig's talent and gift is as a *realist*... He must therefore *force himself* to make anti realism and must therefore grasp *loans from Picasso and Leger*. It is embarrassing to see how dilettantishly he acquires the formal elements of these artists....<sup>409</sup>

The real problem for Kurella was the fact that he saw Heisig as a lynchpin for the future of East German art. As he stated it in the final sentence in the report to focus on Heisig, "the ideological and art theoretical discussion with Heisig with the help of these paintings is of *fundamental meaning for our entire art* and must be thoroughly prepared and led."<sup>410</sup>

Within a week of this report, which was forwarded to Kurt Hager at the Politbüro in Berlin, the various organizations and individuals responsible for overseeing the murals in Leipzig had filed written explanations of their view of and part in the project.<sup>411</sup> Together, these documents provide a fascinating glimpse into the complicated inner workings of East German cultural bureaucracy, which was, as will be shown, far from monolithic. They also suggest, like

---

Wirklichkeitscharakter nimmt. Kurz, diese Bilder sind *bewusste* Illustrationen der Theorie des 'Realismus ohne Ufer,' der ja bei einem Teil unserer Künstler zum Programm gemacht wird."

<sup>409</sup> Ibid. "Das Unglück ist nur, dass Heisig seiner Begabung und Anlage nach ein *Realist* ist... Er muss sich also *zwingen*, Antirealismus zu machen, und muss deshalb zu *Anleihen bei Picasso und Leger* greifen. Es ist peinlich zu sehen, wie dilettantisch er sich Formelemente dieser Künstler aneignet..."

<sup>410</sup> Ibid. "Die ideologische und kunsttheoretische Auseinandersetzung mit Heisig an Hand dieser Bilder ist von *grundsätzlicher Bedeutung für unsere ganze Kunst* und muss gründlich vorbereitet und geführt werden."

<sup>411</sup> Kimmel, *Abschrift eines Schreibens von Gen. Prof. Alfred Kurella*, 2/20/65. Bundesarchiv-SAPMO: DY 30/IV 2/9.06/7. This cover sheet to Kurt Hager states that Kurella's *Thoughts About the Murals in the Hotel "Germany" (Leipzig)* is attached.

Kurella's report, that Heisig was a key figure in the discussions taking place about art at the time, especially in Leipzig.

In a one-page letter addressed to the regional branch of the SED (SED-L), Heinz Mäde stated on February 15<sup>th</sup> that the leadership of the painting and graphics section of the VBK-L “fundamentally welcome the solutions to the assignment” shown in the hotel murals.<sup>412</sup> He pointed out that they were not oil paintings with precisely readable details but rather decorative, ornamental creations that try to create a unity with the building. Of all the murals in the *Bettenhaus*, the VBK-L leadership found *Schwedt* and the Mattheuers' *Eisenach* to be the best because they capture “the beauty, strength and optimism of our life.”<sup>413</sup> He ended the letter by welcoming a further discussion of the visual arts in Leipzig.

Gerhard Winkler, consultant for the hotel project and curator of the Leipzig Museum, wrote a four-page letter to Paul Fröhlich, head of the SED-L. Mentioning their meeting in front of the murals two days earlier on February 13<sup>th</sup>, Winkler stated he would focus primarily on Heisig's work in what followed since that was where the two of them had differed the most in their opinions.

Before turning to a description of the murals, however, he first discussed the basic conception behind the project as a whole, including the choices made in terms of style and medium. The ornamental rather than realistic style had been chosen, he explained, based on the lighting in the space and the fact that it was a place where people would be constantly coming and going. Nonetheless, the decorative function was to be bound to the content: “Ornament

---

<sup>412</sup> Mäde, letter to the SED-L, 2/15/65. SächsStAL: VBK-L 117. “...grundsätzlich die Lösungen der gestellten Aufgaben begrüßen.”

<sup>413</sup> Ibid. “...der Schönheit, der Kraft und dem Optimismus unseres Lebens...”



without a direct relationship to the thought content was not to be created.”<sup>414</sup> The use of sgraffito and plaster reliefs, on the other hand, was decided on because they seemed closer to the essence of building itself.

Winkler then went on to describe each of Heisig’s murals, pointing out that *Halle* had gone through a number of changes before the final work was completed. These changes were largely in the objects chosen for presentation rather than the style. He went on to praise the works as a whole:

The especially difficult, but in my opinion new, exists in that here an attempt was undertaken to develop ornament on the basis of a political theme. In art and architecture there was, to my knowledge, no example of this until now.<sup>415</sup>

While Winkler acknowledges that the works may not be perfect, they nonetheless indicate “a possible and promising way.”<sup>416</sup> Furthermore, the combination of the sgraffito technique with fresco in two of the works is a complicated one that, he states, had never before been carried out in the GDR. In the end, Winkler concludes by saying that Heisig’s murals are “a step forward” on the path of East German art and worthy of a “fruitful discussion” about the synthesis of art and architecture.<sup>417</sup>

The City Council (RdS), which, as the commission giver, was ultimately responsible for the murals, wrote a ten-page report—also on February 15<sup>th</sup>—plainly detailing the process as it had unfolded. Gerhard Winkler, it states, had been chosen in January 1964 to report back and

---

<sup>414</sup> Gerhard Winkler, letter to Paul Fröhlich, 2/15/65. SächsStAL: SED-L 362. “Es sollte keine Ornamentik ohne unmittelbar vermittelnden Gedankeninhalt geschaffen werden.”

<sup>415</sup> Ibid. “Das besonders Schwierige, aber m.M. nach Neue, besteht darin, dass hier ein Versuch unternommen wurde, das Ornament auf der Basis einer politisch inhaltlichen Thematik zu entwickeln. In Kunst und Architektur gibt es m.M. bisher keine solchen Beispiele.”

<sup>416</sup> Ibid. “...einen möglichen und entwicklungsfähigen Weg.”

<sup>417</sup> Ibid. “Das hier Erreichte ist trüchtig genug, um eine fruchtbringende Discussion zur baueingebundenen realistischen Kunst im Gang zu halten und zur sinnvollen Synthese zwischen Architektur und realistischer bildender Kunst einen wertvollen Beitrag zu leisten... einen Schritt nach vorn.”

forth between the City Council and artists working on architectural projects. This was exactly one year before the murals at the Hotel Germany were to be finished.

According to the report, it was not until three months later, however, in late April, that the first details of the Hotel Germany project began to be decided upon. The earliest decisions were presumably those regarding style and medium discussed in Winkler's report above. In mid May, the content of the murals was established: they would show "the German landscape in connection with the respective progressive traditions of German history, especially the workers' movement."<sup>418</sup> By the end of the month, most of the artists had been selected and matched to specific works. Heisig, the report notes, had been recommended for the project by the VBK-L in early May. Apparently Hans Lauter at the SED-L had requested his inclusion. Significantly, this means Heisig received the commission for these murals, which were both prestigious and lucrative, in the very weeks he was under investigation for his controversial speech at the Fifth Congress.

In late June, the artists submitted their first sketches, which were discussed by the project manager, investor, hotel "owner," and a member of the City Council, among others.<sup>419</sup> In late July, Heisig's murals were approved, although it was recommended that there be a greater emphasis on the working class in *Halle* and on economics in *Rostock* and *Schwedt*. The Mattheuers' murals were approved nearly two months later in mid September. By mid November, designs at one-fifth scale were submitted by all of the artists. The Mattheuers' and Heisig's were approved, although *Halle* needed further work with "artistic forming." Engels'

---

<sup>418</sup> Kresse, *Bericht des Rates der Stadt Leipzig über die Konzeption und Durchführung der künstlerischen Angestaltung des Hotels "Deutschlands,"* 2/15/65. SächsStAL: SED-L 362. "An den Etagenwänden im Bettenhaus sollte die deutsche Landschaft in Verbindung mit den jeweiligen progressiven Traditionen der deutschen Geschichte, besonders der Arbeiterbewegung, gestaltet werden."

<sup>419</sup> The actual term used in the document is "hotel user" (*Hotelnutzer*) since it was actually the State that owned the building.

murals, on the other hand, were criticized as having “Neodadaist” tendencies, and he was asked to deliver new sketches by mid December.<sup>420</sup>

On December 12, there was a final meeting. All of the sketches except for Heisig’s *Halle* and Engels’ *Trier* were approved. *Halle*, it was determined, should portray the new construction taking place in the city. *Trier*, on the other hand, was criticized on political-ideological grounds. New designs for both were to be submitted to the mayor.

In terms of the works themselves, the City Council’s report viewed both of the Mattheuers’ murals as well as Engels’ *Weimar* as “successful.”<sup>421</sup> *Trier*, however, was determined to be “artistically immature and politically unconvincing.”<sup>422</sup> Like Kurella, they thought it should be hidden from view until another artistic solution could be found. *Halle* also found criticism, albeit mild, for the left-hand side of the image.<sup>423</sup> In sharp contrast to Kurella’s report, however, was their valuation of *Rostock*—viewed as “successful”—and *Schwedt*, which found “general approval.” It was also seen as a “win” for its portrayal of both the city as a new industrial center of the GDR and the decisive role of the new man: “The synthesis [of the two] is in the foreground portrayal of an optimistic human face and [in the background] the view of the dynamic working process.”<sup>424</sup>

The City Council’s report drew to a close with a series of suggestions for improvement, including the need for artists to have more time for their work. Too much time had been wasted, it states, in the earliest phases of the planning process before the artists were involved.

---

<sup>420</sup> Ibid. “Neodadistisch.” This comment was made by Werner Tübke.

<sup>421</sup> Ibid. *Leipzig* was considered “gelungen.” *Eisenach* was also viewed positively: “Zugleich sollte das glückliche Leben der Jugend in unserem Staat versinnbildlicht werden. Die Darstellung wird insgesamt als den Forderungen entsprechend bewertet.”

<sup>422</sup> Ibid. “Das Werk wird als künstlerisch nicht ausgereift und politisch nicht voll bewältigt beurteilt.”

<sup>423</sup> Interestingly, it was the right-hand side of this painting that was the focus of Kurella’s ire.

<sup>424</sup> *Rostock*: “gewonnen.” *Schwedt*: “Diese Synthese ist in der Vordergrunddarstellung eines optimistischen Menschenantlitzes und der Auffassung des dynamischen Arbeitsprozesses gelungen... Die Darstellung fand allgemeine Zustimmung.”

On the following day, February 16, the District Council of Leipzig (RdB) wrote a 15-page report on the murals that gave a similar listing of their development, although it laid emphasis on what went wrong in the process and blamed the City Council (RdS) for much of it. According to this report, there had been numerous complaints by artists through the end of April 1964 that basically boiled down to their not knowing who was responsible for making decisions at the City Council.<sup>425</sup> The report also notes that although various meetings and deadlines had been planned by the RdS, they did not always take place. Moreover, the suggestions for changes to be made to the murals themselves were largely content-based rather than stylistic or ideological.

In terms of the murals, the report states that the works in the hotel are essentially identical to the sketches that had been approved, except for *Halle* and *Schwedt*. The sketch for *Halle*—which had been approved only in mid January—had been a pencil drawing; the final work had more clearly defined contours and a clearer message. *Schwedt*, on the other hand, was viewed to have been better in the sketch, where some of the buildings had been more clearly delineated. Additionally, the use of color in the final work was seen as creating a “confusing contrast” not evident in the sketch.<sup>426</sup>

---

<sup>425</sup> This was part of a long-standing problem in Leipzig that stretched back until at least to the commissions for the Opera House on Karl-Marx-Platz. This building was supposed to have been decorated with paintings by a number of local artists, including Heisig, Tübke and Sitte. In fact, Heisig was part of the planning commission to help come up with a theme for the building’s artistic decoration, a position the RdS assigned him in January 1958. SächsStAL: RdS Planträger für Investbau Oper. Archival evidence suggests a lack of communication between the architect and the committee, however, such that the VBK-L was complaining by the end of the 1950s. This led to the handing out of commissions only a couple months before the Opera House opened in October 1960. Heisig, for example, received a commission to create a triptych for the Übergang im Parketgeschoss in August 1960. *Einleitung zur 15. Tagung der Staatlichen Bezirksauftragskommission für bildende Kunst*, 8/3/60. SächsStAL. The title of the work was, *History of the Worker Theater*. Neither it nor the works by any of the other local artists—including Tübke and Sitte—were included in the final building.

<sup>426</sup> Häußler, *Bericht für das Sekretariat der SED-Bezirksleitung zur künstlerischen Ausgestaltung des Hotels “Deutschland,”* 2/16/65. SächsStAL: SED-L 362. “...die Farbeigkeit noch nicht den verwirrenden Kontrast wie im Original aufweist.”

The report then turns to a valuation of the murals. Engels' work is dismissed as "ideologically weak" and showing an "unskilled imitation of the forms of Picasso..."<sup>427</sup> The Mattheuers' murals, on the other hand, are viewed as "the most suitable."<sup>428</sup> In fact, the report states that "these [murals] portray a starting point, a realistic way with artistic means, for future decorative murals..."<sup>429</sup>

Heisig's work, by contrast, receives harsh criticism that recalls the view found in Kurella's report. *Halle* and *Schwedt*, in particular, are denounced for the "blurring of contents and the overemphasis on the formal."<sup>430</sup> *Schwedt* is further criticized for the "inner disharmony of the arbitrary choice of colors" with its use of blues, greens, blacks and browns.<sup>431</sup> "The overemphasis on the formal-decorative leads to an extensive disintegration of form and content – the violation of the essential demands of a realistic artwork..."<sup>432</sup> Significantly, the report then points to Heisig's controversial speech at the Fifth Congress held the previous year, which it sees as related: "Out of that is a formalist interpretation that is... hardly to be distinguished from many western works of art and can in no way describe the realist art production in modern building projects of the future."<sup>433</sup>

---

<sup>427</sup> Ibid. "...einer ungekonnten Nachahmung von Forment Picassos bis zu primitiven, versimplifizierten und kindhaft-naiv wirkenden Formen."

<sup>428</sup> Ibid. "am meisten gerecht."

<sup>429</sup> Ibid. "Sie stellen einen Ausgangspunkt für künftigen dekorative Wandgestaltungen an Bauvorhaben in realistischer Weise mit künstlerischen Mitteln dar."

<sup>430</sup> Ibid. "Die Verwischung des Inhalts und die Überbetonung des Formalen wird noch verstärkt durch die willkürlichen inneren Disharmonien in der Farbwahl, zum Beispiel bei 'Schwedt' blau im Gegensatz zu grün sowie schwarz und braun."

<sup>431</sup> Ibid.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid. "Die Überbetonung des Formal-Dekorativen führt zu einem weitgehenden Auseinanderfallen von Form und Inhalt – die Verletzung einer der wesentlichsten Forderungen eines realistischen Kunstwerkes..."

<sup>433</sup> Ibid. "Herausgekommen ist eine formalistische Auffassung, die sich vom vielen westlichen Kunstwerken tatsächlich kaum noch unterscheidet und keinen Weg für die realistische Kunstgestaltung in modernen Bauobjekten für die weitere Zukunft darstellen kann." Significantly, the report then states that these works show a "significant break" and a "return to tendencies already existent in earlier interpretations, such as the Sportforum." This is an important statement because it makes reference to one of Heisig's earliest murals (WV2), which is also the only one from the 1950s of which there is currently a visual record. It is a black-and-white sgraffito that emphasizes the linear

The report states that these works “do not serve our general attempts, to fill the people with optimism and give [them] a clear Marxist world view.”<sup>434</sup> It then points to the original commission as having contributed to the problem, as well as the “user” of the hotel and the architect; apparently they had expressed interest in a “so-called cool modern [art]” rather than a “socialist realist” portrayal.<sup>435</sup> Another problem, the report continues, was the lack of discussion of the basic ideological-aesthetic questions with regard to the objects themselves. It then concludes by calling for a discussion about the ideological-aesthetic question of “our cultural politics,” which, especially with regard to architecture and the visual arts, desperately needed to be undertaken.<sup>436</sup>

In all of the documents written in the immediate wake of Kurella’s report, the Mattheuers’ work was viewed positively, Engels’ *Triers*, negatively. There was also general agreement that Heisig’s mural, *Halle*, was not fully satisfying. Opinion varied greatly, however, on Heisig’s murals *Rostock* and, especially, *Schwedt*. Mäde singled the latter out for its beauty, strength, and optimism, a view that stood in sharp contrast to Kurella’s, who saw the same work as intentional deformation, mutilation, and making ugly of reality. The District Council was of a similar mind as Kurella, seeing in *Schwedt* a work of distorted forms and arbitrary coloring. The

---

and clearly draws upon Picasso. At this point in time, 1955, there was a discussion in *Bildende Kunst* taking place about Picasso’s role for East German artists (see chapter 3).

<sup>434</sup> Ibid. “...dienen nicht unserer allgemeinen Bemühung, den Menschen mit Optimismus zu erfüllen und ein klares marxistisches Weltbild zu geben.”

<sup>435</sup> Ibid. “Da durch die Nutzer des Hotels wie auch zum Teil durch Architekten zusätzlich gegenüber den Künstlern immer wieder auf eine sogenannte kühne moderne, in einem Fall sogar ‘ja-nicht-sozialistischen-realistische’ Gestaltung Wert gelegt wurde...”

<sup>436</sup> Ibid. “Die Arbeiten zeigen die dringende Notwendigkeit, die Grundsatzdiskussion über ideologisch-ästhetische Fragen zu unserer Kulturpolitik...” It also calls for fundamental changes in the state leadership activities and an improvement in the RdB’s supervision of such works.

City Council, on the other hand, which was ultimately responsible for the works, expressed restrained praise, stating Heisig's work had found general approval.

The polarization of opinion around *Schwedt* suggests that it embodies the very essence of the debates taking place about art at the time. The many reports written testify to its importance to the discussion in Leipzig as well as to the importance of art more generally in East Germany. They also show that cultural policy in the GDR was far from monolithic. Multiple organizations were involved in the decisions being made, especially when it came to architectural art. In Leipzig alone, there was the VBK-L, the City Council, the District Council, and the SED-L. As these reports show, they did not always agree in their views.

The debates over art that took place in these years, however, were not limited to the administrative sphere. Indeed, a discussion about the Hotel Germany murals took place in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* that summer, where it was intended to segue into reviews of the Seventh Regional Art Exhibition that fall. The hope was to interest people in art and to begin educating them about it. As Heisig had stated in a meeting that June: "We need an educated public [*Fachpublikum*] for the visual arts..."<sup>437</sup> It was a desire encouraged by the government itself through the Bitterfeld Conference and the Sixth Party Conference's call for an "educated nation."

Increasing discussions about art in the press was one step toward these goals. Significantly, *Schwedt* was a focal point in the discussion that took place later that summer. In fact, the first of the five articles in the series, published on July 10, 1965, was titled "A First Conversation with Professor Bernhard Heisig." Written by Rita Jorek, the visual arts editor, it delivered a positive view of the murals in the hotel and was illustrated by a photo of *Schwedt*.

---

<sup>437</sup> *Nachschrift wesentlicher Gedanken aus der Diskussion während des Gesprächs des Genossen Paul Fröhlich mit bildenden Künstlern am 21. Juni 1965*, SächsStAL: SED-L 362. "Wir brauchen ein Fachpublikum auch für die bildende Künstler, nicht nur im Sport."

The article began with the story of an “ordinary” cleaning woman who was so enthusiastic about the work that she offered “to explain the mural to us so that we might recognize its particular beauty.”<sup>438</sup> But, as Jorek pointed out, “Heisig did not make it easy for her...”<sup>439</sup> With these words, she subtly challenged her readers to take the time needed to see the image and to understand “the artist’s interpretation of reality.”<sup>440</sup> She then went on to praise the working together of artist and architect demonstrated by the project as well as the artistic fantasy of the mural, that was, according to Heisig, “not to be understood as an illustration of thoughts and ideas, but rather as an independent artistic creation.”<sup>441</sup> Indeed, Heisig praised the commission’s freedom from a literal interpretation and stated, “All too frequently it is forgotten that the happy attitude towards life that a work of art can produce also has an ideological function.” At the end of the article, Jorek invited “artists, art historians, and architects [as well as interested readers] to write to us so that the experiences that are won by this work can be used for other opportunities.”<sup>442</sup>

Whereas Jorek’s piece was wholly positive, the tone of the article published the following week was slightly defensive, suggesting that discussions were taking place behind the scenes. Written by Günter Meißner, an art historian in Leipzig who will play an important role in the debate about *The Paris Commune*, the second article in the series argued against the idea that the

---

<sup>438</sup> Rita Jorek, *Wir stellen zur Diskussion: Bilder auf der Etage, Ein erstes Gespräch mit Prof. Bernhard Heisig*. In: *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, July 10, 1965. “Frau Günther ist keine legendäre Zimmerfrau...Als wir uns im Hotel Deutschland umschaute, kam sie uns tatsächlich auf der 3. Etage entgegen und bot sich ganz impulsiv an, uns die Wandbilder zu erklären, damit auch wir ihre besonderen Schönheiten erkennen könnten.” Heisig’s *Rostock* is the mural on the third floor.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid. “Bernhard Heisig hatte es ihr... nicht einfach gemacht.”

<sup>440</sup> Ibid. “Man muß sich die Zeit zum Sehen nehmen, und man muß eindringen in das Bild, um... die vom Künstler interpretierte Wirklichkeit zu begreifen.”

<sup>441</sup> Ibid. “...nicht als Illustration von Gedanken und Ideen aufgefasst wurde, sondern als eigensändige künstlerische Gestaltung.”

<sup>442</sup> Ibid. “Allzuoft wird noch vergessen, dass auch das heitere Lebensgefühl, das ein Kunstwerk vermittelt, eine ideologische Funktion hat.”



murals were too abstract: “From the beginning it was forbidden to spread a photorealistic panorama of these cities, since the murals in these passageways should convey their essence concisely and quickly and decorate the room.”<sup>443</sup> He believed the “swing and personal passion ... must be experienced, the artistic form must be content-full expressions and not simply the means to an end of an ideal statement with the help of certain motifs.”<sup>444</sup>

Of all the murals, Meißner liked *Schwedt* the best and dedicated almost a fourth of his article to it, three times as much as to any other artist. Despite the praise, however, it is clear he was also defending the work against the type of criticism found in Kurella’s report.

This artist [Heisig], whose inclination toward the fantastic sometimes changes into bizarre deformation, does not want to offer pleasant drama, but rather pack sense and imagination with comforting intensity. He pushes back the variety of symbols in favor of the large unity of effect, forces everything to a characteristically moving language of form that can at first appear shocking, whose sense however comes from the content of the task. As such, much is “made foreign” and what the eye perceives at first as a beautiful play of forms and colors—a completely legitimate function of architectural art—the imagination solves with observation.<sup>445</sup>

Two weeks later a complete change in tone took place. In his article from July 31, 1965—the longest article in the series—Dr. Herbert Letsch, head of the cultural department of the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, called Heisig’s work, “not sufficiently solved,” if also “an interesting

---

<sup>443</sup> Dr. Günter Meißner, *Schönheit und Überfülle, Diskussionsbeitrag zum Thema “Bilder auf der Etage.”* In: *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (17 July 1965). “Von vornherein verbot es sich, ein fotogetreues Panorama dieser Städte auszubreiten, denn die Wandbilder in diesen Durchgangsräumen sollten knapp und schnell erfassbar das Wichtigste vor Augen stellen und den Raum schmücken.”

<sup>444</sup> Ibid. “...die künstlerische Form selbst muß inhaltvoller Ausdrucksträger sein und nicht bloß Mittel zum Zweck einer ideellen Aussage mit Hilfe bestimmter Motive...”

<sup>445</sup> Ibid. “Dieser Künstler, dessen Hang zum Phantastischen manchmal in die skurrile Deformierung umschlägt, will nicht wohlgefällige Pathetik offerieren, sondern Sinn und Phantasie mit beruhigender Intensität packen. er drängt die Symbolvielfalt zugunsten der großen einheitlichen Wirkung zurück, zwingt alles in eine eigentümlich bewegte Formensprache, die zunächst bestürzend wirken kann, deren Sinn aber aus dem Inhalt seiner Aufgabe entspringt. So ist vieles ‘verfremdet,’ und was das Auge zuerst als schönes Spiel der Formen und Farben wahrnimmt – eine durchaus legitime Funktion der baugebundenen Kunst – enträtselt die Phantasie beim Betrachten.”

attempt.”<sup>446</sup> For one, the sgraffito technique for the nearness of an inner room does not seem suitable: “In my opinion, the viewer finds a discordant note between the intimacy of the room and the hard, one could say cyclopic symbolism of the image [...]”<sup>447</sup> On the other side, he found the complexity of the image unsuitable for the quick view of the hotel guest: “[The image requires] a longer look and repeated viewing.”<sup>448</sup> He mentioned Heisig several times in the article, the only artist to be so named.

Letsch’s was the last substantive article on the murals published in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*. His presentation seems a compromise between the two sides expressed in the reports: the artists were praised for their effort, but the murals themselves were deemed unsuitable. It was followed a week later by a short and relatively neutral article by the architect of the building, which ended the series.

In comparison to the discussion that took place in the various reports written about the murals, the articles in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* were not as vehement in their criticisms. The sense that style was an indicator of political persuasion and could thus be a threat had been removed from the debate, which focused, instead, on the appropriateness of the forms to the task at hand. It was a shift, in many ways, to the perspective of the artists, although it ended with a negative evaluation.

The public debate, however, did not end in the *Leipziger Volkzeitung*. Two months later, in October 1965, Meißner published an article about the murals at the national level in *Bildende*

---

<sup>446</sup> Dr. Herbert Letsch, *Wir diskutieren: Bilder auf der Etage, Das Bild im Raum*. In: *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (7 July 1965). “nicht hinreichend gelöst,” “einen interessanten Versuch.”

<sup>447</sup> Ibid. “Der Betrachter empfindet m.E. einen Mißklang zwischen der Intimität des Raumes und der harten, sozusagen zyklischen Symbolik der Bildgestaltung...”

<sup>448</sup> Ibid. “Denn nur wenige Menschen – wenn man von den Zimmerfrauen absieht – werden die Gelegenheit haben, das Bild längere Zeit und wiederholt zu betrachten.” Here Letsch makes a reference to—and subtle refutation of—Jorek’s article from a few weeks earlier.

*Kunst*.<sup>449</sup> Not only did the article deliver a positive assessment of *Schwedt*, it was illustrated by several preliminary sketches for it. Indeed, a detail of the mural—the worker’s face—appears as the cover illustration for the issue itself.

Despite the vehemence of the controversy around the Hotel Germany murals, Heisig did not retreat into safer territory. Instead, he created another work of art that, like the murals, combined a Socialist subject matter with formal innovation. Exhibited at the Seventh Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig in October and November 1965, *The Paris Commune* became the center of yet another heated debate; the third for Heisig in two years. In comparison to the murals, however, the controversy around this painting—an oil on canvas—focused less on the style of the work than its pessimistic tone.

## 4.2 THE PARIS COMMUNE (1964/65)

While the Hotel Germany murals were being debated in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, preparations were being made for the Seventh Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig, which opened on October 2, 1965, thus the same month in which Meißner’s article on Hotel Germany appeared in *Bildende Kunst*. This exhibition was, along with the opening of the hotel, one of the cultural highlights of the year-long celebrations for Leipzig’s 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It contained 759 works by 117 artists in painting, graphics, and sculpture, and was the first to have an art historian—Günter Meißner—on the jury.

---

<sup>449</sup> A letter by Dr. Jutta Schmidt at *Bildende Kunst* indicates the article was nearing the final stages of preparation for publication already in late July. In the letter, Dr. Schmidt also indicated that she shared Meißner’s view of *Schwedt*. *Letter from Dr. Jutta Schmidt, Henschelverlag Kunst und Gesellschaft, to Günter Meißner, July 26, 1965*. Thank you to Günter Meißner for a copy of this letter.

In the introduction to the catalog, written by the VBK-L, the exhibition was presented as an opportunity to discuss the artistic development that had taken place in Leipzig since the last regional art exhibition four years earlier. It expressed pleasure in the breadth of “artistic individualities” shown in the exhibition as well as the fact that “a number of... Leipzig artists have found their personal style, which has made it possible for them to portray the important societal and political themes [in an individual and interesting way].”<sup>450</sup> Younger artists, it added, are also represented with interesting works.

The introduction then concluded with the following statement:

The artists of Leipzig are convinced [they] have achieved a further contribution to the development of socialist realism. We hope that the works presented in this exhibition elicit a lively, intellectual discussion and contribute to [*befruchten*] the conversation about the important tasks and possibilities of art in our time.<sup>451</sup>

Significantly, this desire for a lively discussion also appears in the official announcement for the exhibition—*A Call to All Visual Artists in Leipzig*—a two-page document that came out in late March. It begins by pointing out the importance of the exhibition as part of the city’s anniversary celebrations and the desire to contribute, as artists, “to making Leipzig a modern socialist metropolis.”<sup>452</sup> It then points to the Sixth Party Conference of the SED—which had announced a new phase in East German society in 1963, one focused on the comprehensive building of Socialism—before describing the current cultural situation:

---

<sup>450</sup> Introduction to the catalog for the Seventh Regional Art Exhibition. “den verschiedenen künstlerischen Individualitäten,” “...eine Anzahl zum Teil schon bekannter Leipziger Künstler ihre persönliche Handschrift gefunden haben, die es ihnen möglich machte, die grossen gesellschaftlichen und politischen Themen individuell und interessant zu gestalten.” Introduction to the catalog for the Seventh Regional Art Exhibition.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid. “Die Leipziger Künstler sind überzeugt, einen weiteren Beitrag zur Entwicklung des sozialistischen Realismus geleistet zu haben. Wir geben dem Wunsch Ausdruck, dass die in dieser Ausstellung gezeigten Arbeiten zu einer lebendigen geistigen Auseinandersetzung anregen und das Gespräch über die grossen Aufgaben und Möglichkeiten der Kunst in unserer Zeit befruchten möge.”

<sup>452</sup> *Aufruf an alle bildende Künstler des Bezirkes Leipzig*, 3/25/65, SächsStAL: VBK-L 114. “Wir als Leipziger Künstler wollen mit unseren Werken dazu beitragen, daß Leipzig eine moderne sozialistische Großstadt wird.”

Once again... artists, art critics, and cultural politicians are busying themselves with questions of artistic means – which formulation-possibilities of the visual arts are an adequate expression of our times; to what extent individual talents and leanings can be integrated into an important, objective message about the problems of our time; how artistic development can be sped up [*vorangetrieben*] through true socialist and artistic difference of opinions [*Meinungsstreit*].<sup>453</sup>

In this pursuit, it states, each artist must make his own decision as to which themes he is able to portray with the means at his disposal.<sup>454</sup> It also emphasizes that the further development of socialist art depends on the full unfolding of a variety of talent. It ends with a call to artists to submit their best work “to help make this exhibition varied, interesting and engaging... [and thereby] to contribute to a true artistic difference of opinions [*Meinungsstreit*] and to the development of Leipzig art production.”<sup>455</sup>

Heisig was one of more than a hundred artists who heeded this call to submit work. Several of his graphics and three paintings were selected by the jury. Of the paintings, only *The Paris Commune* (WV30) survives today, albeit in the form of a black-and-white reproduction from the catalog.<sup>456</sup> It depicts the final, bloody days of the Commune—praised in East Germany as the first Socialist state in Europe—as a dynamic mass of struggling figures within a subtle grid of horizontal and vertical lines created by the edges of an advertising column on the far left, weapons, arms, legs, and a banner at the right.

---

<sup>453</sup> Ibid. “Erneut beschäftigen sich in zunehmendem Masse Künstler, Kunstkritiker und Kulturpolitiker mit der Frage nach dem künstlerischen Mitteln, welche Formulierungsmöglichkeiten der bildenden Kunst ein adäquater Ausdruck unserer Zeit sind, inwieweit individuelle Begabungen und Neigungen sich zu einer grossen, objektiven Aussage über die Probleme unserer Zeit vereinen lassen, wie im echten sozialistischen und künstlerischen Meinungsstreit die Kunstentwicklung vorangetrieben werden kann.”

<sup>454</sup> Ibid. “Jeder Künstler muss, ausgehend von den Erkenntnissen der ersten und zweiten Bitterfelder Konferenz, seine Begabung einzuschätzen versuchen, um selbst zu entscheiden, welche Themen er mit seinen Mitteln zu gestalten in der Lage ist.”

<sup>455</sup> Ibid. “Wir bitten alle Kolleginnen und Kollegen, diese Ausstellung mit ihren besten Werken zu beschicken und dadurch mitzuhelfen, diese vielseitig, interessant und anziehend zu machen, mit ihren Arbeiten beizutragen zu einem echten künstlerischen Meinungsstreit und zur Weiterentwicklung des Leipziger Kunstschaffens.”

<sup>456</sup> As will be discussed later in this chapter, this illustration is actually a little different from the painting that was exhibited as Heisig reworked parts of it in the meantime. Nonetheless, it was this reproduction that accompanied the argument in the press. What the actual painting looked like is unknown.

Upon closer examination, individuals emerge from the seeming chaos. Just to the right of the center, a figure with his mouth open holds up his left hand as if pronouncing the words on the banner before him; it reads, in French, “you are also workers.”<sup>457</sup> A woman with her head bowed, holds the banner up between her outstretched arms like a shield against the approaching bayonets. Along the bottom left-hand corner a man with a bandaged head lies supine on the ground, apparently dead. Another figure—curled into himself, perhaps wounded in the stomach—falls forward onto him. To the right of the falling figure an old woman buries her head into her hands in despair. Behind her, two figures struggle, one turning back to face us, his fist raised in the air in defiance. Near the advertising column at the far left, the face of a blond woman disappears amidst the fighting. Above her a figure in a military uniform arches backward, apparently lifted from the ground by the force of a blow. To his right, just above the center of the painting, another face with an open mouth—screaming in defiance or fear—is clearly visible.

*The Paris Commune* marks a significant departure from the pictorial simplicity and emphasis on waiting that characterizes Heisig’s earlier paintings on the topic such as *March Days in Paris I* and *II* (WV15, WV16). Exhibited at the Sixth Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig in 1961, these earlier paintings, which are the first in the series to have been exhibited, were criticized by Walter Ulbricht himself. As was widely reported in the press at the time, the head of the East German State had stood before the paintings and commented that “the typical about the Commune is that the Paris workers had stormed.” In Heisig’s work, he noted with displeasure,

---

<sup>457</sup> With the exception of the blond woman at the far left-hand side of the painting, the gender of most of the figures in the work cannot be ascertained from the black and white reproduction. For the sake of narrative clarity alone, I have assigned a gender to each of the figures in my description of the work. Where possible, I have used other paintings by Heisig as a guide.

there was no sense of this.<sup>458</sup> Ironically, the Communards in the painting from 1964 “storm,” but the perceived pessimism of the work, combined, to a lesser extent, with its formally innovative style, placed it at the center of a heated debate.

Heisig’s painting was not the only one to cause controversy at this exhibition, however, which has become famous in the history of East German art for marking the emergence of the “Leipzig School” of modern art. Two of Heisig’s colleagues from the Leipzig Academy were also criticized, albeit less so, for paintings they showed. Werner Tübke exhibited *The Life Memories of Dr. Schulze, Attorney at Law, III* (see Chapter 2, fig. 2-9), a simultaneous narrative composition that criticizes former Nazi lawyers living in West Germany. Wolfgang Mattheuer exhibited *Cain* (fig. 4-4), a Surrealistic blue-monochrome painting depicting the Biblical story of the first murder. Common to all three was a “modern” style and pessimistic subject matter.

For all the controversy that would later ensue, the Seventh Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig was highly praised in the press for most of its run. Even before it opened, there were articles in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* praising the “variety of artistic expression” in the works submitted and the feeling that Leipzig “artists have found themselves.”<sup>459</sup> Nor was this praise limited to jury members. On the second day of the exhibition, Paul Fröhlich of the SED-L, stated, albeit with the caveat that it was not a final judgement, that the exhibition was “a remarkable step forward for Leipzig artists.”<sup>460</sup> This cautiously positive review may have been

---

<sup>458</sup> Joachim Uhlitzsch, “Sixth Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig,” in *Junge Kunst* 2 (1962). “Als der 1. Sekretär des Zentralkomitees der SED, Walter Ulbricht, die Ausstellung besuchte, sagte er vor den Bildern Heisigs, das Typische der Kommune bestehe darin, dass die Pariser Arbeiter gestürmt hätten. Das ist in der Tat entscheidend. Im Sturm wurde die Bastion der Bourgeoisie genommen und die Herrschaft des Kapitals vorübergehend gestürzt. Auf dem Bild Heisigs ist davon nicht zu spüren.”

<sup>459</sup> No author, “*Vielfalt des künstlerischen Ausdrucks*,” in *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (1 August 1965). Eichhorn stated, “Man kann fast sagen, die Künstler habe zu sich selbst gefunden.” Mäde stated, “Vielfalt der künstlerischen Äusserungen.”

<sup>460</sup> *Erster Rundgang – erste Urteile, Paul Fröhlich und Erich Grützner besuchten die 7. BKA-L, Leipziger Volkszeitung* (3 October 1965). “Abschliessend sagte Paul Fröhlich, wobei er ausdrücklich betonte, dass es

the result, in part, of a desire to avoid creating more tension between artists and functionaries in the wake of the months-long discussion around the Hotel Germany murals.

Many of the reviews published about the exhibition mentioned *The Paris Commune*. Early on, the painting was praised: “Energetic” and “explosive,” it was seen as a “symphony of dramatic tones” that made “the unstoppable strength of the Communards noticeable.”<sup>461</sup> It was also the focus of an illustrated article by Meißner in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* on October 30<sup>th</sup>. This was the third in a series of in-depth articles written by art historians in Leipzig about important works in the exhibition; the first two focused on the above-mentioned paintings by Tübke and Mattheuer.

Meißner began his article, “A Picture of the Commune,” by talking about the historical event itself and its link to the present before turning to Heisig’s work. This background information bears repeating here to gain a better sense of how the Paris Commune was viewed in East Germany at the time:

For eight days an embittered street fight raged before the Prussian-supported reactionary [forces] suffocated the Paris Commune... in a sea of blood. The greatness and tragedy of this first proletarian revolution remains alive [today]... as legacy and lesson... in the German working classes. But slight was [its] echo in the visual arts.... Today, almost one hundred years later, [with] the dreams of the Paris Communards a reality in many lands, visitors to the Seventh Regional Art Exhibition stand before an image by Bernhard Heisig that is dedicated to this event...<sup>462</sup>

---

keineswegs um ein abgerundetes abschliessendes Urteil gehe, dass diese Ausstellung ein beachtlicher Schritt nach vorn für die Leipziger Künstler sei.”

<sup>461</sup> Meißner, *ND*, 10/5/65. “vitaler Malerei.” M.T., *Die Union*, 10/21/65. “explosiv wirkenden ‘Kommune.’” *LVZ*, 10/9/65. “...Sinfonie dramatischer Töne...” *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (3 October 1965). “...das Gemälde *Die Pariser Commune* die unerhörte Kraft der Kommunarden spürbar macht...”

<sup>462</sup> Meißner, “Ein Bild der Commune,” *Leipziger Volkszeitung-Beilage* (30 October 1965). “Acht Tage tobte ein erbitterter Strassenkampf, ehe die von Preussen unterstützte reaktionäre Übermacht die Pariser Commune, den Verboten einer neuen Ordnung in einem Meer von Blut erstickte. Grösse und Tragik dieser ersten proletarischen Revolution blieben immer als Vermächtnis und Lehre lebendig, auch in der deutschen Arbeiterklasse. Gering aber war das Echo in der bildenden Kunst... Heute, knapp hundert Jahre später, da die Träume der Pariser Kommunarden in vielen Ländern Wirklichkeit sind, steht der Besucher der 7. Bezirkskunstausstellung vor einem Bild Bernhard Heisigs, das jenem Ereignis gewidmet ist...”



Meißner admits that Heisig does not make it easy for the viewer and then looks at how the work functions as a commentary on the present:

Heisig... [an] important painter of our century, paints historical events not for memory alone, but rather as a rousing warning to contemporaries. His own experiences and visions flow into this appeal against the strengths of death and repression that still threaten today. That is why the main attention is on the tragic side of the Commune...<sup>463</sup>

After praising the style of the painting, which he compares to music in its submergence of details to the overall effect of the work, Meißner goes on to point out that the image in the catalog and the article no longer exists; it had been reworked. This, he explains, is the result of “Heisig’s always searching, never content attitude...”<sup>464</sup> He then concludes the article with the following statement: “out of innermost conviction, [Heisig] dedicates a picture, upsetting to some, to the main question of our being, the fight against death and oppression.”<sup>465</sup> This last comment almost certainly would have echoed within the context of the escalating war in Vietnam, which was a topic much in the news in East Germany at the time.<sup>466</sup>

A week later, on November 6, the first negative review of Heisig’s painting appears in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*. Written by Werner Krecek, head of the newspaper’s cultural department, “Letter to a Picture” was published under the pseudonym Klaus-Dieter Walter and

---

<sup>463</sup> Ibid. “Wie diese bedeutenden Maler unseres Jahrhunderts malt Heisig historisches Geschehen nicht zum Gedenken allein, sondern als aufrüttelnde Mahnung an die Zeitgenossen. Eigene Erlebnisse und Visionen flossen ein in diesen Appell gegen die Kräfte des Todes und der Unterdrückung, die heute noch drohen. Daher das Hauptaugenmerk auf die tragische Seite der Commune...”

<sup>464</sup> Ibid. “...ein Beweis für die immer suchende, nie zufriedene Haltung Bernhard Heisigs...”

<sup>465</sup> Ibid. “...nie zufriedene Haltung Bernhard Heisigs, der sicher aus innerster Überzeugung der Hauptfrage unseres Seins, Kampf gegen Tod und Unterdrückung, noch manches aufrüttelnde Bild widmen wird.”

<sup>466</sup> Headlines in the press in 1965 included, “USA Terror in Vietnam,” “South Vietnamese Patriots Deal the USA New Blows” and “300 Air Pirates Shot Down.” *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (1 May 1965): 5. *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (28 May 1965): 5, 1. It was referred to “the dirty US war in Vietnam” in SED documents of the day. See among others, *The Evaluation of the Leipziger Volkszeitung from 4.-9. July 1966 in Terms of the Handling of Political Foci (Press Conference of Professor Albert Norton, Open Word and Protest Movement against the Dirty US War in Vietnam)*, SächsStAL: SED-L IV/A/2/9/1/347. There were also calls aimed specifically at artists to create works to help raise awareness of and money for the suffering of the Vietnamese people. “Kunst-Auktion für Vietnam,” *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (24 July 1966). *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier* discussed in chapter 1 also needs to be seen in this context.

presented as a letter sent in by a reader. It begins by praising the exhibition as a whole before concentrating on Heisig's painting. Acknowledging that such a topic must be difficult for an artist to portray, Krecek nonetheless has "objections."<sup>467</sup> He states that Heisig's painting "doesn't breathe the spirit" of the Communards.<sup>468</sup> These were people who worked day and night, he tells us, to create a society that is the model for the Socialist state of today. "Perhaps it is not possible to show that in an image when one only portrays the end."<sup>469</sup> Perhaps if the painting were called *The Last Days of the Commune*, it would be okay, he admits. Ultimately, however, it is Heisig's focus on the end of the Commune in his work—his picking the wrong moment in the story—to which Krecek objects. "...[the Paris Commune] was a great beginning: the first proletarian state in the world."<sup>470</sup>

Commissioned by the Leipzig branch of the SED, Krecek's letter may have been prompted by a report sent to Kurt Hager, head of the Ideological Commission at the Politbüro, three weeks earlier, although the report itself does not mention Heisig's work.<sup>471</sup> Dated October 20<sup>th</sup>, this two-page document begins by praising the "variety of artistic styles" apparent in the regional exhibitions taking place in Berlin, Leipzig, and Halle, but then goes on to criticize Leipzig.<sup>472</sup> "In Leipzig other tendencies are noticeable... Basically a whole part of the exhibited

---

<sup>467</sup> Walther, *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (6 November 1965). "Einwände."

<sup>468</sup> Ibid. "...es diesen Geist nicht atmet."

<sup>469</sup> Ibid. "Vielleicht ist es auch gar nicht möglich, das im Bild zu zeigen wenn man nur das Ende Gestaltet. Wenn das Bild 'Die letzten Tage der Commune' hiesse, könnte man vielleicht noch ja zu ihm sagen..."

<sup>470</sup> Ibid. "...hier ein grosser Anfang war: der erste proletarische Staat der Welt."

<sup>471</sup> "Rita Jorek-Kleinert," GEDOK, 45. Hager was a member of the Politbüro and head of the Ideological Commission at the time. In an article published in 1999, Henry Schumann mentions that Lotte Ulbricht had also expressed dissatisfaction with the Seventh after her visit, although he does not mention the date she was there. *Kunstdokumentation*, 515

<sup>472</sup> *Genossen Hager zur Information*, 10/20/65, Bundesarchiv-SAPMO: 37. "vielfalt von künstlerischen Handschriften."

works, especially paintings, testify to an abandonment of our world view...<sup>473</sup> It then calls for a “thorough appraisal” of the exhibition.<sup>474</sup>

Significantly, the negative review of Heisig’s painting published in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* was supposed to have been written by Rita Jorek, but she submitted a positive review instead.<sup>475</sup> Like her article on Heisig’s murals four months earlier, Jorek begins the piece—which was never published—by pointing out that “*The Paris Commune*... reveals itself fully to the viewer only after prolonged looking.”<sup>476</sup> She goes on to state that “the more one knows about the heroic fight of the Communards, the better one understands [the painting].”<sup>477</sup> She then sets herself the task of explaining why the work is important.

After briefly describing the image, she argues that it illustrates the words Brecht gave to the Communard Delescluze in his play, *The Days of the Commune*: “Should our enemies succeed in turning Paris into a grave, they will at least never make it a grave of our ideas.”<sup>478</sup> She points to the figures sacrificing their lives to hold up the banner that says, “you are also workers,” and to the figure holding up his fist “like a Prophet... in warning and admonition, as if he wanted to keep the murderers from a mistake.”<sup>479</sup> She goes on to say that “the hope that the good ideas must convince, that they could do this better, perhaps, than weapons, characterizes these fighters

---

<sup>473</sup> Ibid. “In Leipzig machten sich jedoch noch andere Tendenzen bemerkbar... Im Grunde genommen zeugen ein ganzer Teil der aufgestellten Werke, besonders der Malerei, von einem Verlassen unserer weltanschaulichen Position.”

<sup>474</sup> Ibid. “eine gründliche Einschätzung der BKA vornimmt und sie Dir verlegt.”

<sup>475</sup> Interview with Jorek, Summer 2005. “Rita Jorek-Kleinert,” GEDOK, 45.

<sup>476</sup> Rita Jorek, “Das Gemälde ‘Pariser Commune’ von Bernhard Heisig auf der 7. Bezirkskunstausstellung erschliesst sich dem Betrachter oft erst nach längerem Anschauen ganz,” unpublished article for the *LVZ*, November 6, 1965. Thank you to Rita Jorek for this document.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid. “Man begreift es besser, je mehr man selbst über den heldhaften Kampf der Kommunarden weiss, und man begreift sie besser, wenn man sich von dem Bild anrühren lässt.”

<sup>478</sup> Ibid. “...wie es Brecht den Delegierten bei der Kommune, Delescluze, sagen lässt: ‘Sollte es unseren Feinden gelingen, Paris in ein Grab zu verwandeln, so wird es jedenfalls niemals ein Grab unserer Ideen werden.’”

<sup>479</sup> Ibid. “...der, einem Prophet gleich und die Hand warnend und mahnend erhebt, als wollte er die Mordenden vor einem Irrtum bewahren.”

of the proletarian revolution; it is also, however, the reason for its defeat, [since] some of its leaders thought until the end that the justness [of the cause] did not require violence.”<sup>480</sup>

This latter idea subtly connected Heisig’s painting to the East German present, where service in the National People’s Army had been made a prerequisite for advancement in the GDR only a few years earlier.<sup>481</sup> This militarization of Socialism was the result of a lesson learned from the downfall of the Paris Commune: Socialism was worth fighting for, even if that meant taking up arms against the enemy.<sup>482</sup>

In contrast to the pessimism others found in the work, Jorek sees optimism:

“The optimism that this image radiates lies not only in the individual Communards... but also in the composition. This becomes particularly clear in a comparison with the middle panel of Otto Dix’s war triptych... [which] emphasizes the senselessness of war... In *The Paris Commune*, by contrast, the people strive to the top... they are themselves signs that point to the future.”<sup>483</sup>

At the end of the article, Jorek becomes critical. Significantly, however, her criticism focuses primarily on the image reproduced in the catalog, which, she points out, had been reworked in the meantime. The earlier work, she states, had been oriented less toward the future and had expressed a greater sense of doubt than the work currently on view in the exhibition.

---

<sup>480</sup> Ibid. “Die Hoffnung, dass die gute Idee überzeugen müsse, dass sie es vielleicht besser noch könne als die Waffen, charakterisiert die Grösse dieser Kämpfer der proletarischen Revolution, sie ist aber auch ein Grund für ihre Niederlage; dann bis zum Schluss meinten einige ihrer Führer, dass die Gerechtigkeit der Gewalt nicht bedarf.”

<sup>481</sup> Corey Ross, “‘Protecting the Accomplishments of Socialism’? The (Re)Militarisation of Life in the German Democratic Republic” in *The Workers’ and Peasants’ State, Communism and Society in East Germany under Ulbricht 1945-71*, eds. Patrick Major and Jonathan Osmond (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) 78-93.

<sup>482</sup> This was Brecht’s basic point of view in his play, *The Days of the Commune*.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid. “Das Optimistische, das vom Bild ausstrahlt, liegt nicht nur in einzelnen Gestalten der Kommunarden begründet... sondern auch in der Komposition. Das wird im Vergleich mit der Mitteltafel des Kriegstriptychons von Otto Dix besonders deutlich... So sind... das Gefühl der Sinnlosigkeit des Krieges hervorgehoben... In dem Bild der ‘Pariser Commune’ dagegen streben die Menschen nach oben... sind sie selbst das Zeichen, das in die Zukunft weist.” In a review of a triptych of the Paris Commune shown at the Leipzig Academy, Jorek criticizes the lack of individuals in Heisig’s painting. This is something he has clearly “corrected” in this later version. See Jorek, “Von Oeser bis zum Absolventen, Über die Jubiläumsausstellungen der HGB,” *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (15 October 1964).

Turning to the current work, she points out that the foreground is not as strong as the middle ground with its “rich possibilities for association.”<sup>484</sup>

Even though the exhibition closed in mid November, the debate about Heisig’s work continued at the national level. In February 1966, Meißner published a six-page article praising the Seventh Regional Art Exhibition in *Bildende Kunst* as “a decided advance” on the path to a true socialist art. Accompanied by a plethora of illustrations, “About the Deepening of the Realistic Message” discusses a number of works, including *The Paris Commune*, which, Meißner states, was the “object of criticism and a comprehensive discussion. In this the principle question of historical truth arose and the legitimacy of seeing—under a subjective viewpoint—unsettling connections [between this event and] the present.”<sup>485</sup>

Meißner states that the work is of “burning actuality,” although he admits that “one must agree with critics... that the shift in accent [from waiting] to the destruction [of the Commune] grasps only a part of the historical truth. But this part is very expressively and provocatively portrayed and does not concentrate only on the pessimistic assessment of the physical downfall.”<sup>486</sup> Not unlike Jorek before him, Meißner states, “To me it appears that the moments of heroism—such as the balled fists of the last communards, the dynamic beacon of the red banner, or the blast-of-trumpets-like yellow of the background—point to the future victory of the

---

<sup>484</sup> Ibid. “reichen Assoziationsmöglichkeiten.”

<sup>485</sup> Meißner, *Bildende Kunst* 2 (1966) 77. “...der ‘Pariser Commune’ war Gegenstand der Kritik und einer umfassenden Diskussion. Dabei erhob sich die prinzipielle Frage nach der historischen Wahrheit und der Berechtigung, diese unter dem Gesichtspunkt einer subjektiv betonten, beunruhigenden Zeitbezüglichkeit zu sehen.”

<sup>486</sup> Ibid. “Damit ist die Aussage noch heute von brennender Aktualität, aber zweifellos muss man den Kritikern des Bildes darin zustimmen, dass mit der Akzentverlagerung auf die Vernichtung nur ein Teil der historischen Wahrheit erfasst ist. Aber dieser Teil ist sehr expressiv und aufrüttelnd gestaltet und nicht nur konzentriert auf die pessimistische Feststellung des physischen Unterganges.”

ideas of the proletarian fight for independence. Here is the artist's expressive strength ecstatic and visionary at the same time...<sup>487</sup>

Unlike with the murals, however, Meißner's article was not the final word, perhaps because of the Eleventh Plenum, which marked the beginnings of a new cultural freeze in East Germany.<sup>488</sup> In the May 1966 issue of *Bildende Kunst*, Harald Olbrich responded with a long, unillustrated article about *The Paris Commune* titled, "Aesthetic Subjectivity or Subjectivism?" He began by praising Heisig before turning a critical eye to the work:

I value Professor Bernhard Heisig's efforts [toward] a gripping, emotionally deep [*tieflotende*] and spiritually complex art. I am impressed by his murals for the "Interhotel Germany" in Leipzig. In the dynamic conception of the images and, to a great extent, their generalization, I see the artist's wholly personal reflection of the human atmosphere of the free socialist society. But it is only with difficulty that I can agree with his most recent attempts with *The Paris Commune*, since there, superficial interests in problems of form... and writhing amorphously doughy masses decidedly limit the Party value of the Commune. The tragedy of the final fight, the uncompromising position of the revolutionary communards becomes a brutally libidinal convulsion. The image limits itself to an ethical rejection of the counter-revolutionary troops, thus persisting with accusation and negation....<sup>489</sup>

---

<sup>487</sup> Ibid. "Mir scheint, dass Momente des Heroismus, wie die geballten Fäuste der letzten Kommunarden, das dynamische Fanal des roten Transparents oder das fanfarenstossähnliche Gelb des Hintergrundes, auf den zukünftigen Sie der Ideen des proletarischen Befreiungskampfes hinweisen. Ekstatisch und visionär zugleich ist hier die Ausdruckskraft des Künstlers..."

<sup>488</sup> The Eleventh Plenum focused primarily on film, but affected all areas of culture. It took place in December 1965. Presumably Meißner's article had gone to press before the results of the Plenum were in.

<sup>489</sup> Harald Olbrich, "Ästhetische Subjektivität oder Subjektivismus," in *Bildende Kunst* 5 (1966): 272-273. "Ich schätze die Bemühungen von Professor Bernhard Heisig um eine packende, emotional tieflotende und geistig fielschichtige Kunst. Ich bin beeindruckt von seinen Wandbildern im 'Interhotel Deutschland' in Leipzig (BK 10/65). In dem dynamischen Konzept der Bilder und im hohen Grad ihrer Verallgemeinerung sehe ich den vom Künstler ganz persönlich empfundenen Abglanz der menschlichen Atmosphäre freier sozialistischer Gesellschaftlichkeit. Ich kann aber nur schwerlich einverstanden sein mit seinen jüngsten Versuchen zur 'Pariser Kommune'; denn dort schränkt das vordergründige Interesse an Formproblemen, das Angezogenheit des Künstlers von quellenden und sich windenden amorph-teigigen Massen die parteiliche Wertung der Kommune entscheidend ein. Die Tragik des letzten Kampfes, die unbeugsame Haltung der revolutionären Kommunarden wird zur animalisch-triebhaften Zuckung. Das Bild beschränkt sich auf eine ethische Ablehnung der konterrevolutionären Truppen, verharrt also in der Anklage und Negation."

Like Krecek, Olbrich believed Heisig had not found the “fruitful” moment in this work.<sup>490</sup> “The theme of the Commune can only be immortality despite defeat.”<sup>491</sup> It was, above all, the work’s pessimism that he found so objectionable. “Doesn’t the chaos of the scene emerge primarily from a moment of disbelief in the victory of humanity and socialist progress?”<sup>492</sup> The work suffered, he believed, from an ideologically unclear position and did not fulfill art’s task, which is to be a moral and true expression of reality.

Significantly, Olbrich did not have the same objections to Heisig’s lithograph “The Fascist Nightmare” (fig. 4-5). This surrealistic print, which won a gold medal at the International Book Exhibition in Leipzig that summer, depicts a wounded figure in the foreground being threatened by a vulture-like creature. In the background, a military tank rolls over screaming figures in a crowd. Olbrich interpreted this work as an “artistic criticism of Neofascism and Imperialism in West Germany.”<sup>493</sup> In comparison to *The Paris Commune*, “the tendency toward negation [and] the invocation of the fantastic [functions in this work] as a cathartic shock effect...”<sup>494</sup>

The problem with the Paris Commune, then, was ultimately not one of style or tone in and of itself, but rather in combination with the subject matter, an almost-sacred moment in Socialist history. As he stated it, “the historical experiences of Marxism are not to be made fully

---

<sup>490</sup> Ibid. “Insofern hat Heisig für mich nicht den fruchtbaren Moment gefunden.”

<sup>491</sup> Ibid. “...das Thema der Kommune kann doch nur Unsterblichkeit trotz Niederlage sein.”

<sup>492</sup> Ibid. “Entsteht also nicht das Chaos der Bildfläche primär aus einem momentanen Unglauben an den Sieg der Humanität und des sozialen Fortschritts?”

<sup>493</sup> Ibid. “...künstlerische Kritik am Neofaschismus und Imperialismus Westdeutschlands...” Significantly, Olbrich suggests moving beyond simply focusing on the horrific and threatening, however, to focus on unveiling the system of oppression. Heisig’s later work in the Fascist Nightmare series does exactly this.

<sup>494</sup> Ibid. “Es ist bemerkenswert, dass gewichtige Beiträge Heisigs, wie der ‘Faschistische Alptraum,’ wo sich Tendenzen der Negation, der Beschwörung des Unheimlichen als einer kathartischen Schockwirkung gestalterisch frei entfalten konnten, an der ‘Kommune’ gegenwärtig scheiterten.”

one's own" simply to make an effective picture.<sup>495</sup> For him, the Paris Commune formed the "opposite pole" to "The Fascist Nightmare."<sup>496</sup> He thus ended the article with a call for balance between the positive and negative in art: "Only in the interplay of both sides, and in the dominating role of [the positive], [will] Socialist *Parteilichkeit* reveal itself in its entirety."<sup>497</sup>

Six months later, in the November 1966 issue of the magazine *Unity (Einheit)*, Heisig's painting on the Paris Commune—presumably the same one shown at the Seventh—was criticized yet again, albeit for what appears to be the last time. In an article about the state of art in East Germany before the Sixth German Art Exhibition in Dresden, which was to open nearly a year later, Jutta Schmidt criticized Heisig's "false conception" in the work and, in particular, its emphasis on the physical downfall of the Commune and on doubt. Whereas Jorek had seen individual figures in the work triumphing despite their defeat, Schmidt saw "a fist [sticking] pathetically out of an unformed concentration of color blotches, a final 'despite everything.'"<sup>498</sup> She concluded her discussion of the painting by saying that "a lack of historical truth has necessarily resulted in the loss of artistic truth and... clearly leads here to the selling out of a realistic position."<sup>499</sup>

---

<sup>495</sup> Ibid. "...historische Erfahrungen des Marxismus nicht völlig zu eigenen und damit auch nicht bildwirksam wurden."

<sup>496</sup> Ibid. "Neben der Verneinung im 'Alptraum' ist der Gegenpol, eben die menschliche Position gerade in der 'Pariser Kommune' nicht klar erkennbar."

<sup>497</sup> Ibid. "Erst im Wechselspiel beider Seiten und in der dominierenden Rolle der letzteren offenbart sich die sozialistische Parteilichkeit in ihrem ganzen Umfang." It is unclear whether Olbrich is alluding to Heisig's own words at the Fifth Congress. There, Heisig had made a similar comment, but in contrast to Olbrich, he was criticizing the prohibition on portraying the negative side of life in East German art.

<sup>498</sup> Schmidt, *Einheit*, 11/66, as found in AdK Archiv: Kober Nachlass 14. "...eine aus ungeformten Ballungen von Farbaufträgen pathetisch hervorstoßende Faust, ein letztes 'Trotz alledem' aussagend." Schmidt, *Einheit*, 11/66, as found in AdK Archiv: Kober Nachlass 14.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid. "Mangel an historischer Wahrheit hat aber notwendig den Verlust an künstlerischer Wahrheit zur Folge und führte hier ganz eindeutig auch zur Preisgabe realistischer Positionen."



The controversy around *The Paris Commune* focused primarily on the work's pessimism and, more specifically, its emphasis on the Commune's defeat rather than its beginnings. Krecek saw this as "not breathing the spirit" of the Communards, while Schmidt saw it as "the selling out of a realistic position." Meißner and Jorek also focused on the theme of the work in their reviews, praising it as a "rousing warning to contemporaries" to stay vigilant in the fight for Socialism.

In the final assessment, *The Paris Commune* did exactly what artists and theoreticians set out to do in the *Call to Artists* put out for the Seventh Regional Art Exhibition: it was an "interesting" work that contributed to "a true artistic difference of opinions and to the development of art in Leipzig."<sup>500</sup>

### 4.3 CONCLUSION

The murals in the Hotel Germany and *The Paris Commune* both focused on East German subject matter. The murals depicted cities that were important to the GDR, while the painting depicted one of the key moments in the history of Socialism. They also shared an artistic style that rejected a unified sense of time and space. This "modern" style was new to Heisig's work, having first emerged to the public in *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier* in late 1964, which is the same time period in which he was creating sketches for the hotel.

A comparison of *The Paris Commune* with this earlier painting shows Heisig had continued his move away from the simple realism desired by many political functionaries,

---

<sup>500</sup> See footnote 455.

collapsing the pictorial space even further and exchanging the late-Impressionist brushstroke for the harder edges of both Cubism and the mural medium. Indeed, it would seem Heisig's work on the murals for the hotel directly informed the painting.<sup>501</sup> In both there is a similar sense of exploding out from the center. There is also a similar stacking of figures in the right-hand side of *Halle*—the last of the three murals Heisig created for the hotel at this time—and the painting.<sup>502</sup> These similarities suggest he was working with ideas across media and, more specifically, that his experiments with the sgraffito medium were affecting the rest of his oeuvre. Further evidence of this are the colorful prints he made for *Mother Courage* (figs. 4-6, 4-7) and a booklet for Leipzig's 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations (figs. 4-8, 4-9). These are some of the only prints in Heisig's oeuvre to contain color. These crossovers suggest that Sitte was right in his recent assertion that Heisig left his position as rector of the Leipzig Academy in 1964 in order to have more time for mural commissions, which were not only more lucrative, they brought him interesting artistic experiences. Indeed, he made more murals in late 1964 and 1965 than at any other point in his career.

Despite the similarities between them, the murals for the Hotel Germany and *The Paris Commune* were significantly different in tone. The swirling, abstracted colors of the murals are largely optimistic, while the painting's focus on the final, bloody days of the Communards is pessimistic. It was this pessimism that was the focus of critics' ire in the controversy that surrounded the painting. For the murals, on the other hand, it was solely their style. Significantly, the style of *The Paris Commune* was barely mentioned negatively, a fact I will return to shortly.

---

<sup>501</sup> Although the latter is currently dated to 1964, it seems likely he would have continued working on it until it was submitted to the jury—and as we have seen, even after that—in the Spring of 1965.

<sup>502</sup> Heisig even referred to these figure (in *Halle*) as barricade fighters. Kihago, 24.

At a deeper level, however, the criticism for both works was the same: they were perceived as a threat to the East German way of life. The fragmentation of the images depicted in the murals not only made them difficult to read, it was seen as evidence for the perceived dissolution of society in the West. According to Kurella, this “foreign” view had no place in the East, and he perceived it as an “invading” force. Similarly, in his discussion of *The Paris Commune*, Olbrich stated, “Doesn’t the chaos of the scene emerge primarily from a moment of disbelief in the victory of humanity and socialist progress?”<sup>503</sup> For both of these critics, Heisig’s work seemed to stand in opposition to East Germany.

Kurella’s passionate criticism of the Hotel Germany murals sparked a flurry of bureaucratic activity in Leipzig that resulted in numerous reports and meetings that ultimately testify to the importance of these works. At this point in time, architectural art was highly valued in East Germany, where it was seen to embody the Party’s interest in bringing art to the people. Indeed, every architectural project was to set aside 1-2% of its total costs to pay for its artistic decoration.<sup>504</sup>

In the mid 1960s, it was in architectural art that many artists, in part because of the medium, were pushing hardest against the aesthetic boundaries of what functionaries found acceptable.<sup>505</sup> Whereas stylistic innovation was overlooked in some projects, the Hotel Germany murals were created in a “hotel of the first order” built on one of the most important city squares

---

<sup>503</sup> Ibid. “Entsteht also nicht das Chaos der Bildfläche primär aus einem momentanen Unglauben an den Sieg der Humanität und des sozialen Fortschritts?”

<sup>504</sup> MfK, *Entwurf Verordnung über das Auftragswesen in der baugebundenen Kunst*, 6/1/65. AdK Archiv: VBKD 5613. “Zur Finanzierung der Werke bildender Kunst stehen aus den Investitionsmitteln für die Errichtung von Gesellschaftsbauten 1 – 2% von der Gesamtbausumme zur Verfügung.”

<sup>505</sup> As Heisig stated it in his controversial speech in 1964, “Architecture, book illustration and the commercial arts have developed a class-indifferent character... I would like to see this in our own realm...” See chapter 3 and Appendix D for the full speech.

in East Germany as part of the celebrations for Leipzig's 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary. As such, it was of particular importance to the Party. Moreover, Leipzig had always been a reliable center for conservative Socialist Realism; the emergence of a "modern" style was thus all the more unwelcome because it was unexpected. Artists, on the other hand, were presumably encouraged by these same factors to create more challenging work. They were creating art for the most international city in East Germany at a time when it would host even more visitors than usual, including from the capitalist West.

In the many meetings that followed Kurella's report, it appears the artists were able to convince political functionaries in Leipzig of their commitment to Socialism. They were answering the Bitterfeld and Sixth Party Conferences' calls for a higher quality of art, an art suitable for the "educated nation." Indeed, the interest in educating the people to understand a more complicated art reveals itself in both the various reports about the meetings that took place and the fact that the essence of the debate about the murals repeated itself, albeit less dramatically, in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* that summer. This series of articles suggests that the political threat the murals had posed for some functionaries earlier in the year had been diffused. Left over was a discussion about the appropriateness of style and art's relationship to "reality." This helps to explain why the plethora of styles found in the Seventh Regional Art Exhibition—and in *The Paris Commune*—was initially praised rather than criticized.

Another factor contributing to the initial praise of the art found in the Seventh was the focus—in the wake of the Sixth Party Conference—on raising the quality of art. This led to the inclusion of experts (*Fachleute*) into the discussions about art and to the founding of the section of art theoreticians in the VBKD. Significantly, the first of these new sections was established in Leipzig, and it was founded in April 1965 just a few months before the 7<sup>th</sup> BKA-L opened. In

fact, this exhibition was the first in Leipzig to have an art historian on the jury, which further explains why it was initially praised.

Beginning in late October, however, voices critical of the exhibition—and especially of the many different styles of painting it contained—came increasingly to the forefront. Significantly, this was only a few weeks before the infamous Eleventh Plenum of the Central Committee of the SED in December 1965. This Plenum brought an abrupt end to artistic experimentation, which was seen as having gone too far in recent years, and marked a new freeze in the GDR's cultural policies.

It is in the wake of this event that Heisig's painting, *The Paris Commune*, was heavily criticized at the national level for its pessimism. Some believe he destroyed the painting as a result.<sup>506</sup> Eyewitnesses and a newspaper account, however, suggest the painting was shown at a solo exhibition of his work in 1968.<sup>507</sup> This exhibition included several paintings by Heisig that focused on the final, bloody days of the Paris Commune. Rather than being cowed by critics, it appears that Heisig had continued to explore the ideas that had caused such controversy in 1965/66. In fact, it was not until the end of the 1960s that he turned away from emphasizing the Commune's final, bloody days in his work, a change that coincided with a broader turn in his art to creating more overtly Socialist works as will be discussed in the next chapter.

---

<sup>506</sup> See Eckhart Gillen, "Schwierigkeiten beim Suchen nach Wahrheit," in *Gestern und in dieser Zeit, Bernhard Heisig zum Achtzigsten*, ed. Heiner Köster (Leipzig: Faber & Faber, 2005) 77, Karin Thomas, *Kunst in Deutschland Seit 1945* (Köln: DuMont Literatur und Kunst Verlag, 2002) 198, and Ulrike Goeschen, *Vom sozialistischen Realismus zur Kunst im Sozialismus* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2001) 145. This misunderstanding seems to have begun with an unfortunate juxtaposition of information in the 1989 Retrospective catalog. *Retrospektive*, 101.

<sup>507</sup> In a review of an exhibition of Heisig's work from 1968, the Leipzig art historian Henry Schumann stated, "Von den insgesamt 8 ausgeführten Fassungen existieren noch vier, hiervon ist die 1965 geschaffene wohl die bisher bedeutendste, in Ausstellungen viel bemerkt und gegenwärtig in Buna ausgestellt." Interestingly, in an article published in 1996, he stated something different: "Als Konsequenz zerstörte Heisig diese (zehnte) Fassung der 'Pariser Commune.'" Günter Feist, Eckhart Gillen and Beatrice Vierneisel, eds., *Kunstdokumentation SBZ/DDR, Aufsätze, Berichte, Materialien* (Köln: Dumont, 1996), 517. Rita Jorek also stated she remembers seeing the painting again at an exhibition of Heisig's work at *Kunst der Zeit* gallery in 1968. Interview with Rita Jorek, Summer 2005. Newspaper articles confirm there was an exhibition of Heisig's work there in March of that year.

Despite the Plenum, Heisig's work was praised in *Bildende Kunst* two months later. This fact shows how inconsistent art policy in the GDR could be. It was not a monolithically repressive system, but rather one of different organizations and opinions. Indeed, these organizations frequently disagreed with each other as can be seen in the various reports created about the murals. It can also be seen, however, in Heisig's biography: He received the prestigious Hotel Germany commission in the very weeks he was being investigated by the Party because of his controversial speech at the Fifth Congress. This fact also illustrates the tendency for opinion to divide significantly between artists and theoreticians on the one side and cultural and political functionaries on the other.

Without a unified implementation of cultural policy, artists in East Germany were largely on their own to determine what was appropriate in terms of artistic style. As shown in this chapter, the art they created could end in controversy. That the battle over art was particularly strongly fought in Leipzig at this point in time is not surprising. As discussed in the previous chapter, Leipzig had twice been the center of high praise for creating the simple type of Socialist Realism functionaries preferred. The first time, under the leadership of Kurt Massloff, was at the Third German Art Exhibition in 1953; the second, under Heinrich Witz, at the Sixth Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig in 1961. In both cases, artists in Leipzig had broken out of their assigned role as a center for graphic arts to become praised for their painting. This ambition to be a center for East German painting reveals itself again in the Seventh Regional Art Exhibition, encouraged, no doubt, by the fact that this exhibition was part of the celebrations for Leipzig's 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Artists in the most international city in East Germany—indeed, the GDR's “secret” capital—wanted to be the best. Ultimately they succeeded. The formally innovative and

intellectual style of painting that first emerged at the Seventh went on to represent the GDR in the West in the late 1970s and 1980s.

As this chapter has shown, Heisig was at the center of the debates over what art in East Germany should be, especially as they played out in Leipzig. His commitment to raising the quality of Socialist art can be seen in his controversial speech at the Fifth Congress (see Chapter 3), where he called for, among other things, an openness to western artistic styles. It can also be seen in his murals at the Hotel Germany and in *The Paris Commune*. Indeed, the fact that these works became centers of controversy—receiving the highest praise and sharpest criticism—demonstrates just how engaged he was with the artistic issues of the day. It also reveals his talent as an artist. Heisig could touch a nerve: In less than two years, he was the focus of three separate controversies and countless reports and meetings.

Heisig's artistic skill, commitment to Socialism, political savvy, and feisty temperament made him an ideal figure in the fight to create an art that would transcend the narrow concerns of politicians in East Germany to be praised internationally. As such, he was a valued artist in Leipzig. It is therefore not surprising that in May 1966, the same month that Olbrich published his criticism of *The Paris Commune* in *Bildende Kunst*, Heisig was nominated by the VBK-L for the prestigious City Prize of Leipzig. Although he did not receive the award in this year, the fact that he was nominated at all is further evidence of his importance as an artist as well as of the complicated nature of cultural policy in East Germany.<sup>508</sup>

---

<sup>508</sup> Another indicator of the complexity of East German cultural policy can be seen in the fact that Heisig was nominated to create the murals for the Hotel Germany after he gave his controversial speech at the Fifth Congress but before his self-criticism.

In the nomination, which explains why he should receive the award, Heisig's intensive work with the Paris Commune thematic and his murals for the Hotel Germany are mentioned.<sup>509</sup> Significantly, it ends with the following sentence, which serves as a nice summary for this chapter, if not the dissertation as a whole: "With... the whole of his artistic production, [Heisig] throws out problems of representation that excite the conversation about the further development of our national art in an interesting and exciting way."<sup>510</sup>

---

<sup>509</sup> Also mentioned is "The Fascist Nightmare."

<sup>510</sup> VBK-L, *Kunstpreis der Stadt Leipzig 1966 [Empfehlung]*, 5/31/66. SächsStAL: VBK-L 155. "Er wirft damit, wie auch in seinem gesamten Schaffen, Gestaltungsprobleme auf, die das Gespräch über die Weiterentwicklung unserer nationalen Kunst interessant und positiv anregt."



## 5.0 PAINTING FOR THE EAST, 1968-71

Less than four years after the Seventh Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig, Heisig created another painting that would become a center of controversy, *The Brigade*. Little known in current scholarship—presumably, in part, because an image of the work was not thought to have survived—this painting marks the first of a number of portraits Heisig created between 1968 and 1971 that focus on figures important to Socialism.<sup>511</sup> Others include *Dimitroff*, *Lenin*, *Lenin and the Unbelieving Timofej*, and *Brigadier II*. Indeed, the latter three are three of the best-known portraits in Heisig's oeuvre.

When Heisig created these paintings, he was newly a freelance artist, having left his teaching position at the Leipzig Academy in August 1968. For the second and final time in his life in the GDR, he relied solely on his art to earn money, a condition that would last until 1976.<sup>512</sup> Not coincidentally, these years mark a significant jump in the number of paintings he

---

<sup>511</sup> I found a color photograph of this painting in the Kober Nachlass (AdK Archiv) in the Summer of 2005.

<sup>512</sup> Heisig's first stint as a freelance artist began in the late summer of 1951, when, in the wake of Max Schwimmer's departure, he left the Leipzig Academy, where he had been a student since 1949. He returned to the Leipzig Academy as an assistant teacher in January 1954. The conditions for his departure in 1968 will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. It was not difficult to survive on art alone in the GDR as the cost of living was low. Also, one of the VBKD's responsibilities was to make sure its members were getting commissions. Letters in the archives suggest that artists could—and did—go to the VBKD for help when struggling to make ends meet. In a worst case scenario, artists could always work a day or two in a factory; this would be enough to pay the bills for the entire month. (Interview with Sonja Eschefeld, Summer 2002). This is an important distinction to make from the capitalist system: money was not a weighing concern in the GDR the way it is in the West because the cost of living was so low.

created.<sup>513</sup> They also follow in the immediate wake of his transition—in the second half of the 1960s—from being primarily a graphic artist to primarily a painter, although graphics continue to play an important role in his artistic production to the present day.<sup>514</sup>

These years as a freelance artist also saw the beginning of Heisig’s so-called rise to *Staatskünstler* status in the GDR, especially once Erich Honecker came to power in 1971 and proclaimed that, “When one starts from the firm position of Socialism, there can be... no taboos in the realm of art and literature. That concerns the question of content as well as style...”<sup>515</sup> With this pronouncement, Heisig’s art—its style and frequent pessimism—could no longer be viewed as a danger to Socialism, and he quickly became recognized at the national level. In 1972, he was awarded the National Prize of the GDR, Second Class, among several other awards.<sup>516</sup> He also became a member of the Academy of Visual Arts in Berlin (AdK) as well as vice president of the Leipzig branch of the VBKD. In 1973, he had his first major retrospective exhibition, which opened in Dresden and traveled to Leipzig. Significantly, he was the first East German artist under fifty to have such an exhibition. Then in 1974, he was elected one of six vice presidents of the VBKD at the national level. In these years he also continued on as a member of

---

<sup>513</sup> These years also saw the emergence of several of his best-known series of *Komplexbilder*, including *Fortress Breslau*, *Difficulties in the Search for Truth*, and *Christ Travels with Us*.

<sup>514</sup> While it would be tempting to link this change in media to his departure from the Leipzig Academy, Heisig had had his first solo exhibition of paintings—at *Kunst der Zeit* in Leipzig—already in March 1968. This suggests that his turn to painting was something already in the works. It presumably stemmed from the fact that it was a more lucrative medium than graphics; it was also more highly valued in East Germany. It is for these reasons that Heisig had established a painting class at the Leipzig Academy several years earlier upon becoming rector in 1961. His new status as a freelance artist in 1968, however, would certainly have supported this change in emphasis.

<sup>515</sup> Erich Honecker at the Fourth Conference of the ZK der SED as reported in *Neues Deutschland* on December 18, 1971 and cited in *Kunstkombinat DDR, Daten und Zitate zur Kunst und Kunstpolitik der DDR 1945-1990*, eds. Günter Feist and Eckhart Gillen (Berlin: Museumspädagogischen Dienst, 1990) 77. “Wenn man von der festen Position des Sozialismus ausgeht, kann es meines Erachtens auf dem Gebiet von Kunst und Literatur keine Tabus geben. Das betrifft sowohl die Fragen der inhaltlichen Gestaltung als auch des Stils...”

<sup>516</sup> The following is a list of East German awards Heisig received between 1968 and 1976. Kunstpreis der Stadt Leipzig, 1970. National Prize, 2<sup>nd</sup> Class, 1972. Kunstpreis der DTSB (Deutscher Turn- und Sportbund), 1972 or 1973. Ehrennadel der Gesellschaft für DSF in Gold, 1972 or 1973. Kunstpreis des FDGB (Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund), 1973. Vaterländischer Verdienstorden in Gold, 1974. Theodor-Körner-Preis der NVA, 1974. Johannes R. Becher Medaille in Gold, 1975. Banner der Arbeit, Stufe I, 1976.

the jury of the Art Exhibitions of the GDR in Dresden and the Regional Art Exhibitions in Leipzig.

Current scholarship tends to describe Heisig's rise to *Staatskünstler* status in the GDR in these years as the result of his willingness to “compromise” himself for the new regime with works like *Brigadier II* and *Lenin*.<sup>517</sup> In this chapter, I will challenge this view by placing these works back into the cultural context in which they were created. I will begin with *Brigadier II*, looking at it in terms of the first painting he created on the subject, *The Brigade*. At the center of an intense debate in 1969, this earlier painting suggests that worker portraits were not as neutral—nor as propagandistic—as many Western scholars might assume. I will then turn to *Lenin*, comparing it to another work Heisig created on the subject, *Lenin and the Unbelieving Timofej*, and to works on the subject created by other artists at the time. When placed in context, these paintings suggest that Heisig was actively engaged in trying to rejuvenate a hackneyed subject matter and make it relevant for the intended audience, be it the people or the Party. Indeed, *The Brigade* is a similar attempt to redefine worker portraits, which were ubiquitous in the GDR. When placed in context, these four paintings—all but one of which were created before Honecker came to power in May 1971—reveal an artist who was committed to both East German art and Socialism, albeit not uncritically so.

---

<sup>517</sup> Official website for *WdB*, <[www.bernhard-heisig.de/press.html](http://www.bernhard-heisig.de/press.html)>. Accessed: February 19, 2007. “Daher zeigt die Ausstellung auch die Kompromisse, die Lenin-Porträts und Parteaufträge, wie z.B. das Wandbild *Gestern und in unserer Zeit* von 1974 aus dem Gebäude der Leipziger Bezirksleitung der SED, von dem Heisig zwei Tafeln durch Übermalung noch bis zum Februar 2005 revidierte.” For similar formulations see *WdB*, 302, 321, and Eckhart Gillen, *Das Kunstkombinat DDR: Zäsuren einer Gescheiterten Kunstpolitik* (Berlin: Dumont, 2005), 140.

## 5.1 FROM *THE BRIGADE* (1969) TO *BRIGADIER II* (1970)

One of Bernhard Heisig's best-known paintings in the GDR was *Brigadier II* (WV74, 1970), a work often referred to without the numerical designation. First exhibited at *The Face of the Working Class in the Visual Arts of the GDR* in 1971, this painting was highly praised in the press and subsequently reproduced in numerous catalogs and textbooks over the course of the Honecker era (1971-89).<sup>518</sup> It was even the subject of a postage stamp (fig. 5-1) made to commemorate the tenth party conference of the SED in 1981. In actuality, the painting on the postage stamp is not the same one that was exhibited in 1971 because Heisig repainted parts of it in 1979 (WV171).<sup>519</sup> The two versions nonetheless share the same canvas and are often referred to interchangeably. Both depict a stocky middle-aged brigade commander with a beer belly and graying hair giving a thumbs-up with his left hand. He wears a red V-neck shirt, blue jacket, and a hard hat with goggles typical for construction workers. In the original painting, the factory where he works is depicted in the background. In the later version, this has been largely painted out, effectively placing more emphasis on the figure.<sup>520</sup> It is not surprising that this painting—in both versions—was praised in the “Workers’ and Farmers’ state.” Heisig has painted the brigade commander as a content, even smug, man in control. Taking up more than half of the composition, he meets our upturned gaze with a slight smile and gives us the thumbs-up.

---

<sup>518</sup> In April 1971, it was chosen as the “work of the month” by the Leipzig Museum. It was also exhibited the following year at the Eighth Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig and the Seventh Art Exhibition of the GDR. Patricia Ferdinand-Ude, “Das gemalte Selbstbildnis im Werk von Bernhard Heisig in der Zeit von 1958-1995,” MA thesis, Universität Leipzig, 23.

<sup>519</sup> Date of Heisig's reworking of the painting from Ferdinand-Ude, 25.

<sup>520</sup> Heisig also painted the background out of a portrait titled, *Professor Walter Schiller* (compare WV50 and WV51). The latter work appears in the catalog for Heisig's first major retrospective exhibition in 1973. Another change in *Brigade II* is the inclusion of a dark red undershirt that covers more of the man's chest.

Although *Brigadier II* displays a positive view of life in the GDR, the original painting upon which it was based was quite controversial. This initial painting—the first of Heisig’s worker portraits—was created for a commission he received more than two years earlier, in June 1968, for an oil painting with the working title, *The Pipe Insulating Brigade*.<sup>521</sup> Commissioned by the District Council of Leipzig (RdB, Rat des Bezirkes Leipzig), the work was to be finished by January 31, 1969, in time for the regional art exhibition in Leipzig that summer.<sup>522</sup> Considered a highlight in Leipzig’s cultural program for that year, this exhibition was one of several that took place in the GDR in 1969 to celebrate the country’s 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>523</sup> Architectural art, as well as history paintings and portraits of the working class were the three main foci of these shows, which were to showcase the GDR’s achievements in the visual arts.<sup>524</sup>

According to Heisig (1973): “I hadn’t worked with this subject before. But since I sometimes spend months on a construction site creating [murals],” he felt able to attempt such a work when it was offered to him.<sup>525</sup> “I was particularly interested in capturing the atmosphere. For example, one time I saw a pipe insulation brigade working in the freezing cold. I found it optically quite interesting how they carried out their work in the snow with their big red hands... I painted two or three versions of the painting. Shortly before it was due... I decided to pull one of the figures—the one giving the thumbs up—to the front of the image...”<sup>526</sup> This painting was exhibited as *The Brigade* in the Regional Art exhibition for which it was commissioned.

---

<sup>521</sup> *Die Rohrisolierbrigade*. SächsStAL: VBK-L 213 & 273, RdS 8082, SED-L 607.

<sup>522</sup> Ibid.

<sup>523</sup> *Kommunique*. SächsStAL: VBK-L 128. “Die Ausstellung ist ein kultureller Höhepunkt in dem Programm des Bezirkes Leipzig für das Festjahr der Republik 1969.”

<sup>524</sup> Heisig exhibited work in all three of these areas.

<sup>525</sup> Commissions in East Germany were relatively open ended. Presumably the RdB approached Heisig about creating a worker portrait, and he gave them the working title of *Rohrisolierbrigade*. See full quote from Heisig in next footnote.

<sup>526</sup> “Der Künstler zu seinem Werk,” in *Kunsterziehung* (February 1973): 4. “Ich hatte mich vorher mit solchen Stoffen noch nicht beschäftigt. Aber viele Monate war ich manchmal auf Baustellen tätig, weil ich mich mit Kunst

*The Brigade* (WV63)—which is reproduced for the first time in this dissertation—depicts six workers against the backdrop of a factory.<sup>527</sup> The main figure, standing second from the left, rests his left hand on his hip. His right leg, bent and raised, carries his weight. His right hand gives a thumbs-up. A thin, middle-aged man with thinning white hair, he looks directly at the viewer and grins. While clearly not the same man portrayed in *Brigadier II*, the relationship between the two is obvious; the factory in the background may even be the same one, albeit depicted at much closer range in the later work. Behind him to the right, three workers in red shirts—two of whom wear hard hats—also look toward the viewer, or possibly at the smiling man standing at the right-hand border of the image. The one closest us has his left hand raised, presumably pointing to himself in the midst of a conversation. The figure on the right-hand side of the painting is nearly as large as the one giving the thumbs up. Wearing a hard hat, he catches our gaze with a smile, his arms folded across his chest. He is echoed on the left-hand side of the painting by another figure whose back is to us. This figure is the only one to contradict the optimism of the picture. With left-hand raised to the back of his short white-haired head, he appears tired, perhaps perplexed; as such, he is a reminder of the hard work these men undergo on a daily basis.

---

am Bau beschäftigte. Das Milieu war mir also vertraut, doch ich hatte es noch nie irgendwie gemalt. Und da bekam ich ein Angebot, ich hatte noch keinen Kontakt zu dem Stoff, musste mich erst herantasten, jedoch nicht mit der Absicht, porträtähnliche Bilder zu malen, sondern einfach um die Atmosphäre einzufangen. Zum Beispiel hat mich sehr interessiert, als ich bei starker Kälte eine Rohrisolier-Brigade sah, wie sie im Schnee, mit grossen, roten Händen ihre Arbeit verrichtete. Ich fand das optisch sehr interessant, bin also einfach erstmal vom Optischen ausgegangen. Mit der Zeit aber hat sich dann das Thema herausgeschält, und ich wollte dann eine Brigade malen... Ich kam aber mit der Arbeit noch nicht zurecht. Ich malte zwei, drei Fassungen des Bildes, kam bis kurz vor dem Ablieferungstermin – es war zu einer Ausstellung hier in Leipzig – damit nicht zu Rande und wusste auch nicht recht, woran es liegt. Bis ich mich entschloss, eine der Figuren, die diese Bewegung mit dem Daumen nach oben machte, im Bild ganz nach vorn zu ziehen. Und plötzlich hatte das Bild einen Akzent, und so hab ich es dann ausgestellt.”

<sup>527</sup> Unhappy with the painting, Heisig began reworking *The Brigade* shortly after the exhibition closed, ultimately destroying it through overpainting. I discovered a color photograph of it in the Kober Nachlass at the Archive of the AdK in the summer of 2005.

*The Brigade* captures these men at a moment of rest and—with the exception of the figure on the far left—emphasizes their good mood with smiles and the thumbs-up of the central figure. They appear confident, relaxed, and in dialogue with us, the viewer or artist. On one level, the work illustrates the fulfillment of life under socialism by focusing on the contentedness and joviality of its workers. On another, it illustrates the good relationship Heisig had with these particular men, who have not only stopped their work to interact with him, but are, in fact, posing for him and quite happily so. As such, this painting can be seen as visually supporting the Bitterfeld Way (1959), which promoted the better integration of workers and artists in East German society, primarily by sending the latter into factories to observe operations and by encouraging the former to create art and take part on exhibition juries.

Although current interpretations of Heisig's life and work downplay the positive relationship he had to the GDR, there is significant evidence to suggest he was a promoter of the Bitterfeld Way, at least in terms of its emphasis on closing the gap between life and art. In the argumentation submitted for the Medal for Outstanding Achievement he received in 1960—one of at least five he received during the Ulbricht era—Heisig was praised for the work he did in preparing and carrying out the Fourth Congress of the VBKD in 1959, the focus of which was on what the Bitterfeld Way meant for visual artists.<sup>528</sup> Heisig was also praised in this document for “setting an example in the encouragement of our young artists to carry through the Bitterfeld line” in his role as head of the Commission for Youth Questions in Leipzig.<sup>529</sup>

---

<sup>528</sup> *Begründung zum Vorschlag für die Auszeichnung mit der “Medaille für ausgezeichnete Leistungen” anlässlich des 1. Mai 1960*, 19.4.1960. SächsStAL: VBK-L 155. “Besonders hoch einzuschätzen ist seine Aktivität bei der Vorbereitung und Durchführung des IV. Verbandskongresses in ideologischer Hinsicht.” Heisig's biographical file at the Archive of the AdK states Heisig received the Medal for Outstanding Achievement five times. Additional archival evidence confirms the date for three of these awards: 1955, 1958, and 1960. SächsStAL: VBK-L 166 & VBK-L 181.

<sup>529</sup> *Ibid.* “[Als Leiter der Kommission für Nachwuchsfragen] er setzt sich beispielhaft ein für die Forderungen unserer jungen Künstler bei der Durchsetzung der Bitterfelder Linie.”

These official observations are supported by the speech Heisig gave at the Fourth Congress of the VBKD, where he strongly criticized the “dogmatism” of the “bourgeois Moderne” and argued in favor of a socially engaged art.<sup>530</sup> Heisig later reworked this speech and published it as the lead article for the April 1960 issue of *Bildende Kunst*. In “There is No Art for Art’s Sake,” he stated that he saw the West’s emphasis on a narrow set of rules—on formalist elements such as flatness—and its promotion of the artist as separate from society as leading to “artistic suicide,” which, he stated, has been avoided in socialist countries due the new “societal mission” artists have there.<sup>531</sup> For Heisig—both in this speech and in the present—art cannot be separated from its social context, nor should it be accessible only to a small elite. Indeed, Heisig’s ideal “partner” is the general public, and he believes “one must be able to make an art for which an understanding of art is not necessary.”<sup>532</sup> As he stated it in 1973, “I like it when [my art] appeals to people, when they get something from it... I am like a lynx afterwards, always trying to find out what people said about a work.”<sup>533</sup>

Heisig’s belief in the socialist collapsing of the distance between life and art can also be seen in his experimentation with architectural art during the Ulbricht era, when he made at least eleven large murals, mostly sgraffiti. In the GDR, the artistic decoration of buildings was seen as

---

<sup>530</sup> A transcript of this speech can be found in the Alfred Kurella Nachlass in the AdK Archiv. It was also published—in shortened form—in two sources at the time: in *Vierter Kongress des Verbandes Bildender Künstler Deutschlands* (Leipzig: VBKD, 1959) 91-9, and “Es Gibt Keine Kunst an Sich,” *Bildende Kunst* 4 (1960): 213-8. “dogmatik,” “spätbürgerlichen Moderne.”

<sup>531</sup> *Bildende Kunst* 4 (1960): 214. “Im Raum des Sozialismus setzte eine gesellschaftliche Bremswirkung früh genug ein, um diesen drohenden Selbstmord zu verhüten. Der Künstler stand hier plötzlich vor einem neuen gesellschaftlichen Auftrag.” See also *Vierter Kongress*, 94.

<sup>532</sup> Renate Hartleb, *Bernhard Heisig* (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1975) 2. “Mann müsste eine Kunst machen können, zu deren Verständnis kein Kunstverständnis notwendig ist.”

<sup>533</sup> *Bernhard Heisig: Gemälde, Zeichnungen, Lithographien* (Dresden: Gemäldegalerie Neue Meister, 1973) 46. “Ich suche viel lieber das Gespräch mit jemandem, der zu artistischen Fragen keinen Kontakt hat; mich interessiert sein Reflex vor dem Bild. Ich ziele auf eine möglichst einfache Partnervorstellung: ich möchte gern, daß es den Leuten gefällt, daß sie etwas davon haben. Ich bin der Meinung, daß das geht, denn es ist ja immer gegangen. Immer bin ich wie ein Luchs hinterher zu erfahren, was die Leute zu einem Bild sagen. – Am ödesten sind die sogenannten Fachdiskussionen über Malerei.”



an important contribution to society in terms of improving the quality of life. Rather than sitting in a museum, these works were out in the open, integrated into the daily interactions of the East German citizen. Highly valued by the regime, the visual arts were allocated a portion of the budget for every building project. Nor was Heisig's contribution limited to murals: He led the artistic planning for Karl-Marx-University (1968-75) and the Gewandhaus (1977-81), both located in the prestigious Karl-Marx-Platz in Leipzig.<sup>534</sup> Significantly, it was Heisig's experience with murals that led him to take up the commission to create *The Brigade* in 1968.

At the time Heisig created *The Brigade*, worker portraits had become a topic of particular interest among artists and functionaries in the GDR. Long a part of East German art—from early 1950s works focusing on rebuilding to early 1960s works focusing on the fruits of labor—changes in society and the view of the worker in the late 1960s were placing new demands on their visual representation, especially since the Seventh Party Conference of the SED in April 1967, when Ulbricht criticized the visual arts for lagging behind the social-political development of the GDR: “[there is a] certain insecurity among many artists, also the younger ones, toward... our Republic.”<sup>535</sup>

In the wake of this conference, *Bildende Kunst*, the GDR's main art magazine, devoted the first three articles of its January 1968 issue to worker portraits. All three take for granted what Gertraude Sumpf states outright in the second article: “the central task of the visual arts [in

---

<sup>534</sup> For more information, see ZM7411 and ZM8464 at the Leipzig University Archive and 03/177 at the Archive of the Gewandhaus.

<sup>535</sup> Walter Ulbricht, from his speech at the VII. Parteitag der SED, as published in *ND*, April 18, 1967, and republished in *Kunstkombinat* (1989), 68. “Dass solche Stimmungen und Auffassungen aufkommen können, erklärt sich aus einer gewissen Unsicherheit vieler Künstler, auch jüngerer, gegenüber den schnellen aussen- und innenpolitischen Entwicklungen unserer Republik.”

East Germany] today is to portray the people who are perfecting Socialism in our country.”<sup>536</sup> What exactly these new images should look like, however, is not stated. Rather, it is presented as a puzzle that only artists can solve.<sup>537</sup> The lack of artists taking up this challenge, however, is bemoaned in the magazine’s lead article, “The Image of the Working Man.” The authors, Waltraut Westermann and Jutta Schmidt, then focus on a number of paintings on display at the Sixth German Art Exhibition in Dresden—then in its final weeks—that they see as pointing in the right direction.<sup>538</sup>

A closer look at one of these works—Erhard Großmann’s *Brigade from LJW Prenzlau* (fig. 5-2, 1967)—provides a useful comparison for understanding how Heisig was engaging with the genre in *The Brigade*. Depicted in a realist style with just a hint of cubist simplification, Großmann’s painting shows seven male workers gathered together in an indoors setting, presumably the break room at the LJW Prenzlau factory. Loosely grouped into four figures on the left and three on the right, they appear both posed and relaxed, as if knowing their picture is going to be taken but that the cameraman is still loading the film. In the meantime, they sit or stand and wait. They appear sedantary, perhaps tired, and although they share the same physical space, they do not interact with each other, nor with us. Instead, each appears lost in thought, an aspect of the work that is both praised and criticized by Westermann and Schmidt, who see the portrayal of “deep psychological traits” in many of the figures as evidence of the artist’s closeness to the brigade on the one hand, but as taking away from the group feeling of the work on the other: “inner cohesion is missing... It is lacking a central point to bring them into

---

<sup>536</sup> Gertraude Sumpf, “Das Mensch-Technik-Problem in neuen Arbeiten von Willi Neubert,” in *Bildende Kunst* 1 (1968): 9. “Das Bild der Menschen zu gestalten, die heute in unserem Land den Sozialismus vollenden, ist die zentrale Aufgabe unserer bildenden Kunst.”

<sup>537</sup> Saying artists needed to solve this problem is an improvement over similar discussions earlier in the decade as evident in Heisig’s speech at the Fifth Congress in 1964.

<sup>538</sup> Waltraut Westermann and Jutta Schmidt, “Das Bild des arbeitenden Menschen,” in *Bildende Kunst* 1 (1968): 2-8.

relationship to each other instead of merely standing next to each other.”<sup>539</sup> Nonetheless they see the work as an “important step forwards.”<sup>540</sup>

In comparison to Großmann’s painting, whose somber tone and static nature are typical traits of worker portraits at the time, Heisig’s *The Brigade* is full of life, a feeling emphasized by the dynamic brushstroke and bright colors. Like Großmann, Heisig has caught the workers during a pause, but far from appearing tired or static, the men are active and happy – one gives the thumbs up, another brings his hand to his chest, several laugh. Rather than a group of individuals isolated from one another, the men seem to belong together, a fact emphasized by their shared orientation toward the front of the picture plane. In fact, Heisig has made us—the viewer or artist—the unifying factor of the work. The men appear to be responding to us, while two of them clearly return our gaze, something unusual for worker portraits of the day. As such, Heisig has made us an active participant in the work, as either a fellow brigade worker (many in the audience would have been workers) or a visitor. The smiles and gestures both welcome us into the fold and indicate how great life as a worker in this brigade is.

Not only illustrating the joy of life under socialism, where workers are proud of their active role in the development of a better society, *The Brigade* also reflects the importance of technology to the GDR at that time, which was being promoted since the Seventh Party Conference of the SED in 1967 as the way for Socialism to overtake Capitalism. In *The Brigade*, the factory where the men work takes on a prominent role in the background, not only establishing the location, but also reflecting the highly technological nature of East German

---

<sup>539</sup> Ibid., 6, 8. “An jeder seiner Gestalten ist ablesbar, dass er die ihm heute verfügbaren malerischen Mittel mit Sicherheit einzusetzen versteht und dass er mit den Menschen vertraut ist. Fast jeder Dargestellte besitzt...psychologisch vertiefte Züge. Aber es fehlt eben noch jenes innere Verbundensein, das die einzelnen Gestalten zueinander ins Verhältnis bringt.”

<sup>540</sup> Ibid., 6. “...mit dieser Arbeit ein ernsthafter Schritt vorwärts gelang...”

industry. Similarly, the integration of the worker and technology appears in the four smokestacks in the background, which echo the four figures in the center of the work.

Despite the optimism of the work and its relationship to the ideology of the day, *The Brigade* was not well received in the party press when it was exhibited at the 1969 regional art exhibition in Leipzig for which it was created. In fact, it was heavily criticized. The harshest criticism came from Dr. Herbert Letsch, editor of the *Leipziger Volkszeitung (LVZ)*. In an article published in the *LVZ* on May 24<sup>th</sup>, he wrote:

The expressive painting wakens above all the impression of pained, mistreated human beings. The painting has a strong leaning toward the amorphous, the destructive, the morbid. At the same time the clumsy and brutal painting style is not to be ignored... Bloody and virtually brutal reds have been placed in the faces, with corresponding pale, sick blues and weak greens. The warm orange tones emphasize the amorphous and brutal character of the painting. This use of color does not lead to an expressive enhancement of a true expression of the spiritual life of the new human being, but rather an impression of pained and physically mistreated human beings... Similarly the composition avoids all stability; it is as amorphous and formless as the painting itself. The features of the handwriting apparent here is the painterly expression of a subjective and false interpretation of the essence of the socialist human being.<sup>541</sup>

A similar sentiment, albeit in much softer tones, was expressed a month later—allegedly by a reader—in the SED’s national newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*: “I know that Professor Heisig is an artist with great talent, but the construction workers that he painted radiate, in my

---

<sup>541</sup> Dr. Herbert Letsch, “Handschrift-Expressivität-Ideologie,” in *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (24 May 1969). “Diese expressive Malerei erweckt vor allem die Vorstellung vom gequälten, vom geschundenen Menschen. Diese Malerei hat einen starken Zug ins Amorphe, ins Destruktive, ins Morbide. Zugleich ist das Ungeschlachte und brutale des malerischen Duktus nicht zu übersehen... Da werden in Gesichtern blutige, geradezu brutal-stofflich wirkende Rots eingesetzt, und blässliche, kranke Blaus und schwächliche Grüns korrespondieren mit ihnen. Die Wärme der Orange-Töne unterstreicht diesen amorphen und brutalen Charakter der Malerei. Dieser Einsatz der Farbe dient nicht der expressiven Steigerung einer wahren Aussage vom geistigen Leben des neuen Menschen, sondern er stimuliert die Vorstellung vom gequälten und direkt physisch geschundenen Menschen... Auch die Komposition läßt im Ganzen jede Festigkeit vermissen, sie ist ebenso amorph, formlos, wie die Malerei selbst. Die Züge der Handschrift, die hier vorliegt, sind malerischer Ausdruck einer subjektivistischen, einer falschen Auffassung vom Wesen des sozialistischen Menschen.”

opinion, neither the strength of the working class, their creation, their self confidence, nor the true humanity of socialist personalities. They appear to me to be crude, impersonal, and foreign...”<sup>542</sup>

Ostensibly, the problem with *The Brigade* was its style and, in particular, the “almost brutal” way in which it was painted. And yet Heisig’s use of a loose, late German impressionist brushstroke was not new to his work at this point in time, but rather had been in evidence for at least a year, if not longer.<sup>543</sup> An ambivalent review of a small exhibition of his work the previous year, in March 1968, confirms this point:

...his new, very painterly painting is loud, brutal, wild – and very sensitive. It is unobliging and inelegant... [it] knows, however, the delicacies of the palette of late German Impressionism or also [Max] Schwimmer. What exactly gleams by this fine skin... a charming conversation of color and line winds its way... through a unique topography. It seems to threaten us from behind the surface, to explode suddenly from it, [and] to float above it as a fine web of lines. The formal aggression covers itself with the thematic.<sup>544</sup>

Significantly, *The Brigade* was not the only painting Heisig showed at the Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig that year that displayed such brushwork. *The Sons of Icarus* (WV69) had a

---

<sup>542</sup> Irma Nitschka, “Wir suchen unser geistiges Antlitz, Leser schreiben zu Bezirksausstellung ‘Architektur und bildende Kunst,’” in *Neues Deutschland* (24 July 1969). “Ich weiss Professor Heisig ist ein Künstler mit grossem Talent, aber die Bauarbeiter, die er gemalt hat, strahlen nach meiner Meinung weder die Kraft der Arbeiterklasse, ihr Schöpfertum, ihr Selbstbewusstsein, noch die echte Menschlichkeit sozialistischer Persönlichkeiten aus. Auf mich wirkten sie eher grob, unpersönlich und fremd.” While this article may have been written by a reader, criticisms by officials were sometimes presented as such, thus it is possible that “Irma Nitschka” is a pseudonym. Werner Krecek’s letter about *The Paris Commune* discussed in Chapter 2, for example, was published under the pseudonym Klaus-Dieter Walter.

<sup>543</sup> The earliest works with such a brushstroke are currently dated to 1966 and include, *Akt im Spiegel* (WV43), *Bildnis der Mutter* (WV44), and *Gudrun* (WV45).

<sup>544</sup> Dr. M.T., “Eine Topographie in Farben. Werke von BH bei ‘Kunst der Zeit’ ausgestellt,” in *Die Union* (30 March 1968). “...wenn auch nicht sensationell – so doch schockierend. Wir glauben damit nichts zu sagen, was nicht grundlegend beabsichtigt ist. Seine neuere, sehr malerische Malerei ist laut, brutal, wild – und sehr sensibel. Sie ist ungefällig und ungraziös und kennt doch die Delikatessen auf den Paletten des deutsche Spätimpressionismus oder auch bei Schwimmer. Was aber gerade bei diesem feinhäutig, durchschimmert war, anmutige Konversation von Farbe und Linie, schlingt sich bei Heisig durch eine eigenwillige Topographie, droht tief hinter der Bildfläche, bricht plastisch aus ihr hervor, schwebt als feines Linienspinst darüber. Die formale Aggression deckt sich mit der thematischen.”

similarly loose brushstroke, but it was not criticized in the press. In fact, it was illustrated in the catalog, albeit in black and white. Moreover, this other painting—a comparison of two world views, one based on science, the other, religion—was relatively pessimistic in tone.<sup>545</sup>

In this context, it becomes clear that it was not the brushstroke per se that was “shocking” about *The Brigade*, but rather its use in the worker portrait genre. Worker portraits were always political, but at this point in time, they had become particularly volatile because the Sixth Party Conference had made them of interest to both politicians and artists alike. The latter were expected to define the genre, yet their attempts frequently clashed with the limited artistic understanding of many political functionaries who wanted merely “pretty” pictures done in a conservative realist style.

Another reason for the criticism, however, can be gleaned from a report written by the Leipzig branch of the SED on May 28, 1969. This report lists all three of Heisig’s paintings from the Regional Exhibition as showing no socialist realist position, but it singles out *The Brigade* for particular censure:

Professor Heisig steps before the public with a present-day theme in *The Brigade*... With it, he fully neglects the dialectical unity of content and form. He breaks free from and dissolves form. The workers are intentionally nastily portrayed. The brigade image stands in sharp contrast to the socialist human image. Through this portrayal, Professor

---

<sup>545</sup> The left half of the painting is dominated by the Russian scientist and father of human space flight, Konstantin Ziolkowski. He is seated on a plinth and looks to the stars much like he does in the sculpture of him outside the Memorial Museum of Cosmonautics in Moscow. Above him soar planes and rockets. In the right half of the painting, however, a bishop holds his hands to his face while a heretic, tied to a stake, burns beside him. Behind them the Tower of Babel looms large. In the bottom right-hand corner of the painting, Leonardo da Vinci works on a flying machine while looking up toward Ziolkowski, making a connection between the artist and scientist that Heisig himself may have felt. Between them a small figure of Icarus—his wings drawing a diagonal line between da Vinci and Ziolkowski—bends forward as if to jump into the sky. Behind him another image of Icarus plummets to the ground. In the top center of the composition a giant moon separates the two sides of the painting—the scientific from the religious—and recalls the space race taking place at this point in time between the two super powers. In fact, it was less than a month after the exhibition closed that Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, effectively signalling the US’ victory in this regard. The Soviet space program can thus be seen as one of the sons of Icarus referred to in the painting’s title.

Bernhard Heisig expresses skepticism in his relationship to the working class as the leading strength of our societal development.<sup>546</sup>

According to this report, the problem with Heisig's "crude" portrayal of the figures in his painting seems to be less the style itself than the fear that the painting may, in fact, have been criticizing the GDR, or perhaps, even, real existing Socialism as a whole. Indeed, there were things to criticize. In 1968, the Soviet Union had put an end to the revisionism taking place in Czechoslovakia where Alexander Dubcek had been trying to give Socialism "a human face." These changes—such as ending censorship—gave many intellectuals throughout the Eastern bloc hope for a more democratic Socialism. In August, these hopes were crushed when the Soviets sent military tanks into Prague to forcibly suppress dissent.<sup>547</sup>

It was also in this year that Heisig left the Leipzig Academy, becoming a freelance artist for the second and final time in the GDR. His resignation was presumably prompted, in part, by the recent dogmatic turn in higher education as a result of the Third University Reform.<sup>548</sup> Long

---

<sup>546</sup> *Einschätzung der Werke der Malerei, Grafik und Plastik der Bezirksausstellung Leipzig "Architektur und bildende Kunst,"* Leipzig, May 28, 1969. SächsStAL: SED-L IV.B.2.9.2.607. "Prof. Bernhard Heisig tritt mit dem *Brigadebild* mit einem aktuellen Thema an die Öffentlichkeit. Dabei mißachtet er völlig die dialektische Einheit von Inhalt und Form. Er verselbständigt die Form und löst sie auf. Die Arbeiter werden bewußt häßlich dargestellt. Das *Brigadebild* stellt einen Gegensatz zur sozialistischen Menschenbildgestaltung dar. Durch diese Gestaltungsweise äußert Prof. Bernhard Heisig Skeptizismus, sein Verhältnis zur Arbeiterklasse als der führenden Kraft unserer gesellschaftlichen Entwicklung."

<sup>547</sup> According to Kurt Hager, the GDR did not send troops into Prague as is frequently thought. Instead, they were readied and sent to the East German border as backup that was never called upon. Kurt Hager, *Erinnerungen* (Leipzig: Faber & Faber, 1996) 300.

<sup>548</sup> The Third University Reform went into effect in 1968. It marked a dogmatic turn in East German higher education that led several professors to leave teaching, including Gerhard Kurt Müller, who had replaced Heisig in 1964 as rector of the Leipzig Academy. Heisig suggests as much a decade later in a conversation with the Leipzig art historian Henry Schumann: "I had no choice. The circumstances at the time did not give me the necessary measure of freedom I needed to realize my goals." When asked by Schumann whether it was a free decision, Heisig stated, "yes, encouraged by some circumstances that spoiled the teaching profession for me at the time in 1968." Henry Schumann, *Ateliergespräche* (Leipzig: Seeman Verlag, 1976) 119. ["Ich hatte keine Wahl. Die Umstände gaben mir damals nicht das nötige Maß an Freiheit, das ich brauchte, um Zielvorstellungen verwirklichen zu können. ... Ja, gefördert durch einige Umstände, die mir damals 1968 das Lehramt verleidet hat."]

Current scholarship explains Heisig's departure from the Leipzig Academy in 1968 as the result of his being threatened with being sent to a one-year political school. See *WdB* 219 and *Kunstkombinat* (2005) 140. The source for this information, which is uncited, is presumably the October 1967 meeting minutes of the local SED: *Protokoll*

the focus of criticism from individual members of the local Party, his teaching—and, in particular, the skepticism found in many of his students’ work—came under increasing fire in a number of reports leading up to the Reform.<sup>549</sup> One such report, for example, states:

...the diploma classes of Comrade Professor Heisig... embody in their basic attitude marked skepticism... [there is] an inclination toward the depiction of the peculiar, strange, or, as it is expressed in the visual arts, an inclination toward the “plumbing the depths of the soul” ...<sup>550</sup>

---

*der Leitungssitzung vom October 19*, October 19, 1967, SächsStAL: SED-L 356. This report, however, does not present the Party school as a punishment, but rather as an award for Heisig’s being an “ersten Genossen.” Similarly, Heisig seems to have responded positively to the suggestion: “Heisig is fundamentally in agreement with a visit to the Party school. He asks, however, for concrete suggestions on how he can reconcile his currently large stock of artistic commissions for the public with his activity as a teacher.” [“Heisig: ist grundsätzlich mit einem Parteischulbesuch einverstanden. Er bittet aber um konkrete Vorschläge, wie er den jetzigen grossen Auftragsbestand an künstlerischen Arbeiten für die Öffentlichkeit und der Tätigkeit als Lehrer vereinbaren soll.”] It is unclear whether Heisig’s response was genuine or simply a tactful evasion. In either case, the report does not support current scholarship’s portrayal of this moment as a significant break between Heisig and the Party. Nor is there an explanation given for why such a break would happen at this point in time; Heisig had been the focus of criticism for years.

In comparison to this one report, there is significant evidence to suggest Heisig left the Leipzig Academy in 1968 in order to have more time for his art. As he himself stated in the report above, he had numerous commissions to fulfill, including at least three paintings, two murals, and a print series. He was also head of the visual arts program of the Karl Marx University building project. (See the catalog for the 1969 Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig). Indeed, to have more time for his art is the reason he gave in the biographical section of his CV a few years later. “Danach war ich bis 1968 Leiter der Abteilung Grafik und Malerei und löste 1968 das Lehrverhältnis aus eigenem Wunsch, da die zeitlichen Belastung eine sinnvolle Fortführung meiner künstlerischen Arbeit nicht mehr ermöglichen.” *Lebenslauf*, April 6, 1972, AdK Archiv: Kober Nachlass 14/3. A report in his Stasi file similarly suggests he left to have more time for his art: “Prof. H. gehört zweifellos zu den wichtigsten Künstlern unserer Republik. Einer größeren Öffentlichkeit ist er allerdings erst in den letzten Jahren bekannt geworden, d.h., seit er sein Lehramt an der HGB in Leipzig aufgegeben hat und sich ganz seiner künstlerischen Arbeit widmen konnte.” Unlabeled report, presumably dating from 1974, BStU Leipzig: Bernhard Heisig 000022.

<sup>549</sup> Archival evidence suggests Heisig was criticized at the Leipzig Academy at least as early as 1959. In a review of his person from that year, he was called a “recht schwieriger Charakter,” one whose basic attitude was “bürgerlich” and who was politically “oberflächlich.” It also stated he was missing the inner preparedness needed for political education. *Protokoll über die Leitungssitzung vom 2.6.59*. HGB Archive. Another report from just over a week later called him “ein besonders heikles Problem.” *Sitzung der Parteileitung am 11.6.59*. HGB Archive. In 1960, he was criticized for a “mangelnde Parteiverbundenheit.” *Protokoll der Parteileitungssitzung vom 29.4.60*. HGB Archive. These reports suggest that criticism of Heisig was nothing new, thus it seems unlikely that the criticisms of 1966 and 1967 would have been enough—on their own—to cause him to leave the Leipzig Academy.

<sup>550</sup> Barth and Butzmann, *Information für Gen. Paul Fröhlich*, July 14, 1966. SächsStAL: SED-L 356. “...die Diplom-Klassen von Gen. Prof. Heisig... verkörpern in ihrer geistigen Grundhaltung ausgeprägten Skeptizismus... Unterstützt wird das noch dadurch, dass es einen Hang zur Gestaltung des Absonderlichen, Skurrilen oder wie es in der bildenden Kunst ausgedrückt wird, einen Hang zum ‘loten in die Tiefe der Seele’ gibt...”



Similarly, Heisig's graphics classes were criticized in this report for illustrating existentialist authors like Sartre and Kafka instead of work by East German authors.

In light of these events, it is easy to read *The Brigade* as a criticism of real existing socialism, thus Letsch's comment that it was "intentionally nastily portrayed." The clash between the optimism of the subject matter and the "virtually brutal" brushstrokes and "sick" color can be seen to function as a visual commentary on the disconnect between the ideals of Socialism and the reality of it as exemplified by the violent suppression of the uprising in Prague.<sup>551</sup> Similarly, the flamboyant optimism of the workers in *The Brigade*—especially as marked by the thumbs-up giving protagonist—may have been intended as an ironic jab at the accusation of skepticism that had been leveled at his teaching in recent years. On a lesser note, the figure with his back turned toward the viewer can be read as a reminder of the physical and mental exhaustion such workers face on a daily basis.

Criticized by the Party, *The Brigade* was defended by the Leipzig branch of the Artists' Association (VBK-L), albeit not uniformly praised; indeed, the painting is not one of Heisig's best. In June, thus shortly after the SED's report, they released their own evaluation of the exhibition:

---

<sup>551</sup> It was also in this year that the University Church St. Pauli in Leipzig was blown up to make room for another building in spite of significant protest from local citizens. This event marks a particularly low moment in Leipzig's history as political functionaries won out against the will of the people. Even in the present, many citizens of Leipzig are still upset about this event. See "Leipzig braucht die Universitätskirche, zum Wiederaufbau der 1968 gesprengten Paulinerkirche," 21 February 2007, <[www.paulinerkirche.de/inhalt11.htm](http://www.paulinerkirche.de/inhalt11.htm)>. Recently Erick van Egeraat from Rotterdam won the design competition for a new church, which is scheduled to be completed by 2009 in time for the university's 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary. See "Jury beendet Streit um Pauliner-Aula" in *MDR* (26 May 2004), 21 February 2007, <[www.mdr.de/kultur/521368.html](http://www.mdr.de/kultur/521368.html)>. Heisig has spoken out in favor of Egeraat's design, stating "Diese brutale Sprengung war ein Schock. Deshalb brauchen wir heute eine würdige Form des Erinnerns." Jackie Richard, "Der grosse Bernhard Heisig fleht: Erspart uns bitte den St.-Pauli-Schock," *BILD* (7 October 2005), 21 February 2007 <[www.detektei-wischer.de/erkl\\_licht.htm](http://www.detektei-wischer.de/erkl_licht.htm)>.

Professor Heisig's composition shocked some observers through its very expressive application of color... If one looked past this first and—for some—foreign impression, the work reveals outstanding value. In particular, the optimism that radiates from the picture, the complete lack of convention, as well as the convincing inner strength of the people.<sup>552</sup>

Pointing out that the work was created as a commission, the VBK-L's report faults the lack of communication between Heisig and the RdB, who gave the commission, for the work's overemphasis on formal elements. It also points out the difficulty of creating images of brigades, calling for more time and money to develop this genre, and praises the attempt: "The exhibition shows that Leipzig artists have no fear of tackling great tasks... That goes also for the format. The courage to master important themes spiritually and practically should be praised and recognized."<sup>553</sup>

In another report, Joachim Uhlitzsh seems to straddle the line between these two perspectives. On the one side, he admits that "the three most problematic artists of our time are: 1) Werner Tübke, 2) Bernhard Heisig, and 3) Wolfgang Mattheuer."<sup>554</sup> And yet, he goes on to say, "none of whom are so far from the Party that they cannot be won with patience..."<sup>555</sup> In regard to *The Brigade*, he takes a cautiously positive view: "in contrast to Comrade Letsch, who

---

<sup>552</sup> *Einschätzung der Malerei und Grafik der Bezirksausstellung "Architektur und bildende Kunst" im Messehaus am Markt vom 1. Mai bis 30. Juni 1969.* SächsStAL: SED-L 607. "Prof. Heisigs Komposition schockierte manchen Betrachter durch die sehr expressive Art des Farbauftrags... Wenn es jedoch gelang, den ersten und für viele fremdartigen Eindruck zu überwinden, erschlossen sich am Werk hervorragende Werte. Besonders hervorzuheben sind der Optimismus, den das ganze Bild ausstrahlt, der völlige Mangel an Konvention sowie die überzeugende innere Kraft und Stärke der Menschen." Compare to second document of the same name in the same file for slight variations.

<sup>553</sup> Ibid. "Die Ausstellung liess erkennen, dass die Leipziger Künstler insgesamt keine Scheu vor der Übernahme grosser Aufgaben – bis hin zum Historienbild – haben. Das gilt auch im Hinblick auf die Formate. Der Mut, bedeutsame Themen geistig und praktisch zu bewältigen, ist hervorzuheben und anzuerkennen."

<sup>554</sup> Joachim Uhlitzsch, *Zur Einschätzung der Abteilung I der Bezirkskunstausstellung Architektur-bildende Kunst zum 20. Jahrestag der DDR*, May 28, 1969. SächsStAL: SED-L IV.B.2.9.2.607. "Die drei problematischsten Künstler sind zur Zeit: a) Werner Tübke, b) Bernhard Heisig, c) Wolfgang Mattheuer."

<sup>555</sup> Ibid. "Ich halte keinen dieser drei Künstler für so weit von den Forderungen der Partei abgekommen, dass er bei geduldiger Einbeziehung in das Kollektiv der fortschrittlichen Kräfte, und vor allem bei konkretisierter Aufgabenstellung, für künftige Werke nicht gewonnen werden könnte."

strongly criticized Heisig's Brigade painting... I believe that it shows the beginnings of the artist's contemplation of the societal commission."<sup>556</sup> More importantly, he states that, "after talking to Heisig extensively about this Brigade painting, I will give him a new commission with the concrete advice to emphasize the optimistic attitude and to clear up the formal relationship between the figure and the space."<sup>557</sup>

Whether or not Uhlitzsch gave him a new commission is unclear, although Heisig did create at least two more worker portraits over the course of the next year, destroying *The Brigade* in the process.<sup>558</sup> According to Gerhard Winkler, director of the Leipzig Museum, which owned both *The Brigade* and its successor, *Brigadier II*: "...images developed in quick succession in which the foundational theme of the...[*Brigadier II*] began to crystallize. Heisig showed the version that came immediately before this one at the Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig in 1969. It gave rise to much approval, but also to sharp disapproval. Some of these discussions were the occasion for [*Brigadier II*]."<sup>559</sup>

Heisig, on the other hand, explains the genesis of this painting as follows:

*The Brigade* was so ripped apart that I took the painting back. I wanted to change it, but it got worse and worse and then I threw it in the corner. Through word of mouth came the magazine *FF Dabei*, the only one that had art reproductions and wanted to give *The Brigade* a whole page... the painting didn't exist any more. But I didn't want to lose the

---

<sup>556</sup> Ibid. "Im Gegensatz zum Genossen Letsch, der in einem Artikel in der *LVZ* vom 24.6. das Brigadebild Heisigs heftig attackiert, bin ich der Auffassung, dass hier Ansatzpunkte zu einer Besinnung des Künstlers auf den gesellschaftlichen Auftrag liegen."

<sup>557</sup> Ibid. "Ich würde Heisig nach ausführlicher Diskussion an diesem Brigadebild einen erneuten Auftrag zum gleichen Thema erteilen, mit dem konkreten Hinweis, den optimistischen Grundgehalt stärker und endgültiger herauszuarbeiten und eine formale Klärung der Figuren und des Raumes, entsprechen diesem Grundgehalt, zu unternehmen."

<sup>558</sup> *Brigadier I* (WV70) and *Brigadier II* (WV74). In her MA thesis, Patricia Ferdinand-Ude explains that *Die Brigade* came into the possession of the Leipzig Museum and that Heisig managed to convince the director, Dr. Winkler, to let him bring the work back to his studio for further work. Ferdinand-Ude, 24.

<sup>559</sup> Winkler, "Kunstwerk des Monats aus dem Museum bildende Künste Leipzig," *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (10 April 1971). "...entstanden in schneller Folge einige Bildfassungen, in denen sich das Grundthema des hier besprochenen Gemäldes zu kristallisieren began. Die Fassung, die unmittelbar vorausging, zeigte Heisig auf der Leipziger Bezirkskunstausstellung im Jahre 1969. Sie rief viel Zustimmung, aber auch scharfe Ablehnung hervor. Einige dieser Diskussionen waren der Anlass... zum hier besprochenen Gemälde *Der Brigadier* [sic]."

reproduction. So I took out the main figure of the five and painted him in front of a ballet mirror...<sup>560</sup>

Confirming Heisig's account, *Brigadier II* appears as a nearly full-page color illustration in the December 4, 1970 issue of *FF Dabei*. The short text written by Gerhard Winkler shows how the work was viewed at the time:

[*The Brigadier* depicts] an experienced builder between thirty and forty years old, who is no longer so quickly brought to action, but who one nonetheless trusts can be hard in the suitable moment. His class consciousness presents itself not through external attributes but rather through his inner bearing. He is not a worker who, in a constant dispute over wages as a so-called "employee," must push through his rights opposite capitalist business, but rather a worker who, as the owner of societal means of production, is the human type who characterizes our socialist present.<sup>561</sup>

Four months later, Winkler wrote another, longer article praising the *Brigadier II* in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* when it was featured as the Leipzig Museum's work of the month.<sup>562</sup> So began the painting's rise to fame. Over the course of the next couple years it was exhibited in numerous exhibitions, including the Eighth Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig and the Seventh Art Exhibition of the GDR in Dresden. Not only highly praised in the press, it also affected other artists' portrayal of the subject. The most notable example of this is Frank Rüdiger's *Meister*

---

<sup>560</sup> Gillen interview, October 15, 2000, in *Kunstkombinat* (2005), 140. "Das Brigadebild ist so verrissen worden, dass ich das Gemälde zurückgenommen habe. Ich wollte es ändern, es wurde aber immer schlechter und dann habe ich es in die Ecke geschmissen. Durch Flüsterpropaganda kam die Zeitschrift *FF Dabei*, die einzige, die Kunstreproduktion brachte, auf mich zu und wollte die Brigade ganzseitig abbilden, das Bild existierte aber nicht mehr. Auf die Reproduktion wollte ich aber nicht verzichten. Da habe ich die Hauptfigur der insgesamt fünf Figuren herausgenommen und habe sie vor dem Ballettspiegel gemalt." In her MA thesis, Patricia Ferdinand-Ude mentions that Heisig created *Brigadier II* under some pressure, thus seeming to support his account.

<sup>561</sup> Gerhard Winkler, *FF Dabei* (4 December 1970). "Der Type des Brigadiers ist sehr genau angelegt: ein erfahrener Bauarbeiter zwischen 30 und 40 Jahren, den so schnell nichts mehr aus der Ruhe bringt, dem man aber zutraut, dass er im geeigneten Augenblick hart werden kann. Sein Klassenbewusstsein drückt sich nicht durch äussere Attribute, sondern durch seine innere Handlung aus. Es ist nicht der Arbeiter, der im ständigen Lohnkampf stehend als sogenannter 'Arbeitnehmer' seine Rechte gegenüber dem kapitalistischen Unternehmer durchsetzen muss, sondern es ist der Arbeiter, der als Eigentümer gesellschaftlicher Produktionsmittel den Menschentyp unserer sozialistischen Gegenwart charakterisiert."

<sup>562</sup> Dr. Gerhard Winkler, "Kunstwerk des Monats aus dem MbK Leipzig. Bernhard Heisig's *Der Brigadier*, Ölgemälde," in *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (10 April 1971).

*Heyne* (fig. 5-3), which, like Heisig's, is a close up of a confident and happy worker; instead of giving a thumbs up, however, he simply laughs.

By the end of the decade, *Brigadier II* had been reproduced countless times in newspaper articles and textbooks.<sup>563</sup> Then in 1981, it became the image on the 20 pfennig stamp made to honor the tenth Party conference of the SED. What had begun as a controversial work with *The Brigade* in 1969 had developed into one of Heisig's best known and most lauded paintings in the GDR.

## 5.2 LENIN (AND THE UNBELIEVING TIMOFEJ)

In the same year he received the commission to create *The Brigade*, Heisig was invited to submit a sketch of Vladimir Lenin to a competition in Leipzig.<sup>564</sup> Although there is currently no archival evidence to confirm whether he actually entered work for—or won—this competition, he did create his first portrait of Lenin at this time, *Lenin and the Unbelieving Timofej* (WV76, 1968).<sup>565</sup> A well-known painting in his oeuvre, this work—or, more accurately, two subsequent

---

<sup>563</sup> In 1973, Heisig created a self portrait with this painting in the background, *Selbst mit erhobener Hand* (WV106).

<sup>564</sup> Heisig was actually invited to submit work for two portraiture competitions at this time, one for Lenin and one for Georgi Dimitroff. The two competitions were usually discussed together. *Protokoll der Sitzungsleitung – Sitzung am 1. Oktober 1968*, SächsStAL: VBK-L 114. Heisig was first suggested for the Dimitroff painting already on March 19, 1968. *Protokoll der Sitzungsleitung*, SächsStAL: VBK-L 21. The first description of what the content of the paintings should be, however, does not appear until August 10. *Inhaltliche Konzeption zum Wettbewerb Tafelbild*. August 10, 1968. SächsStAL: VBK-L 114. The call for a limited competition for these two oil paintings is mentioned again in a document on September 24. *Beschluss des Rates des Bezirkes, Nr. 99-21/68*, SächsStAL: BT/RdB 4656. A document dated to October 16 explains how the works would be judged, how much each participant would receive for his or her sketch, which was to be 1:5 in size, and that these sketches would be due on March 20, 1969. *Wettbewerbsbedingungen*, SächsStAL: VBK-L 114. It appears that the end date for these two paintings may have changed during the process. In the introduction to the catalog, *Im Geistes Lenins*, where Heisig's works on Lenin and Dimitroff were first exhibited, it says the initiative for these works was decided in December 1969, which is more than a year after the dates suggested by the archival evidence just cited.

<sup>565</sup> Heisig also created a painting titled, *Dimitroff* (WV78), which suggests he was responding to the competitions. Other artists also created works on these topics at this point in time. Harry Blume exhibited a painting titled,

versions of it (WV58, WV59)—is praised today for its seemingly irreverent portrayal of the Soviet leader. Indeed, the image is filled with humor, which, when placed in context, can be seen as another attempt—like with *The Brigade* and *Brigadier II*—to rejuvenate a subject matter that had been painted countless times before. A comparison of this work with *Lenin* (WV86, 1971), a more serious painting on the subject he completed three years later, further suggests that Heisig was consciously adapting his art to the needs and interests of his audience.

The first *Lenin and the Unbelieving Timofej* was made, if not in response to the above-mentioned competition, then for Lenin's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1970, for which there was a general call to artists to create work.<sup>566</sup> As Heisig's description of the painting's development suggests, it was not a topic he simply came to on his own:

As I began to work with the Lenin theme, I had no contact to [it], which meant nothing more and nothing less than all the others. It is a figure that, as a subject, is so staked out and so often made that one could really have doubts. It appeared to make no sense to work with the figure at all when everything has already been done. I watched all possible films and studied other materials until the conversation with [the cultural functionary Alfred] Kurella came back to me. [It was a conversation about how the success of the book *Naked Among Wolves* stemmed from its use of a story from the Bible]. I took up the old biblical subject of Christ and the unbelieving Thomas, and from Thomas, I made Timofej; I didn't know that Timofej was not the [Russian] translation of Thomas. – It was simply about showing the relationship of two humans to each other... [I] sought a fable to make the Lenin figure somehow current. That was for me an essential point.<sup>567</sup>

---

*Lenin in Leipzig*, at an exhibition in Berlin in April 1970. Heinz Zander exhibited a painting of Dimitroff at an exhibition in Leipzig in October 1970.

<sup>566</sup> Although this work is frequently dated to 1968, 1970 seems more likely. The latter is the date given to it in the catalog for the first exhibition in which it appeared. The earlier date suggests the painting was created for the above-mentioned competition, yet the competition's description stipulates a portrayal of Lenin in Leipzig. As such, the Lenin Initiative for his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday seems the more likely impetus for the work.

<sup>567</sup> Bernhard Heisig, undated transcript (presumably 1973). AdK Archiv: Kober Nachlass 13/5. "Alfred Kurella hat mich besucht und fragte mich: was denkst du, warum der Roman von Apitz "Nackt unter Wölfen" so großen Erfolg hat? Literarisch ist er doch gar nicht so bedeutend! Er hat einfach folgendes gemacht: er hat ein ganz altes Thema der menschlichen Grundverhaltensweise, wie es schon in der Bibel steht – und die Bibel ist ja ein Buch voller Volksweisheiten – aufgegriffen: das schutzlose Kind, das plötzlich von allen beschützt wird. Das ist das Grundthema und der Erfolg dieses Buches; damit hat er völlig recht gehabt. Als ich mich mit dem Lenin-Thema zu beschäftigen begann, hatte ich keinen Kontakt zu dem Thema, das heißt nicht mehr und nicht weniger wie alle anderen auch. Das ist ja eine Figur, die als Stoff so abgegriffen ist und so oft gemacht worden ist, daß man eigentlich verzweifeln könnte. Es schien keinen Sinn zu haben, die Figur überhaupt anzugehen, wo denn bloß, es ist doch schon alles gemacht worden. Ich habe mir alle möglichen Filme angeguckt und anderes Material studiert, bis

The first painting in the series, which includes at least four canvases (WV58, 59, 75, 76), survives today only as a black-and-white reproduction. Like all of the paintings in the series, it shows Lenin in the center of the work, the buildings of Moscow's Red Square far behind him. Wearing a suit and tie, he rests his right hand jauntily on his leg and turns his body toward the figure seated to his left. His eyes are mere slits, as if trying to sum up the man beside him, and he holds his left hand in the air—a small cigar between the index and middle fingers—as if taking a moment to think of how best to continue with his argument or, perhaps, emphasizing a point in the making. The bearded older man next to him, on the other hand, takes up less than one third of the canvas. It is as if he, a simple farmer, is attempting to inch out of the picture frame and away from Lenin. He rests both hands on his lap and looks to us, the viewer, as if for help.<sup>568</sup> Clearly he does not recognize that the figure seated next to him is a renowned political leader, nor believe what he is saying.

At first glance, this portrayal of Lenin, who has the aura of a used car salesman in the work, may seem a negative one. Indeed, the seeming ambiguity of the two figures and their relationship to each other has allowed post-Wall viewers to interpret the farmer's skepticism as aptly placed and, thus, to see the work as a subtle criticism of Communism. The title of the painting, however, suggests this was not his intention. Recalling the Biblical story of Christ and the unbelieving Thomas, it places Lenin in the role of Christ and thus as the figure in the right.

---

mir das Gespräch mit Kurella wieder einfiel. Da habe ich also den alten biblischen Stoff von Christus und dem ungläubigen Thomas genommen, und aus dem Thomas habe ich den Timofej gemacht; Ich wußte gar nicht, daß Timofej gar nicht die Übersetzung von Thomas ist. – Es ging einfach darum, eine Verhältnisse zweier Menschen zueinander zu schildern... Ich suchte einfach eine Fabel, um die Lenin-Figur irgendwie aktuell zu machen.”

<sup>568</sup> In all the other versions of this painting, the older man looks at Lenin. Heisig explained this change as follows: “In der zweiten Fassung war mir der Timofej zu sehr in die Ecke geklemmt und ich habe dann die Augen auch anders gemacht, um einen direkteren Kontakt herzustellen, weil meine Söhne sagten: der hört ja gar nicht zu; soweit wollte ich doch nicht gehen; aber in der zweiten Fassung ist das eben schlechter geworden, wie das oft bei zweiten Fassungen ist.” AdK Archiv: Kober Nachlass 13/5.

Timofej, on the other hand, is doubting Thomas, the apostle who would not believe Christ was truly resurrected until he touched his wounds. In this case, the simple farmer Timofej does not believe Lenin's vision of a Communist utopia since he cannot touch it. The humor for East Germans would have stemmed from the unusual visual portrayal of the two figures, which illustrates the fact that, according to Socialist belief, Lenin was trying to help the people even if they could not see it themselves.

The use of humor to portray Lenin was highly unusual, both then and now. A quick look at the catalog for *In the Spirit of Lenin, Indivisibly Bound with the Soviet Union in Friendship*—a major exhibition held in Berlin in 1970 to honor Lenin's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday—emphasizes this point.<sup>569</sup> In comparison to Heisig's painting, which was also in the exhibition, Heinz Wagner's *Professor Lenin* (fig. 5-4) shows the political leader as a studious figure. He sits behind a desk in an office filled with books. Holding one open before him, he catches our gaze. Harry Blume's *Lenin in Leipzig* (fig. 5-5) shows him walking down a street, his hands casually in the pockets of his trenchcoat. His plain clothes, and those of his two male companions, contrast with the fancy attire of the couple disappearing behind them. Frank Glaser's *Picture of W. I. Lenin* (fig. 5-6) shows him leaning on a podium, a red curtain behind him. He catches our gaze and seems to be in mid conversation. In all of these works, there is an attempt to show Lenin as a real person, yet the tone is serious and honorific.

But seriousness was not the only way to make a point, a fact of which Heisig was well aware and experimenting with in this painting:

One can convince another human in many different ways, also with humor... [in this painting] the other remains obstinate; he is already too old... that is what I tried to paint in that I put Lenin two thirds and squeezed Timofej in the corner so that one had the idea

---

<sup>569</sup> Put together by the MfK, VBKD and the Society for German-Soviet Friendship, this exhibition took place in the Altes Museum in East Berlin from April 16 – June 14, 1970.



that Lenin pushes him slowly in the corner and says: so now you must slowly believe! But the other doesn't think about it. Clearly that was the reason why [this painting spoke to so many people], because it clearly goes similarly with them, and because [it] is maybe sympathetic to them that one can solely and quietly and with humor or fun convince someone [else]...<sup>570</sup>

In sharp contrast to the countless honorific portraits of Lenin that people would have encountered every day and thus passed by without noticing, Heisig's painting, through its unusual and humorous portrayal, encourages viewer engagement by making Lenin interesting again. He becomes a real person with personality rather than a towering myth to be venerated without question. Indeed, making Lenin current was one of the reasons Karl Max Kober lauded the painting in the catalog for Heisig's first retrospective exhibition in 1973:

It is not about portraying Lenin for the many hundredth time per se, but rather to create new views or even new nuances of views of him... to make from the person, the things and appearances "on their own," people, things and appearances "for us."<sup>571</sup>

In this context, Heisig's painting can also be seen as a commentary on Socialist society: Timofej represents the people who are bombarded on a daily basis with official proclamations and teachings. Lenin, on the other hand, is the state apparatus intent on understanding the people and convincing them that they—the State—are working in their best interest.

---

<sup>570</sup> Bernhard Heisig, undated transcript (presumably 1973). AdK Archiv: Kober Nachlass 13/5. "Man kann sich sicher auf verschiedene Weise unterhalten. Man kann den anderen Menschen auf ganz verschiedene Weise überzeugen, auch mit dem Witz, aber der Andere bleibt stur, der ist schon zu alt. Und das habe ich versucht zu malen, indem ich dem Lenin zwei Drittel eingeräumt und den Timofej in die Ecke geklemmt habe, so daß man die Vorstellung hat, der Lenin drückt ihn so langsam in die Ecke und sagt: so, nun mußst du es langsam glauben! Aber der andere denkt nicht daran. Offenbar war das der Grund, warum Viele sich so angesprochen fühlen, weil es ihnen offenbar ja selbst ähnlich geht und weil ihnen dabei die Tatsache vielleicht sympathisch ist, daß man jemanden langsam und ruhig und mit Witz oder mit Spaß überzeugen kann."

<sup>571</sup> Karl Max Kober, "Bernhard Heisig – Leben und Werk" in *Bernhard Heisig: Gemälde, Zeichnungen. Lithographien* (Dresden: Gemäldegalerie Neue Meister, 1973) 13-47, here 35. "Es ging also nicht darum, Lenin zum vielhundertsten Male schlechthin zu konterfeien, sondern jeweils neue Sichten oder doch neue Nuancen der Sicht auf ihn zu schaffen [...] aus den Personen, den Dingen und Erscheinungen 'an sich,' Personen, Dinge und Erscheinungen 'für uns' werden zu lassen."

Heisig also created more conventional images of Lenin. In fact, at the exhibition in Berlin, he showed two lithographic prints that are much more serious in tone than the painting: *Lenin to the Bavarian Council Republic* (S437) and *W. I. Lenin*. The first shows Lenin in his characteristic suit and tie seated with pen in hand before a piece of paper. Behind him the faces of the martyred German socialists Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg rise up above a city scene of fighting that recalls the second phase of Heisig's Paris Commune paintings. On the building behind them are the words, in German: "remember Karl and Rosa." These images seem to be what Lenin is thinking about as he pauses from his writing to meet our gaze.

The second print, albeit not reproduced in the catalog, is presumably image S439 from Dietulf Sander's *Werkverzeichnis*. In this work, Lenin raises his right hand, pointing to the sky. He seems to be in the midst of a heated discussion with someone outside of the picture frame to our right. In his other hand, he holds a thick book on the binding of which the name "Marx" is visible. It is an image that prefigures the painting of Lenin Heisig would make the following year.

These prints were presumably created as part of a graphic project by Leipzig artists focusing on a series of telegrams Lenin wrote between 1917-20. This project was mentioned in the introduction to an exhibition held in the fall of 1970, *Exhibition of Leipzig Artists for the Lenin Initiative*, where *Lenin and the Unbelieving Timofej* was shown for the second time.<sup>572</sup> In the conversation with Kober cited several times above, Heisig mentioned the Lenin-Telegram and stated that the work he created for it came between his two paintings on the topic.

---

<sup>572</sup> The small brochure for this exhibition is the source of the black-and-white image of the work, which otherwise does not survive. The Lenin telegrams were also discussed in an article in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, "Gesellschaftlicher Auftrag und Leninstudium," on April 15, 1971.

A few months later, Heisig exhibited the second of these paintings, *Lenin* (WV86), at the Eighth Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig, which opened on January 15, 1972. Current scholarship suggests this work was created as a commission for the Leipzig branch of the SED, in whose offices it hung until 1989. This would explain the significant shift in tone from the earlier painting since the work would have been created for State officials rather than the general public.<sup>573</sup>

Heisig described the challenge he faced in creating this work as follows:

For me the problem was how to paint such an unattractive man, a man who ran around with such a crumpled suit and an almost-slashed shirt... who seems anything but heroic, [but] nonetheless radiated such a fascination. I made many attempts and thought the best solution was to set it in a square, him as a post, like an exclamation point... I changed the arms many times. It took a long time before I had the movement [such] that he comes out of the image somewhat.<sup>574</sup>

In the painting, Lenin does indeed stand like an exclamation point in the center of a large square canvas. He meets our gaze and points his left index finger at us like a school teacher making a point. In his right hand, he holds a book that, albeit closed, has a particular page marked with his finger as if that is the passage that is inspiring his current words. The background of the work is a textured brownish-red color with no ornamentation. It contrasts with the bluish black of his suit and tie to push him forward into our space. The perspective, however, is unusual. We look down on Lenin, and yet, because of the size of the painting itself, he looms

---

<sup>573</sup> I have not seen evidence that the work was commissioned by the SED. It is possible that the SED simply bought it after it was exhibited in the Eighth Regional Art Exhibition or the Seventh Art Exhibition of the GDR. It is listed in the 1973 Retrospective catalog as belonging to the SED-L.

<sup>574</sup> Bernhard Heisig, undated (presumably 1973), AdK Archiv: Kober Nachlass 13/5. "Für mich bestand das Problem darin, einen so unattraktiven Mann zu malen, einen Mann, der mit so einem zerknautschten Anzug und mit einem fast zerschlizten Hemd herumläuft und mit dem roten Bart und der alles andere als heroisch aussieht, dennoch aber so eine Faszination ausstrahlt. Da habe ich also sehr viele Versuche gemacht und dachte, die beste Lösung wäre die, ihn in ein Quadrat zu setzen, ihn wie einen Pfahl (post), wie ein Ausrufungszeichen hochzubringen; die Arme habe ich mehrfach verändert. Es hat lange gedauert, bis ich die Bewegung so hatte, daß er etwas aus dem Bild herauskommt."

larger than life. As such, our relationship to him is in constant flux, not unlike the relationship between two people engaged in a debate. Significantly, this tension draws the viewer into the work to literally engage with the figure portrayed.

Like *Lenin and the Unbelieving Timofej*, this painting demonstrates a very different portrayal of Lenin than that by other artists. This difference becomes clear in a comparison with Willi Sitte's painting, *Homage to Lenin* (fig. 5-7) from two years earlier. In Sitte's work, Lenin is depicted from the worm's perspective. He towers over us as he speaks to what is presumably a mass of people outside the purview of the canvas. He does not meet our gaze, nor is he approachable. Heisig's Lenin, on the other hand, not only meets our gaze, he is coming toward us. In fact, we seem to be in the middle of a heated conversation with him, if not a debate.

In sharp contrast to Sitte's portrayal of a mythic leader, Heisig's painting captures a sense of Lenin the person and the presence he must have had. Indeed, Alfred Kurella, who had met Lenin decades earlier, stated as much in a letter to Heisig:

You will remember that during my last visit with you I expressed delight over some of the pictures you had recently exhibited in Leipzig, especially the Lenin portrait. You told me at the time of your [difficult] considerations regarding the portrayal of Lenin. I told you then that you... had captured Lenin's personality with exceptional exactness, so as I remember it from my contact with him in 1919.<sup>575</sup>

With this painting, Heisig encourages the viewer to think about Lenin the man. Rather than a myth to be blindly worshipped, here is an engaging figure willing to enter into debate with

---

<sup>575</sup> *Handwritten letter from Alfred Kurella to Bernhard Heisig*, August 22, 1972, AdK Archiv: Kurella Nachlass. "Lieber Bernhard! Du wirst Dich erinnern, dass ich bei meinem letzten Besuch bei Dir meiner Freude ueber einige Deiner letzten in Leipzig ausgestellten Bilder zum Ausdruck gebracht habe, besonders auch ueber das Lenin-Portraet. Du erzaehltest mir damals von Deinen nicht einfachen Ueberlegungen hinsichtlich der Darstellung Lenins. Ich sagte dir dann, dass Du, ohne dass eigentlich eine materielle Möglichkeit des 'Kennen[lernens?]' bei Dir vorhanden war, ungewoehnlich genau Lenins Persoenlichkeit erfasst hast, so wie ich ihn aus meinem Umgang mit ihm 1919 und in den folgenden Jahren in mir trage..." With this note, Kurella apparently included a photocopy of a personal photo of Lenin that had never been published but which apparently displayed the same sense of the man as Heisig had captured in his painting. This photo is not in the archival file.

us. In comparison to *Lenin and the Unbelieving Timofej*, however, whose audience is primarily a general public grown weary of being lectured to from above, here is a painting for party officials, a work that hung in the offices of the Leipzig branch of the SED. As such, it can be seen as a reminder to the Party to remain true to the foundations and ideals of Communism. One of these ideals was remaining open to debate and change for the greater good rather than settling into an ossified bureaucratic state. Such a reading is encouraged by the shifting perspective found in the painting, which prevents one from establishing a permanent relationship to the figure portrayed.

### 5.3 CONCLUSION

Like with *Brigadier II*, Heisig's paintings of Lenin offer a significantly new interpretation of the subject matter at hand, one that was closely linked to the intended audience. While commissions presumably inspired the works initially, Heisig made them his own. Not satisfied with creating just another portrait of a worker or political leader, he offered fresh depictions of both that made the subjects of interest again to an audience grown weary by countless other versions. As he stated it in 1973, "I like it, when people like [my art], when they get something out of it... I am always like a lynx on the trail to find out what people said about a picture."<sup>576</sup> It is this interest in reaching his audience—together with his ability to capture the essence of the personality involved—that make him the accomplished portrait artist that he is and was praised for being in the GDR.

---

<sup>576</sup> "...ich möchte gern, daß es den Leuten gefällt, daß sie etwas davon haben. Ich bin der Meinung, daß das geht, denn es ist ja immer gegangen. Immer bin ich wie ein Luchs hinterher zu erfahren, was die Leute zu einem Bild sagen. – Am ödesten sind die sogenannten Fachdiskussionen über Malerei." BH73, 46. Heisig's interest in reaching a general public can also be seen in the following statement: "Mann müsste eine Kunst machen können, zu deren Verständnis kein Kunstverständnis notwendig ist." Hartleb, 2.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

“...Bernhard Heisig [is] one of the most important German artists of the last century.”  
German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, 2005<sup>577</sup>

In 1975 Heisig completed the only commission he would create for the East German state: a large painting—approximately 15' x 9'—titled, *Icarus* (WV129).<sup>578</sup> Made for the Palast der Republik in East Berlin, it focuses on the young mythological figure rising unsteadily above the island of Crete where he had been held captive with his father Daedalus, who appears as a tiny winged figure on a cliff in the bottom right-hand corner of the painting. Daedalus, an inventor, had fashioned wings for them to escape from the island where they were being held captive by King Minos. Before they fled, he warned his son to fly neither too high lest the wax holding his wings together melt, nor too low, or the waves of the ocean might pull him down. According to Greek mythology, Icarus became so enthralled with his new ability to fly that, forgetting his father's advice, he flew too close to the sun and plummeted to his death in the ocean below when the wax in his wings melted.

In Heisig's painting, Icarus' fate seems a distant one. The sun that will lead to his death is but a small dot breaking on the horizon far behind him. The more immediate threat is the eagle

---

<sup>577</sup> Rede von Bundeskanzler Gerhard Schröder zur Ausstellungseröffnung Bernhard Heisig – “Die Wut der Bilder,” March 20, 2005. 21 February 2007, <<http://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Bulletin/2005/03/Anlagen/nr-26-3814286.property=publicationFile.pdf>>. “...Bernhard Heisig [ist] einer der bedeutendsten deutschen Künstler des zurückliegenden Jahrhunderts.” See footnote 3.

<sup>578</sup> Heisig as quoted in “Bernhard-Heisig-Schau in Berlin,” *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger* (10 October 2005). “Ich habe in meinem Leben zwei Bilder im Staatsauftrag gemalt, den *Ikarus* für den Palast der Republik der DDR und das Kanzler Porträt Helmut Schmidts.”

headed toward him with its talons extended. Presumably, it has come from the island below. The mushroom cloud of a nuclear explosion is visible on one end of the island, while countless tiny soldiers—recalling Albrecht Altdorfer's *The Battle of Alexander*—fall into the ocean in droves on the other. These details draw the protagonist's attention as he struggles to gain altitude. The left side of the painting, on the other hand, is filled with numerous images that collectively form a compendium of Heisigian motifs of hubris and its punishment, ranging from the mythical tower of Babel to manned space flight.

In light of current scholarship, it would be tempting to read Icarus as a symbol for Heisig himself and his struggles with the East German government. From this perspective, it would seem that at certain points in his career—notably his speech at the Fifth Congress and his painting of the Paris Commune at the Seventh Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig—he flew too close to the sun and was cast into the ocean, that of heavy criticism. Indeed, Heisig may have been wondering in 1975 whether his recent climb to fame in the GDR would last or if he, like Icarus, would fall.

But Heisig did not fall, at least not in the final decades of the GDR. In fact, in the immediate wake of *Icarus*, his rise became even more pronounced. In 1976, he returned to the Leipzig Academy as a professor and rector. He also became a candidate in the local branch of the SED. The following year, in 1977, he was one of four painters who represented the GDR at documenta 6 in Kassel, West Germany, which marks the emergence of East German art onto the international art scene in the West. Then in 1978 he became the second in command of the Association of Visual Artists (VBKD) in East Germany at the national level.

Despite his continued success, however, Heisig's portrayal of Icarus changed in these years from depicting an early moment in the mythological story to one just before the end. In

*Dying Icarus* (WV135), the protagonist, now screaming, dominates the canvas as he falls, belly-up, toward the ocean below.<sup>579</sup> The yellow that had been just a dot on the horizon in the painting for the Palast now looms large as it emerges from behind the Tower of Babel. The passage of time since the first image is further suggested by the ship disappearing across the horizon; in *Icarus*, it had not yet passed the island with soldiers falling into the ocean.

So what explains the change in Heisig's portrayal of Icarus in these years? The answer may be found in his work for the Palast der Republik. The first in his oeuvre to focus on the mythological figure, *Icarus* was one of sixteen oversized paintings commissioned by the East German state to decorate the foyer of the Palast, which opened to much fanfare in 1976.<sup>580</sup> Located in the square where Karl Liebknecht had announced a Socialist Germany in November 1918, the Palast was an important building in the GDR, where it was known as a "House for the German People." It combined both politics and culture under one roof and was a destination point for many tourists within the eastern bloc. As such, the commission to decorate it was an important one. The theme—chosen by Fritz Cremer—for the paintings was, "Do Communists Dare to Dream?"<sup>581</sup>

With Cremer's text in mind, Heisig's *Icarus* can be seen as the personification of the Communist dream itself and, more specifically, the hope that was East Germany in the minds of many intellectuals at the time. It was the hope for an alternative Germany, one that would stand in opposition to the fascism of the Nazi past and its perceived continuation in the present. In the painting for the Palast, *Icarus* is shown during his ascent, which suggests the possibility for a

---

<sup>579</sup> There is a second painting from 1979 that is almost identical, *The Death of Icarus* (WV148).

<sup>580</sup> *Icarus* starts appearing as a small background figure in the mid-to-late 1960s. The earliest image of which there is a visual record is *The Sons of Icarus* (WV69) from 1969. Subsequent works with *Icarus* as a background figure include *Der Traum des Otto Lilienthals* (WV93, 1972) and *Difficulties in the Search for Truth* (WV114, 1973; reworked in 1977, WV135).

<sup>581</sup> "Galerie im Palast der Republik," in *Auftrag: Kunst 1949-1990* (Berlin: Deutsches Historisches Museum, 1995) 245-260.



different, happier ending. Yet, it is a hope wrapped in pessimism indicative of Heisig's world view. Naked and uncertain, Icarus is the cautious hope for a reformed Communism that many intellectuals had at this point in time, the early years of the Honecker era. Much younger than his predecessor, Erich Honecker had come to power in May 1971. His speech about "breadth and variety" seemed to signal a government that would be more open to criticism and change for the better. His speech about "no more taboos" in the arts as well as other relaxations in policy further encouraged this belief.

Importantly, it was during these years that Heisig rose to international prominence in the GDR. The battles of the 1960s over what Socialist art should be had been largely resolved with this change in political power, at least for Heisig's generation.<sup>582</sup> Style in and of itself was no longer seen as a political threat, nor was pessimism. Consequently, Heisig's work no longer elicited the functionaries' ire the way it had just a few years earlier. Key in this new cultural context was the artist's relationship to Socialism. Moreover, by the early 1970s, younger generations were coming to the fore, artists whose connection to Socialism was less clear, thus bringing into high relief the committedness of Heisig's generation.

The hope many intellectuals had for the GDR in the early 1970s, however, came to a sudden end in late 1976 with the forced expatriation of the East German writer and musical performer Wolf Biermann (b. 1939). A committed Communist with a large following among intellectuals, especially of the younger generations, Biermann had had difficulties with the SED already in the 1960s because he spoke his mind on political matters. In particular, he cast a critical eye on the GDR in the hopes of improving it from within. As a result, he was forbidden

---

<sup>582</sup> Beaucamp similarly sees the change in political power to Honecker as the cause for Heisig's rise to prominence, he did not create "staatsragende oder parteitreue Kunst. Es war umgekehrt. Die Partei versuchte sich das internationale Ansehen dieser Kunst nachträglich zu Repräsentationszwecken zunutze zu machen." Eduard Beaucamp, "Bundesbilder. Ein Streit um Heisig," in *FAZ* (21 February 1998).

to publish or perform in public in the GDR beginning in 1965, a condition that continued into the 1970s. Then, in November 1976, he was refused reentry into the GDR after giving a concert in Cologne.<sup>583</sup> This was a defining moment in the history of East Germany that can be seen as the beginning of the end of the GDR. After this point, the number of artists and intellectuals who left the country rose dramatically.<sup>584</sup>

Significantly, the Biermann affair took place between the time Heisig finished the painting for the Palast and when he painted *Dying Icarus*.<sup>585</sup> The shift in the subject matter can thus be seen as reflecting the loss of hope in the East German project that many intellectuals felt at this point in time. It is also at this point in time that Heisig's work as a whole changes, marking the beginning of the third phase in his artistic production that would last at least through 1989. This third phase is marked by paintings that are "modern" in style but which are less obviously Socialist in subject matter. The thematic turn is, instead, to more general themes of war and ideological manipulation. These themes—albeit based on a Socialist perspective critical of war and committed to uncovering the mechanisms of oppression—were better suited to transcend the Iron Curtain. They also came at a time when West Germany was beginning to look more seriously at work by East German artists. The shift in his subject matter, together with the change in the Icarus paintings, suggest that Heisig had turned his focus from a unified Germany

---

<sup>583</sup> Significantly, Biermann unveiled a new ballad at this concert, *The Prussian Icarus*, which took on additional meaning in light of his forced expatriation. It is likely Heisig was aware of this ballad when he created *Dying Icarus*.

<sup>584</sup> See Manfred Krug, *Abgehauen* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2003), among others.

<sup>585</sup> Heisig's signature does not appear among those who opposed Biermann's forced expatriation, nor on the official VBKD document in support of it. In terms of the latter, Heisig states he would not sign such a thing. ("So was unterschreib ich nicht...") Birgit Lahann, "Salto mortale in zwei Diktaturen, Bernhard Heisig und Johannes Heisig," in *Väter und Söhne, Zwölf biographische Porträts* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1996) 411. According to Lahann, Heisig was later visited by members of the Parteibezirksleitung who spent an entire day trying to convince him to sign a document approving the measures taken. Lahann, 411-412. This is not surprising considering Heisig's relatively high position in the East German cultural world at this point in time – he had recently reassumed the position of rector at the Leipzig Academy and was vice president of the VBKD. He was also a candidate for the SED-L. According to Johannes Heisig, who was impressed by his father's bearing in this matter, "mein Vater... war nicht käuflich." Lahann, 412.

under Socialism to a unified Germany through culture, a revival of Friedrich Meinecke's idea of *Kulturnation* that was prevalent in both Germanys beginning in the late 1970s.<sup>586</sup>

It was in these years that West German authors began to write about Heisig and his work, an interest that coincided roughly with the emergence of West German Neo-Expressionism on the (western) international art scene.<sup>587</sup> The *Neue Wilde* (New Wild), however, were dismissed by some as superficial, a mere market phenomenon. Benjamin Buchloh, for example, criticized these artists for not dealing with important issues of the day in their work such as the escalating military tensions between the eastern and western blocs.<sup>588</sup> He saw these artists, instead, as selling out by choosing a fashionable style for the market, one filtered through Abstract Expressionism and thus supporting American hegemony.

In contrast to the Neo-Expressionists in the West was Bernhard Heisig. His authenticity seemed proven by the simple fact that he created formally innovative work from within a dictatorship. In many ways, his art embodied what Buchloh was looking for but did not find in the *Neue Wilde*.<sup>589</sup> Much of Heisig's work at the time focused on the threat of war, albeit allegorically. He also had fought—as we saw in Chapters 3 and 4—for the right to use an Expressionist style in his work, not simply appropriated something fashionable. Nor was this style filtered through Abstract Expressionism, but rather was seen to be closely linked to great German masters of the past, including Lovis Corinth, Oskar Kokoschka, Otto Dix, and Max Beckmann.<sup>590</sup> In fact, it was not only West German critics and dealers who saw Heisig as the

---

<sup>586</sup> See Stephen Brockmann, *Literature and German Reunification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>587</sup> Indeed, Heisig has been referred to as the “alte Wilde” from Leipzig. Ingeborg Ruthe, “Malen am offenen Nerv,” in *Berliner Zeitung* (22 October 2005).

<sup>588</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression,” 1981.

<sup>589</sup> Buchloh's writing reflects little interest in East German art, so it is unlikely he would have found Heisig's work satisfactory either. I am simply pointing out the relevance of Heisig's work to that discussion.

<sup>590</sup> Heisig was, however, aware of Abstract Expressionism.

rightful heir to these artists, but also the son of Max Beckmann, who gave him several of his father's unused canvases.<sup>591</sup>

Heisig's work was seen by many West Germans as an authentic and "German" alternative to an art world where, as his West German art dealer Dieter Brusberg once stated, "the market had won."<sup>592</sup> Indeed, the "Germanness" of his art—in both style and subject matter—was particularly valuable at a time when nationalism had recently reemerged as an important political force.

Another factor that almost certainly played a role in Heisig's positive reception in West Germany at this time was the renewed discussion of the Nazi past that took place there in the 1980s. This renewed interest was due, in part, to the fiftieth anniversaries of a number of landmark events, including Hitler's rise to power in 1933 and the infamous "night of broken glass" pogrom in 1938. In the mid 1980s there was also the heated *Historikerstreit*, or historians' debate, about whether or not the Holocaust should be viewed as a unique event in history, or part of a larger continuum that includes Stalinist death camps. The latter viewpoint was criticized as relativizing the Holocaust. It followed in the footsteps of Ronald Reagan's visit with then-Chancellor Helmut Kohl to the Bitberg military cemetery the previous year, which had caused a scandal because it contained the graves of forty-nine Waffen-SS soldiers.<sup>593</sup> In this context, it is

---

<sup>591</sup> Heisig kept these canvases together, creating the polyptych, *Zeiten zu Leben*. Eberhard Roters, "Der Maler und sein Thema," in *Bernhard Heisig: Zeiten zu Leben, Malerei* (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag) 17.

<sup>592</sup> *Bernhard Heisig: "Begegnung mit Bildern,"* ed. Dieter Brusberg (Berlin: Galerie Brusberg, 1995) 80. "Denn auch die Moderne scheint erschöpft. Der Markt hat gewonnen." Brusberg has also stated, Modernism "stellt keine Fragen mehr, hat kein Geheimnis, keine Träume. Und ist längst zur Satire ihrer selbst verkommen, überschreitet keine anderen Grenzen mehr als (allenfalls) die des Geschmacks. Wir wissen längst, dass der Kaiser nackt vor unsere Augen trat. Warum geben wir nicht zu und sagen es laut, dass wir heute auch den Kaiser nicht mehr sehen. Es gibt ihn nicht mehr." Brusberg Dokumente 40, 13.

<sup>593</sup> Judy Sarasohn, "Reagan honors war dead in visits to Bergen-Belsen, Bitburg cemetery," in *Stars and Stripes* (7 May 1985) 14 March 2007 <<http://stripes.com/article.asp?section=104&article=17397&archive=true>>

thus not surprising that Heisig's paintings of suffering soldiers—and, especially, Nazi soldiers—found a market.

In the wake of the *Wende*, Heisig's reputation in the FRG changed dramatically. He went from low-key praise in the press to becoming a center for vehement condemnation. As one of the so-called *Staatskünstler*, he was synonymous in many minds with the GDR itself and thus a target for criticism of that regime. Attempts to exhibit his work were frequently met with an outcry in the press that reached its climax with a commission he received to create a painting for the Reichstag in 1998. That discussion peaked in mid February with a letter from Christoph Tannert signed by fifty-eight cultural and political figures.<sup>594</sup> The letter stated that giving the commission to Heisig, “is not only an art historical mistake, but also a political lack of instinct.”<sup>595</sup> The problem these people had with Heisig was his “cooperation with the GDR-regime,” which was seen as standing “in crass opposition to a democratic horizon of values.”<sup>596</sup> Two days later, one of Heisig's first students, Hartwig Ebersbach—a highly respected artist who had had many run ins with the East German government—wrote a response in support of Heisig. As he saw it, “[this debate] is not about a factual discussion of work and life, but rather only

---

<sup>594</sup> These included Jan Faktor, Jürgen Fuchs, Ralph Giordano, Katja Havemann, Freya Klier, Katja Lange-Müller, Ulrike Poppe, and Lutz Rathenow. Visual artists included Hans Hendrik Grimmling, Peter Herrmann, Cornelia Schleime and Max Uhlig.

<sup>595</sup> Christoph Tannert, “Offener Brief” (9 February 1998), faxed to various newspapers. “Die Ehrenrettung von Bernhard Heisig durch nachträgliche Würdigung auf neudeutschem Niveau ist nicht nur ein kunsthistorischer Irrtum, sondern auch eine politische Instiktlosigkeit.” Thank you to Dieter Brusberg for providing me with a copy this.

<sup>596</sup> Ibid. “...Heisig'scher Kooperation mit dem DDR-Regime...” Before this comment, Tannert had criticized the 1994 exhibition at the Neue Nationalgalerie that had placed East and West German works side by side: “...der Zusammenlegung von Werken der DDR-Staatskunst mit Werken der West-Kunst in der Berliner Neuen Nationalgalerie wurde die notwendige Erklärung ersetzt durch kalkulierte Inszenierung, Entpolitizierung und Entmoralisierung in der Würdigung einzelner Künstler aus dem Umfeld der Staatsmacht der DDR standen bereits damals in krassen Gegensatz zum demokratischen Wertehorizont.”

serves a cliché: Heisig, that is the GDR.”<sup>597</sup> He called it “mudslinging,” and concluded by stating that “the East has dignity as well [not just the West].”<sup>598</sup>

Significantly, Heisig was defended in this debate by someone who knows him well, while criticism tended to come from those who did not. As Ebersbach pointed out, his critics were responding largely to his reputation rather than reality. Certainly, Heisig’s brusque manner also played a role in his negative reception, offending some and suggesting arrogance to others the way it had in the GDR.

It is in response to the Reichstag debate that Gillen decided to write his dissertation on Heisig.<sup>599</sup> In particular, he was intrigued by historian Götz Aly’s reply to Lehmann-Braun’s question, “Do we want to explain to a guest from Israel that this picture was by a man formerly in the Waffen-SS?”<sup>600</sup> Götz replied:

[W]e want and must have exactly that in order to explain honestly to an Israeli guest: here hangs the painting of man who made a mistake, who stands for a generation of German youth who... missed “the grace of a late birth.” Here hangs the painting of a man who has familiarized himself with this mistake and has spent a lifetime working on it in order to make up for it. Exactly such images belong in the future German Bundestag, and in the entrance hall no less.<sup>601</sup>

---

<sup>597</sup> Hartwig Ebersbach, *Letter to the Press* (11 February 1998). “...es geht gar nicht um eine inhaltliche Auseinandersetzung mit Werk und Leben, sondern es werde lediglich ein Klischee bedient: Heisig, das ist der DDR.”

<sup>598</sup> Ibid. “Auch der Osten hat eine Würde.”

<sup>599</sup> Gillen, “Schwierigkeiten beim Suchen nach Wahrheit,” in *Gestern und in dieser Zeit, Bernhard Heisig zum Achtzigsten*, ed. Heiner Köster (Leipzig: Faber & Faber, 2005) 77. “Diese Debatte hatte mich damals bewogen, mich mit Werk und Biographie von Bernhard Heisig intensiver zu befassen.”

<sup>600</sup> Ibid. “Auf die Behauptung des damaligen kulturpolitischen Sprechers der Berliner CDU, Uwe Lehmann-Brauns, eine Biographie wie die von Heisig habe dort nichts zu suchen, die er mit der Bemerkung begründete: ‘Wollen Sie etwa einem Gast aus Israel erklären, dieses Bild wurde von einem ehemaligen Mann der Waffen-SS gemalt?!’”

<sup>601</sup> Ibid. “Doch, genau das wollen und müssen wir um der Ehrlichkeit willen einem israelischen Gast erklären: Hier hängt das Gemälde eines Mannes, der sich irrte, der für eine Generation deutscher Jugendlicher steht, die ‘die Gnade der späten Geburt’ knapp verfehlte. Hier hängt das Gemälde eines Mannes, der sich zu diesem Irrtum bekannt und ein Leben lang daran gearbeitet hat, sich und anderen darüber Rechenschaft abzulegen. Genau solche Bilder gehören in den künftigen Deutschen Bundestag, und zwar in die Eingangshalle.”

Gillen continued with this idea in his dissertation, arguing that Heisig's importance as an artist stems precisely from his biography and, more specifically, his attempts to come to terms with the traumas of his past as a Nazi soldier in spite of East Germany's emphasis on "historical optimism."<sup>602</sup>

It is this view that dominated the 2005-06 exhibition, *The Anger of Images*, which must be seen, in part, as an attempt to rescue Heisig from the *Bilderstreit* of the 1990s and place him firmly within the canon of great German artists: Heisig was presented as a microcosm of Germany itself and its attempts to come to terms with the Nazi past. It is a view that was encouraged by the fact that 2005 marked the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II.<sup>603</sup> It also fit well within the recent trend in popular culture in Germany to portray Germans as victims—rather than perpetrators—of the Nazi past; this can be seen in books like Günther Grass' *Crabwalk (Im Krebsgang, 2002)* and Oliver Hirschbiegel's film, *Downfall (Der Untergang, 2004)*.<sup>604</sup>

By presenting itself as a "comprehensive overview" of his work, however, this exhibition ultimately limited Heisig's importance as an artist and intellectual.<sup>605</sup> By overlooking large parts of his oeuvre and downplaying, distorting, and even excising his connections to the GDR, it

---

<sup>602</sup> Gillen (2005), 125. "...dem hartnäckigen Widerstand von Heisig gegen den verordneten Geschichtsoptimismus..."

<sup>603</sup> In Berlin, *The Anger of Images* was part of the "theme year" (Themenjahr), *Between War and Peace*.

<sup>604</sup> See Bill Niven, ed. *Germans as Victims* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). Niven dates the beginning of this turn to 1998, stating the lack of interest in German suffering apparent in the Red-Green coalition under Gerhard Schröder suggested such a topic could be discussed without fear of high-level political instrumentalization. See also W. G. Sebald's *On the Natural History of Destruction*, which was published in Germany as *Luftkrieg und Literatur* in 1999.

<sup>605</sup> Indeed, some newspapers even called it the most comprehensive exhibition of Heisig's work to date, clearly overlooking the larger and more representative 1989 exhibition, *Bernhard Heisig, Retrospektive*. See Ingeborg Ruthe, "Malen am offenen Nerven," *Berliner Zeitung*, 10/22/05 ("...gestatten den bisher umfassendsten Blick auf das Oeuvre, in dessen Mittelpunkt die Verarbeitung der persönlichen Kriegstraumata und die Auseinandersetzung mit seiner Rolle als Täter und Opfer stehen") and Tobias D. Höhn, "K20: Die Wut der Bilder," in *Westdeutsche Zeitung* (22 March 2005), 18 March 2007 <<http://www.wz-newsline.de/sro.php?redid=78676>>.

drained his life and art of its complexity and critical potential. Heisig appeared to be little more than a man obsessed with his own wartime traumas.

As this dissertation has attempted to show, Heisig was not simply a victim of totalitarianism. He was an active participant in the Socialist project that was East Germany, an artist willing to stand up and fight for his beliefs about art. This openness to—and perhaps even desire for—confrontation placed him at the center of a number of controversies in the culturally volatile years of the 1960s. Praised by some and condemned by others, he worked for change in a system that was neither as top-down nor as repressive as one might expect from a dictatorship.

In 1981 Heisig described the Western and Eastern art worlds with the following metaphor:

[If artists can make whatever they want,] then it seems to me like a question in Kindergarten: Miss, must we make whatever we want again today? This is a dangerous thing, pedagogically speaking. A field of friction must develop... It is like a match stick; without [friction], it doesn't burn. And if the pressure is too strong, the commission terroristically given out, the match head breaks. But if I [just] fiddle around next to it, it doesn't burn either.<sup>606</sup>

As this dissertation has shown, East Germany was a “field of friction” for art, the appreciation of which was not limited to just artists and a few specialists, but rather included politicians and the general public alike. Art played an important role in society, where it helped to educate people

---

<sup>606</sup> “Bernhard Heisig im Gespräch mit Helmut Schmidt, moderiert von Marie Hüllenkremer,” in *Kunst in der DDR*, E. Gillen and R. Haarmann, eds. (Köln 1990) 382. “Wenn die Künstler machen können, was sie wollen, ‘dann kommt mir das vor wie die Frage im Kindergarten: Fräulein, müssen wir heute wieder machen, was wir wollen? Das ist eine gefährliche Sache, pädagogisch gesehen. Es muß eine Reibungsfläche entstehen. [...] Das ist wie beim Streichholz, sonst brennt es nicht. Und wenn der Druck zu stark ist, der Auftrag terroristisch erteilt wird, bricht der Streichholzkopf ab. Aber wenn ich daneben fummle, brennt es auch nicht.” Heisig has made similar observations elsewhere: “‘Machen sie ganz frei, was sie wollen’ heißt zugleich: ‘Mach doch, was du willst!’, und das ist eine gespenstische Gleichgültigkeit, die bei dem Künstler das Gefühl des Nichtgebrauchtwerdens erweckt, weswegen er dann notwendigerweise zum Clown werden kann, in eine tragische Rolle gebracht werden kann [...]” Bernhard Heisig in a 1978 conversation with Lothar Lang as reproduced in Karl Max Kober, *Bernhard Heisig* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1981) 202.



into Socialism. In the early years, this importance led to frequent confrontations over what form art should take. In the 1950s, the friction was sometimes too great—as with the Formalism Debates—and the metaphorical match broke. In the 1960s, however, the pressure exerted through repeated discussions and debates resulted, ultimately, in the Leipzig School of modern painting that would be highly praised in the West in the 1980s. It also laid the foundation for the internationally famous “new Leipzig School” led by Neo Rauch, who was one of Heisig’s master students.

In current scholarship on Heisig, the controversies surrounding his art are frequently emphasized as proof of the repressive nature of East German society. Indeed, it was not always easy to be an artist in the GDR, especially during the Ulbricht era. This difficulty resulted in part, however, from the lack of a uniform policy rather than a monolithically repressive one. Instead of a wall, artists frequently faced a minefield, which made it difficult to predict whether their work—if it was challenging—would be praised or denigrated.

During the Ulbricht era, Heisig was at the center of four controversies; three in the mid 1960s and one in 1969. As this dissertation has argued, these debates were, in essence, a fight for a more expanded view of art in East Germany. Without his efforts—as an artist, teacher, and cultural functionary—painting in the GDR may well not have developed beyond the stereotype of Socialist Realism still expected of East German art by many in the West today. Rather than leave the GDR, Heisig chose to stay and work from within to help reform the system, a task in which he ultimately succeeded in terms of redefining Socialist Realism.

A deeper understanding of Heisig’s life and art are of value today not only to East German and German art history, however, but also to Western art as a whole. Based on the same artistic tradition as the West until 1945, Heisig’s art and struggles with it embody an alternative

response to the questions raised about art in the wake of the Third Reich, one that offers a unique perspective on the very different development of Western art since that time. Whereas the West embraced abstraction in the early years after the war and saw in it a spiritual alternative to the corruptions of the real world, the East turned to art as an instrument of education, a way to mold people into better human beings. Significantly, many of the things for which Heisig is praised today stem from his experiences in East Germany: an emphasis on figuration, history, and tradition, as well as making a dialogical connection with the viewer. A nuanced study of his life and work within the context of the GDR thus offers an invaluable opportunity to understand better the complexities of art in East Germany and, more broadly, art under Socialism and in the West.

When his work is placed back into the context in which it was created, Heisig emerges as a complex figure, a man who rejected the western view of art for art's sake and chose, instead, to be actively engaged with the political, social, and cultural issues of his day. Committed to the ideals of Socialism, he chose to create an art of value and interest to the society in which he lived, and to look beneath the surface of Cold War rhetoric for deeper truths, even when that meant facing the ire of political and cultural functionaries as a result.

## APPENDIX A

AdK	Akademie der Künste / The Academy of Arts (located in Berlin)
BKA-L	Bezirkskunstaussstellung Leipzig The Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig (generally held every three years)
DKA	Deutsche Kunstaussstellung or, after 1972, Kunstaussstellung der DDR The main exhibition of East German art held every 4-5 years in Dresden
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany, West Germany (1949-90), united Germany (after 1990)
GDR	German Democratic Republic, (Communist) East Germany
HGB	Hochschule für Grafik und Bildende Kunst The Leipzig Academy of Visual Arts
LVZ	<i>Leipziger Volkszeitung</i> / The Peoples' Newspaper of Leipzig
ND	<i>Neues Deutschland</i> / New Germany, the Party's main newspaper
NVA	National Volksarmee / The National People's Army of the GDR
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschland The Socialist Unity Party: the Communist Party that ruled East Germany
SED-L	The Leipzig branch of the SED
VBKD	Verband Bildende Künstler Deutschland Visual Artists Association of the GDR
VBK-L	The Leipzig branch of the VBKD

## APPENDIX B

Fritz Cremer	Artist and committed Communist. Created sculptures for Buchenwald and Ravensbrück. Put together the controversial exhibition of young artists in Berlin in 1961. Criticized East German cultural policies at the V. Congress of the VBKD in 1964. Came up with the theme for the Palast der Republik paintings.
Hans Engels	Artist. Contributed two murals to the Hotel Germany, one of which was later replaced by Heisig's <i>Berlin</i>
Paul Fröhlich	Head of the SED-L. Was involved in many of the discussions about art that took place in Leipzig in the mid 1960s
Kurt Hager	Head of the Ideological Commission at the Politburo, c. 1958-89.
Erich Honecker	Head of the East German state from 1971-89. Signalled the opening up of cultural policy in East Germany with his "no more taboos" speech in 1971
Rita Jorek	Editor for Visual Arts at the <i>LVZ</i> . Member of the VBK-L. Wrote positively about the Hotel Germany murals and <i>The Paris Commune</i>
Werner Krecek	Journalist at the <i>LVZ</i> , possibly Head of the Cultural Dept. Published a negative article about <i>The Paris Commune</i>
Alfred Kurella	Cultural functionary. Closely involved with Leipzig art scene. His criticism of the Hotel Germany murals in 1965 caused a bureaucratic flurry. He praised Heisig's portrayal of Lenin.
Herbert Letsch	Journalist at the <i>LVZ</i> , possibly Head of its Cultural Dept. Published negative articles about <i>The Paris Commune</i> and <i>The Brigade</i>
Kurt Maßloff	Artist and head of the Leipzig Academy c. 1947-58. Dedicated Communist, he implemented a Soviet-style Socialist Realism that that led to first "Leipzig School" at the 3 <sup>rd</sup> DKA 1953

- Wolfgang Mattheuer Artist. One of the “Band of Four.” Contributed two murals, together with his wife, to the Hotel Germany. His painting, *Cain*, was one of the controversial paintings at the 7<sup>th</sup> BKA-L
- Günter Meißner Art theoretician. Wrote articles about Heisig’s murals and *The Paris Commune*. Was on the jury of the 7<sup>th</sup> BKA-L
- Henry Schumann Art theoretician. Wrote about Tübke for the 7<sup>th</sup> BKA-L. Wrote a review of Heisig’s solo exhibition in 1968
- Willi Sitte Artist. One of the “Band of Four.” Controversial in the 1950s for his “modern” style, he is frequently dismissed today as the ultimate *Staatskünstler*. In his 2003 autobiography, he wrote that Heisig left the Leipzig Academy in 1964 to have more time for his murals.
- Günter Thielemann Artist. Wrote a report about Heisig’s speech at the 5<sup>th</sup> Congress
- Werner Tübke Artist. One of the “Band of Four.” His painting, *The Life Memories of Dr. Schulze, Attorney at Law, III*, criticized the continuation of fascism in West Germany. A focus for debate at the 7<sup>th</sup> BKA-L
- Walter Ulbricht Head of the East German state from 1949-71. Criticized Heisig’s early paintings of the Paris Commune at the 6<sup>th</sup> BKA-L for their lack of action.
- Heinrich Witz Artist. Promoted a Soviet-style Socialist Realism and working together with political functionaries that led to the success of the 6<sup>th</sup> BKA-L in 1961. His work was later seen as simplistic.
- Walter Womacka Artist. Created the highly acclaimed *Pair on the Beach* (1962). Was critical of Heisig’s speech at the Fifth Congress.
- Gerhard Winkler Curator of the Leipzig Museum. Was the artistic consultant on the Hotel Germany project. Wrote articles praising *Brigadier II*.

## APPENDIX C

### Heisig's Life

- 1925 Born in Breslau, Germany (now Wroclaw, Poland)
- 1949 Begins study at the Leipzig Academy (until 1951)
- 1954 Becomes Assistant at the Leipzig Academy
- 1956 Elected chairman of the VBK-L (until 1959)
- 1961 Becomes professor at and rector of the Leipzig Academy  
Exhibits *March Days in Paris I and II* at the 6<sup>th</sup> BKA-L
- 1964 Resigns from position of rector at the Leipzig Academy  
Gives controversial speech at 5<sup>th</sup> VBKD conference  
Exhibits *Christmas Dream* and *Jewish Ghetto Fighters*
- 1965 Controversies over *Schwedt* and *The Paris Commune*
- 1968 Leaves the Leipzig Academy altogether
- 1969 Controversy over his painting, *The Brigade*
- 1970 Receives the Art Prize of the City of Leipzig
- 1971 --
  
- 1972 Receives the National Prize of the GDR (2<sup>nd</sup> Class)  
Becomes chairman of VBK-L (-74) and member of AdK
- 1973 Has first retrospective exhibition; receives several awards
- 1974 Elected VP of VBKD (-78); receives several awards
- 1976 Becomes candidate in SED-L  
Becomes rector of the Leipzig Academy
- 1977 Exhibits at Documenta 6 in West Germany
- 1978 Receives the National Prize of the GDR (1<sup>st</sup> Class)  
Becomes second in command of VBKD
- 1979 Becomes member of the SED-L
- 1980 Solo exhibitions in West Germany (Frankfurt & Bremen)
- 1981 Monograph published by Karl Max Kober
- 1987 Retires as rector of the Leipzig Academy
- 1989 Major retrospective opens in West Berlin
- 1992 Moves to Strodehne

### East Germany

- FRG & GDR founded
  
- Beginning of deStalinization
- Berlin Wall is built
  
- 11<sup>th</sup> Plenum of the SED
  
- Honecker elected  
head of East Germany
  
- Forced expatriation of Wolf  
Biermann
  
- Fall of the Berlin Wall

## APPENDIX D

### BERNHARD HEISIG'S SPEECH AT THE FIFTH CONGRESS OF THE VBKD, 1964<sup>607</sup>

Sehr geehrte Kollegen!

ich möchte mir erlauben, im Folgenden einige Bemerkungen zur Begriffsbestimmung zu machen, die, wie ich meine, neu durchdacht werden und hier besprochen werden müßten, weil sie, gemessen an unserem Leben, vielleicht zu Dogmen zu erstarren drohen. Ich mache dies nach den zwei ausgezeichneten Diskussionsbeiträgen heute Morgen etwas ungerne, weil ich es nicht mit ideser selben emotionalen Kraft hervorbringen werde. Aber ich werde versuchen, die Dinge von vielleicht noch anderer Seite mit beleuchten zu helfen.

Es ist notwendig, daß hier, wie schon gesagt, über den Begriff Realismus, über seine bisher angenommenen Grenzen und über neue Richtpunkte gesprochen wird. Und es ist falsch, dies nur den Theoretikern zu überlassen, oder gar es zu erwarten, von den zumeist schlecht informierten oder schlecht informierenden Autoren zu erwarten, die sich in Tages- oder Fachpresse zu Fragen der bildenden Kunst äußern.

Ich glaube, daß unsere Situation zunächst charakterisiert war von dem Bemühen, den Künstler auf die neue sozialistische Gegenwart zu orientieren und dem Bestreben, ihn dabei möglichst gegen alle Erscheinungsformen der westlichen Ideologie abzuschirmen. Dieses Verfahren führte zu dem unbestreitbaren Erfolg, daß die künstlerische Überlieferung, die Begriffe der Tradition neu gesehen werden mußten und Perioden herangezogen wurden, deren Anregungsgehalt zum Beispiel für den Umgang mit der menschlichen Figur als dem ausdrucksfähigsten Medium des Künstlers, den neuen gesellschaftlichen Auftrag anzugehen half.

In dem richtigen Bemühen, den Künstler aus seiner Isolierung zu führen und ihn vor dem Extrem des autonomen Künstlertums zum Nutzen und Frommen eben der Gesellschaft zu bewahren, ihn gewissermaßen vor dem schauerlichen Tod des Adrian Leverkühnschen Künstlerextrems zu schützen, wurde ein anderes Extrem einer anderen Form von Isolierung übersehen. Der Künstler wurde durch übergroße Ängstlichkeit und durch Tabus abgeschnitten von großen Teilen der Gegenwartskunst, die, was zum Beispiel die westeuropäische Moderne betrifft, pauschal, und das ist wieder ein Extrem, als faulende Frucht am sterbenden Baum des Imperialismus bezeichnet wurden. Die Rechnung schien ganz einfach: Kunst ist zum Überbau

---

<sup>607</sup> Audio tape from AdK Archiv: VBKD 70.

gehörend, klassengebundene Ideologie und folglich im Bereich des Westens, von Ausnahmen abgesehen – diese Ausnahmen ziehen sich, wie der Kollege Raum sehr überzeugend bewies, quer durch Werk und Person, Ausdruck einer lebensfeindlichen Tendenz. In bestimmten Bereichen der Kunst, meist dort, wo ökonomische Prinzipien maßgeblich werden, gilt diese These übrigens nicht mehr so ganz. Den angewandten Künsten, der Architektur zum Beispiel, der Buchkunst, der Gebrauchsgraphik, werden inzwischen stillschweigend eine Art klassenindifferenten Charakter zugebilligt. Es kann auch kaum möglich sein, zum Beispiel zwischen einem modernen Moskauer Hotelbau, einem modernen Moskauer Hochhaus und einem entsprechenden Bau in New York zu unterscheiden.

Es gibt inzwischen eine ganze Reihe theoretischer Begründungen hierfür, die säuberlich zwischen Kunst und Gebrauchskunst unterscheiden wollen. Aber es zeigt sich immer nur, daß dort, wo das eiserne Gesetz ökonomischer Notwendigkeiten korrigierend eingreift, Extreme ad acta gelegt werden müssen. Das V. Plenum zeigte einiges hierzu, und die Straße, die dort geführt wurde, wünschte ich mir persönlich auch für unseren Bereich.

Ich sagte vorhin, daß es zunächst darum ging, den Künstler aufmerksam auf die neue sozialistische Gegenwart zu machen und ihn aus einem Abhängigkeitsverhältnis zur spätbürgerlichen Moderne zu lösen, ihn aufnahmebereit für den neuen Auftrag zu machen. Die Prinzipien der Bitterfelder Konferenz behandeln dies unter anderem, es braucht hier nicht wiederholt zu werden. Aber, über die Ergebnisse und die damit verbundenen Verfahrensweisen herrscht wenig Freude. Und bei vielen Künstlern hat die Vorstellung von Verhärtung oder Stagnation in der Auslegung unserer Kulturpolitik Platz gegriffen. Darüber kann keine noch so optimistische Einschätzung hinwegtäuschen. Ich würde meinen, daß bei uns einige Hemmungsbildung auf die gegenwärtige Auslegung des Begriffs Realismus, sozialistischer Realismus zurückzuführen sind. In dem Bemühen, ihn vor schädigenden Einflüssen zu bewahren, wird der Künstler manchmal behandelt wie ein Kind, das nicht auf die Straße gelassen wird, damit der große Verkehr es nicht gefährdet. [Beifall] Aber ganz sicher lernt ein solches Kind sich nie im Straßenverkehr bewegen und wird dann womöglich eines Tages, da es ja nun doch einmal irgendwann über die Straße gehen muß, das Opfer eines Unfalls. Und wenn Sie wollen, sogar von ihm selbst verschuldet. Anders gesagt, der Künstler, ängstlich abgeschirmt gegen alle Einflüsse der westlichen Moderne zum Beispiel, leidet an einer Art Begriffsdeformation, indem er einerseits diese Kunst, sie als eine Art verbotene und dafür umso reizvollere Frucht betrachtend, überbewertet, andererseits sich geistig nicht stellen will und künstlerisch lebensuntüchtig in ein ödes Provinzletum abgeleitet und flüchtet. Tucholsky charakterisiert das sehr treffend: Herr Meier schreibt für Herrn Schulze und wird bei Herrn Lehmann verlegt. Diese Position nennt sich auch sozialistischer Realismus und tritt fordernd auf. Mann kennt solche Bilder, gegen die so eigentlich nie etwas so recht eingewendet werden kann, weil auf ihnen eben werktätige zu sehen sind, sauber, gerade, ehrlich, einfach und schlicht, so wie das Leben der Werkstätigen angeblich ist. Aber Gottseidank, es ist nicht so humorlos und es ist leider nicht wahr, daß solche genormten Vorstellungen schon überwunden sind, wenigstens aus meinem eigenen Erfahrungsbereich kann ich nicht sagen, daß das so sei.

Das andere Extrem ist die aus der Unkenntnis der Dinge entstandene Betrachtungsdeformation vor der ich sprach, die unkritische Überwertung aller geistigen Erzeugnisse des westlichen Bereichs. Wenn mir gesagt wird, daß mit überholten Mitteln allein noch keine neue Kunst entstehen könne, ist das richtig, aber das bedeutet doch nicht, daß man sich den Erscheinungsformen der westlichen Moderne zum Beispiel, an deren Entstehen schließlich große Künstlerpersönlichkeiten beteiligt waren und ein Teil auch der Zeit sind, in der



wir ja leben, daß man sich diesen Erscheinungen nicht stellen muß. Man überwindet eine Situation doch nicht durch Ignoranz, durch Verdrängung oder Abkapselung, sondern immer noch durch die Auseinandersetzung mit ihr. Das braucht, denke ich, nicht bewiesen [zu] werden. Man muß nicht erst Gift einnehmen, um zu wissen, daß Gift schädlich ist, so hört man als Gegenargument. Aber es handelt sich hier nicht um die Einnahme von Gift, sondern es handelt sich um die geistige Auseinandersetzung mit der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts – eben deswegen, damit mangelnde Information und mangelnde Stellungnahme nicht zu Lähmungserscheinungen, zu Deformationen führen. Erst so kann eine unkritische Überbewertung überwunden werden, kann unterschieden werden zwischen Brauchbarem und Überholtem. Und diese Entscheidung, und das muß auch ganz klar sein, kann nicht stellvertretend für die Künstler durch Kommissionen erfolgen, die ihm zumessen, was geistig für ihn zuträglich ist und was nicht, sondern muß von ihm selbst getroffen werden, in einer Verantwortung... vor der Gesellschaft. Realismus muß sich an den ganzen Menschen wenden, meine ich—das meine ich nicht nur allein—und nicht von einem abstrakten Ideal berichten, daß das Musterbild sozialistischer Vollkommenheit in Wirklichkeit ein widerliches Gestell wäre, weil es eben nur aus Vollkommenheiten besteht.

Der ganze Mensch, seine Freuden, seine Wünsche, seine Sehnsüchte, seine Träume, aber auch seine Tragik und seine Angst und seine Unvollkommenheit, seine Leiden, das Leben, das Leben und der Tod sind Gegenstand künstlerischer Auseinandersetzung. Auch hier darf nichts verdrängt werden, auch hier ist die Kunst dem Menschen zur Seite gegeben und die Auseinandersetzung mit den Schattenseiten des Daseins als untypisch und der sozialistischen Wirklichkeit nicht entsprechen zurückzuweisen, zeugt nur von einem hysterischen Verhältnis zum Leben. Wo aber auf den offiziellen Ausstellungen finden wir sowas, finden wir Ansätze dazu, ich glaube, da ist noch viel zu tun und es gibt viele Möglichkeiten.

Ich sagte, daß die Ursache, für das Versagen, zu allen Seiten des Lebens zu sprechen, in den theoretischen Auslegungen des Begriffs Realismus gesucht wird und von da aus ist es nicht weit, den Theoretikern, den Kunstwissenschaftlern, den Schwarzen Peter zuzuschieben, bleiben sie doch, so heißt es, hinter der Wirklichkeit zurück. Aber der Kritiker war bereits überfordert, als er das neue Kunstbild voraussagen sollte. In einem Artikel im *Neuen Deutschland*, das solche Fragen behandelt, steht neben anderen Unrichtigkeiten etwa folgender Satz: "Dem Künstler sind vom Theoretiker Lösungsmöglichkeiten aufzuzeigen," womit in freier Auslegung der ebenfalls mißverständlichen These... Kunst habe die Bedürfnisse zu erfüllen, die Künstler dann eine Art Dienstleistungskombinat darstellen [Gelächter] – in verschiedene Sektionen unterteilt – das bereits theoretisch vorgebildete Vorstellungen, wie es dann heißt, mit immer größerer Meisterschaft zu erfüllen habe. [Gelächter]

Es fragt sich nur, wie da die Meisterschaft entstehen soll, es sei denn, man betrachtet Meisterschaft als eine Art vollkommenes Exerzieren von Regeln und technischem Können in abstracto. [Gelächter] Das Ganze läuft auf eine vielbelachte Bemerkung eines unserer Autoren hinaus, der seinen anmaßenden Verlegern antwortete: "Sie wollen gern, daß ich so schreibe, wie Sie schreiben würden, wenn Sie schreiben könnten." [Gelächter] Stammt nicht von mir. Der Künstler soll auf der Grundlage neuer gesellschaftlicher Beziehungen neue Wertungen finden, und zwar auf seinem Gebiet, dem der künstlerischen Form. Er soll dem neuen Lebensplan Form geben, das ist seine Aufgabe, und hier eben ist der Theoretiker überfordert, wenn er formulieren soll, wenn er... sich also material schon kristallisieren soll, was sich im Bereich des Materiellen noch gar nicht befindet. Denn befände er sich da, könnte er wenigstens im Annäherungswert sagen, wie das Ding anzusehen hat. Da er es natürlich nicht kann, greift er zu dem Allheilmittel

der Abstempelung, und das haben wir ja auf Schritt und Tritt zu beobachten. Ich würde sagen, wir sollten uns den Satz von Karl Scheffler merken, daß eine wirklich kritische Begabung, eine Kritikerbegabung genauso selten ist, wie eine künstlerische Begabung. [Beifall]

Die mangelnden Kontakte zum Konsumenten für den die Kunst gemacht ist, aber werden am besten überwunden durch eine attraktive Kunst, die erfreut und beglückt, oder ärgert und provoziert, angreift, in jedem Fall aber interessant sein muß, und interessieren muß.

Es ist heute bei uns, so meint man manchmal – und ich will nicht hier in ein nur Kritikastertum ausarten, aber es ist manchmal in dem Zusammendrängen der Zeit notwendig, die wichtigsten Punkte anzusprechen und man kann nicht immer alles so in der Balance halten... Es ist heute bei uns, so meint man manchmal, nichts einfacher, als über bildende Kunst zu schreiben und zu richten. Der gesunde einfache Menschenverstand, das sogenannte rein Gefühlsmäßige, wird gern zum Kriterium berufen. Die Fachzeitung *Bildende Kunst* begrüßt einen Meinungstest auf dem aus einer Stimmzählung Werturteile abgeleitet werden, und so fort.

Wenn darunter eine Reaktion auf kunstsnobistisches Wortgeklingel, Phraseologie zu sehen ist, so ist dies alles als Zwischen situation erklärlich. Nun kann man aber über eine Zeichnung von Dürer ebenso wie über eine Zeichnung von Paul Klee snobistisch, schwülstig oder vernünftig reden, es ist also falsch, durch Beurteilung, Simplifizierung das Unbehagen am Wortgeklingel abreagieren zu wollen, oder gar nun aus Meinungsumfragen, Stimmzählung, Besuchertests ästhetische Maximen ableiten zu wollen. In einer differenzierten modernen Gesellschaft kann für Beurteilung auch in Sachen der Kunst nicht auf Vorbereitung, Bildung und Qualifikation verzichtet werden. Das heißt, es ist Unsinn, anzunehmen, mangelnde Bildung und Vorbereitung könnte durch einfachen gesunden Menschenverstand, rein gefühlsmäßiges Reagieren ersetzt werden. [Beifall]

Zwischen Betrachter und Autor haben sich heute ebenfalls organisatorische Mißbildungen geschoben. Warum eigentlich – ich kann mich irren, aber ich stelle mal die Frage – warum eigentlich muß bei jeder größeren Ausstellung eine offizielle, anleitende Einschätzung zensurenverteilend fragwürdige Maßstäbe aufrichten und so eine wirkliche Auseinandersetzung verhindern? Die Führungen, die anlässlich der V. Deutschen Kunstausstellung in Szene gingen und die das Besucherurteil nach vor aufgrund einer Einschätzung ausgegebenen Maxime ausrichteten, ließen an Desorientierung nichts zu wünschen übrig. Daß vieles für manche Künstler bis in die Nähe des Rufmordes ging, das steht auf einem anderen Blatt. Von einer freimütigen Aussprache ist da nicht die Rede. Und das Künstlerlebnis auf der Grundlage von richtigen Einschätzungen erzeugen zu wollen, ist ein Unsinn. Ich glaube, daß eine Veränderung mancher Verfahrensweisen, ein Durchdenken starr gewordener ästhetischer Maximen notwendig ist. Der Elfenbeinturm des spätbürgerlichen Künstlers darf nicht ersetzt werden durch eine gegen alle gefährlichen Einflüsse abschirmende Glasglocke, [Gelächter] die jede Auseinandersetzung abschneidet. Der Künstler ist auch der Kritiker seiner Zeit. Wo dies nicht akzeptiert wird, geht der Gesellschaft ein Regulativ verloren, sind ihre Lebensregeln, an denen doch gerade der Künstler formen soll, unecht, muß der Mensch die helfende Kunst entbehren, die ihm zur Freude und zum Trost beigegeben ist.

Wir müssen uns der Zeit und alle Problemen im weitesten Umfange stellen können, wenn wir den Anspruch auf geistige Führung rechtfertigen wollen. Wir müssen anstelle der Verdrängung und der Abkapselung das bessere Argument setzen. Auf allen Gebieten der Wirtschaft ist dies längst die Forderung. Wie sollte es gerade in einem sozialistischen Staat wie dem unseren nicht auch auf dem Gebiet des geistigen Lebens sein? Im *Neuen Deutschland* las ich in einem Artikel: "Sektiererische Beckmesserei, Abstempelung und fertige Rezepte sind

unserer Kunstbeurteilung zutiefst wesensfremd.“ Das ist richtig, und das ist nur zu unterstreichen, allein vor erst begegnen wir diesen Erscheinungen noch zu häufig, was ich wenigstens auf meine eigene Erfahrungsbereich – ich arbeite in Leipzig – sagen kann. Und ich bedauere, daß eigentlich Vertreter, zum Beispiel auch der Bezirksleitung der Partei Leipzig und der wichtigen Organisationen, hier gar nicht erschienen sind. Es wäre für uns sehr wichtig und sehr unterstützend gewesen, das Klima und die Diskussion auf dem Kongreß dort, dass das dort hier sein Niederschlag findet. (Es dauert nur noch eine Minute.)

Nur noch einige Bemerkungen zum Referat unserer Genossin Frau Professor Grundig, Kollegen und Genossen. Es wurde, offenbar in dem Bemühen, Erstarrung zu verhindern und gegen Erstarrung anzukämpfen, eine Auffassung vom Realismus gezeigt, die aber doch nur wieder die subjektive Auslegung der Referentin sein kann, und das ist auch gar nicht anders möglich, das ist immer so. Ich will jetzt hier nicht gegen die Auffassung sprechen, die offenbar den persönlich betonten, leidenschaftlichen künstlerischen Formulierungen den Vorzug gibt. Ich kann mir aber auch daneben andere, dieser Auffassung direkt entgegengesetzte künstlerische Möglichkeiten vorstellen, und ich meine, wir müssen – das gilt meiner Ansicht nach besonders für die neuen Leitungsgremien im Verband – immer uns wieder hüten, von einem Extrem ins andere zu fallen, ein Dogma beseitigen zu wollen, indem man ein anderes aufrichtet. Das heißt, daß verhindert werden soll – und ich meine jetzt nicht etwa die Kollegin Frau Professor Grundig – verhindert werden soll, daß ein Mensch der leidenschaftlich, an... seinem Problem von der Kunst engagiert ist, und meint, er habe die Wahrheit an allen Zipfeln, daß er sich dann mit natürlich einem Kollegenkreis umgibt, der das auch vertritt und dann unter Umständen meinungsterrorisierend auftritt. Wir wollen doch so, daß die Diskussion über die Kunst, über unsere Kunst im Bereich der Qualität viele Möglichkeiten zuläßt und in einer echten Auseinandersetzung, wobei der Begriff des Qualitätslosen ausgeschaltet sein soll, die Dinge zum Tragen kommen, die es wert sind, daß sie zum Tragen kommen. Danke. [Beifall]

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

### EAST GERMAN MAGAZINES AND JOURNALS

Bildende Kunst (BK)  
Das Blatt  
Leipziger Volkszeitung (LVZ)  
Mitteldeutsche Neueste Nachrichten (MNN)  
Neues Deutschland (ND)  
Sächsische Tagesblatt (ST)

### FORMAL INTERVIEWS

Eduard Beaucamp  
Gudrun Brüne\*  
Hartwig Ebersbach  
Walter Eisler\*  
Hans-Hendrick Grimmling  
Bernhard Heisig\*  
Johannes Heisig\*  
Anneliese Hübscher  
Rita Jorek\*  
Rüdiger Küttner  
Ursula Mattheuer-Neustädt  
Günter Meißner\*  
Gerhard Kurt Müller  
Hans Jürgen Pappies  
Jutta Penndorf  
Dietulf Sander  
Cornelie Schleime  
Willi Sitte  
Walter Womacka

\* multiple interviews

## ARCHIVES

- Akademie der Künste Berlin (AdK)  
Bernhard Heisig folders  
Personal papers: Lea Grundig, Wolfgang Hütt, Karl Max Kober, Alfred Kurella,  
Roger Loewig  
VBKD – 41-42, 58, 67, 70, 75, 80, 85-86, 95, 143, 168, 172.1-2, 406, 409, 5063,  
5286, 5553, 5591, 5613, 5615, 5729, 5849
- Berliner Ensemble Archiv  
Brecht Archiv  
Play files: Arturo Ui, Furcht und Elend des dritten Reiches, Leben des Galilei,  
Tage der Commune, Winterschlacht
- Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen  
DDR (BStU Leipzig)  
Bernhard Heisig 82616/92  
IM Karl Max Kober – 1011/88  
HA VI OLZ AK1  
XIII 1149/74  
ZMA Abt XX 3098
- Bundesarchiv - Stiftung Archiv der Parteien & Massenorganisationen der DDR  
(Bundesarchiv-SAPMO)  
DR1  
DY30  
(No military files found here for Bernhard Heisig)
- Deutsche Dienststelle (WASSt Berlin)  
Bernhard Heisig's personal file
- Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst Archive (HGB Archive)  
Bernhard Heisig personal file  
Heinrich Witz papers  
All available files from the 1950s and 1960s
- Leipzig Museum  
Erich Oskar Stephan papers
- Sächsische Landesarchiv Leipzig (SächsStAL)  
Börsenverein der Deutschen Buchhändler zu Leipzig in der DDR – 687, 1353  
BT & RdB-L – 1470, 2208, 2265, 2268, 2284, 2348, 2953, 2972, 2973, 2975,  
4516, 4656, 4672, 7982, 8072, 8082, 8080, 8093, 8094, 8103, 8107,  
8110, 8115, 21548, 22357, 24800  
Kurt Massloff papers - V.6.15.01-07  
SAfgKBL 334.1-343  
SED-BL – 05, 84, 337, 436, 1109, 1129, 1772, 1845  
SED-L - IV.A.2.1.014; IV.B.2.9.2.322-323, 329, 356, 362, 533, 566, 607;  
IV.A.2.9.1.336-340, 346-347  
VBK-L – 05-06, 12, 14, 19, 21, 26, 32, 53, 55, 77, 106-107, 114-117, 128,  
153, 171, 178-179, 212-213
- Stadtbibliothek Leipzig  
Max Schwimmer Papers

## WORKS CITED

- Adam, Peter. Art of the Third Reich. New York: Abrams, 1992.
- Barron, Stephanie, ed. "Degenerate Art," The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany. Los Angeles: Abrams, 1991.
- Bathrick, David. The Powers of Speech, the Politics of Culture in the GDR. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1995.
- Bauermeister, Volker. "Hannover: 'Bernhard Heisig. Bilder und Graphik.'" Die Zeit 18 Dec 1981.
- Beaucamp, Eduard. "Auf der Suche nach Bildern, Kunst in einer sozialistischen Stadt. Bericht aus Leipzig von Eduard Beaucamp." Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.
- . "Bundesbilder. Ein Streit um Heisig." Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. 21 Feb 1998.
- "Bernhard Heisig, The Rage of Images." Exhibition brochure. Berlin: Martin-Gropius-Bau, 2005.
- Blechen, Camilla. "Der Unzufriedene." Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 5 Feb 1982.
- . Untitled. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. 25 Jan 1982.
- Blume, Eugen, and Roland März, eds. Kunst in der DDR, eine Retrospektive der Nationalgalerie. Berlin: Verlag Berlin, 2003.
- Brecht, Bertolt. "The Anachronistic Procession, or Freedom and Democracy." Bertolt Brecht Poems 1913-1956. Eds. John Willett and Ralph Manheim. London: Methuen, 1987.
- . "Open Letter to German Artists and Writers." 1951. Kuhn and Giles 317-318.
- Brockmann, Stephen. Literature and German Reunification. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999.
- Brusberg, Dieter, ed. Bernhard Heisig: "Begegnung mit Bildern". Berlin: Galerie Brusberg, 1995.
- . Bernhard Heisig. "Gestern und in unserer Zeit". Berlin: Galerie Brusberg, 2003.
- Buchloh, Benjamin. "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression." 1981. Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2000.
- Bussmann, Georg. "Bernhard Heisig: Die Beharrlichkeit des Vergessens und andere Bilder." Exhibition pamphlet. Frankfurt am Main: Frankfurter Kunstverein, 1980.

- Damus, Martin. Malerei der DDR, Funktionen der Bildenden Kunst im Realen Sozialismus. Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1991.
- Deutsche Presse-Agentur. "Bernhard-Heisig-Schau in Berlin." Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger 10 Oct 2005.
- Dornberg, John. "Trier – Germany's Oldest and 'Most Splendid City.'" German Life 4/5 (1997). 1 Apr 2007 <[http://www.germanlife.com/Archives/1997/9704\\_01.html](http://www.germanlife.com/Archives/1997/9704_01.html)>.
- Dymschitz, Alexander. "Über die formalistische Richtung in der deutschen Malerei." Tagliche Rundschau 24 Nov 1948.
- Ebersbach, Hartwig. letter about the *Reichstag Bilderstreit* (11 February 1998).
- Eckhardt, Ulrich, ed. Zeitvergleich '88 – 13 Maler aus der DDR. Berlin: Galerie Brusberg, 1988.
- Elliott, David. "Socialist Realism." Grove Art Online (Oxford University Press) 2 April 2007 <<http://www.groveart.com/>>.
- Emmerich, Wolfgang. Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR, Erweiterte Neuauflage. Berlin: Aufbau, 2000.
- "Erster Rundgang – erste Urteile, Paul Fröhlich und Erich Grützner besuchten die 7. BKA-L." Leipziger Volkszeitung 3 Oct 1965.
- Feist, Günter, Eckhart Gillen and Beatrice Vierneisel, eds. Kunstdokumentation SBZ/DDR, Aufsätze, Berichte, Materialien. Köln: Dumont, 1996.
- Feist, Günter, and Eckhart Gillen, eds. Kunstkombinat DDR, Daten und Zitate zur Kunst und Kunstpolitik der DDR 1945-1990. Berlin: Museumspädagogischen Dienst, 1990.
- Fox, Thomas C. Stated Memory, East Germany and the Holocaust. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 1999.
- Gillen, Eckhart, ed. Bernhard Heisig, Die Wut der Bilder. Köln: Dumont, 2005.
- . Das Kunstkombinat DDR: Zäsuren einer Gescheiterten Kunstpolitik. Berlin: Dumont, 2005.
- . "Schwierigkeiten beim Suchen der Wahrheit:" Bernhard Heisig im Konflikt zwischen 'verordnetem Antifaschismus' und der Auseinandersetzung mit seinem Kriegstrauma. Diss. U Heidelberg, 2004.
- Gleisberg, Dieter. "Zu Bernhard Heisigs Mutterbildnissen." Bernhard Heisig: Malerei, Graphik, Zeichnungen. Leipzig: Museum der bildenden Künste, 1985.

- Goeschen, Ulrike. Vom Sozialistischen Realismus zur Kunst im Sozialismus, Die Rezeption der Moderne Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft der DDR. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2001.
- G., P. H. "Unter dem Teppich sind Menschenleiber gefangen." Berliner Morgenpost 24 Jun 1984.
- Granville, Johanna. "The Last of the Mohicans, How Walter Ulbricht Endured the Hungarian Crisis of 1956." German Politics and Society 22 (Winter 2004): 88-121.
- Grundman, Ute, and Klaus Michael. Revolution im geschlossenen Raum. Die andere Kultur in Leipzig, 1970-1990. Leipzig: Faber & Faber, 2002.
- Hager, Kurt. Erinnerungen. Leipzig: Faber & Faber, 1996.
- Hartleb, Renate. Bernhard Heisig. Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1975.
- Hecht, Axel. "Editorial." Art, das Kunstmagazin 5 (1998): 3.
- , and Alfred Welti. "Ein Meister, der Talent verschmeht." Art, das Kunstmagazin 6 (1990).
- , and Hanne Reinecke, eds. Zeitvergleich: Malerei und Grafik aus der DDR. Hamburg: Gruner & Jahr, 1982.
- Heisig, Bernhard. "Atelier-Ausstellung in Leipzig." Bildende Kunst 3 (1957): 168.
- . "Der Kunstler zu seinem Werk. Bernhard Heisig zum Gemalde 'Der Brigadier' – VII. DKA." Kunsterziehung 20 (1973): 4-5.
- . "Es Gibt Keine Kunst an Sich." Bildende Kunst 4 (1960): 213-8.
- . "Junge Kunstler in Leipzig." Bildende Kunst 3 (1956): 127-131.
- . "Leipziger Bezirkskunstausstellung 1956." Bildende Kunst 1 (1957): 66-67.
- . "Über die Kunst der Illustration." Marginalien 18 (1965): 42-58.
- . "Zur Kunstausstellung in Leipzig 1954." Bildende Kunst 5/6 (1954): 81-83.
- . "Zur Leipziger Bezirkskunstausstellung 1955." Bildende Kunst 6 (1955): 476-477.
- Helmert-Corvey, Theodor, ed. Bernhard Heisig, Zeiten zu Leben, Malerei (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 1994).
- Herf, Jeffrey. Divided Memory, the Nazi Past in the Two Germanys. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997.



- Hofer, Karl. "Art and Politics." Bildende Kunst 10 (1948).
- Höhn, Tobias D. "K20: Die Wut der Bilder." Westdeutsche Zeitung 22 Mar. 2005. 18 March 2007 <<http://www.wz-newsline.de/sro.php?redid=78676>>.
- Jarausch, Konrad, ed. Dictatorship as Experience. New York: Berghahn, 1999.
- Jonca, Karol. "The Destruction of 'Breslau,' the Final Struggle of Germans in Wroclaw in 1945." Polish Western Affairs (1961): 309-339.
- Jorek, Rita. "Wir stellen zur Diskussion: Bilder auf der Etage, Ein erstes Gespräch mit Prof. Bernhard Heisig." Leipziger Volkszeitung 10 Jul 1965, supplement: 4.
- . "Von Oeser bis zum Absolventen, Über die Jubiläumsausstellungen der HGB." Leipziger Volkszeitung 15 Oct 1964.
- Kahlke, Wolfgang. "Pressedokumentation zu einem durch die Neue Nationalgalerie aufgelösten 'deutschen Bilderstreit.'" Jahrbuch Preußisches Kulturbesitz 31 (1994): 365-408.
- Kaiser, Paul, and Karl-Siegbert Rehbert, eds. Enge und Vielfalt, Auftragskunst und Kunstförderung in der DDR, Analysen und Meinungen. Hamburg: Junius, 1999.
- Kihago, Gabriele. "Probleme der baugebundenen Kunst – nachgewiesen an den neuen Hotels in Leipzig," Thesis. Pädagogischen Institut "Dr. Theodor Neubauer" (Erfurt), 1968.
- Kober, Karl Max. Bernhard Heisig. Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1981.
- Koch, H. W. The Hitler Youth, Origins and Development, 1922-1945. New York: Cooper Square, 2000.
- Krug, Manfred. Abgehauen. Berlin: Ullstein, 2003.
- Köster, Heiner, ed. Gestern und in dieser Zeit, Bernhard Heisig zum Achtzigsten. Leipzig: Faber & Faber, 2005.
- Kracauer, Siegfried. "The Mass Ornament." 1927. The Mass Ornament, Weimar Essays. Ed. Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge, Mass: Cambridge UP, 1995. 75-88.
- Kreck, Werner (as Klaus-Dieter Walter). "Letter to a Picture." Leipziger Volkszeitung 6 Nov 1965, supplement: 6.
- Kuhirt, Ullrich. Kunst der DDR, 1960-80. Leipzig: Seeman, 1983.
- Kuhn, Tom, and Steve Giles. Brecht on Art and Politics. London: Methuen, 2003.
- Küttner, Rüdiger, ed. Bernhard Heisig: Geisterbahn. Berlin: Ars Nicolai, 1995.

- , ed. Schutzversuche: Lithographien 1963-2001 / Bernhard Heisig. Berlin: Galerie Berlin, 2001.
- Lahann, Birgit. "Salto mortale in zwei Diktaturen, Bernhard Heisig und Johannes Heisig." Väter und Söhne, Zwölf biographische Porträts. Eds. Thomas Karlauf and Katharina Raabe. Berlin: Rowohlt, 1996. 395-420.
- Lang, Lothar. "Der Maler Bernhard Heisig." Weltbühne 24 Jul 1973.
- . Malerei und Graphik in Ostdeutschland. Leipzig: Faber & Faber, 2002.
- Lange, Rudolf. "Höllenfahrt durch Zeit und Geschichte, Bernhard Heisig bei Brusberg in Hannover." Hannoversche Allgemeine 12-13 Dec 1981.
- Letsch, Herbert. "Handschrift-Expressivität-Ideologie." Leipziger Volkszeitung 24 May 1969.
- . "Wir diskutieren: Bilder auf der Etage, Das Bild im Raum." Leipziger Volkszeitung 7 Jul 1965, supplement: 6.
- Lichtnau, Bernfried. "Der Beitrag Bernhard Heisigs zur Weiterentwicklung der Historienmalerei in der bildenden Kunst der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik. Bestimmung der Funktions- und Gestaltungsdifferenzierung historisch-thematischer Kompositionen." Diss. Ernst-Moritz-Arndt-Universität Greifswald, 1988.
- Lindner, Bernd. Verstellter, offener Blick, Eine Rezeptionsgeschichte Bildender Kunst im Osten Deutschlands, 1945-1995. Köln: Böhlau, 1998.
- Mäde, Heinz. Das Durchweg Unliterarisch Erzählte Leben Eines Mannes im Deutschland des 20. Jahrhunderts. Langendorf/Untergreisslau: Saale-Druck Naumberg, n.d.
- Mann, Bärbel, and Jörn Schütrumpf. "Galerie im Palast der Republik." Auftrag: Kunst 1949-1990. Ed. Monika Flacke. Berlin: Deutsche Historisches Museum, 1995. 245-260.
- Mattheuer-Neustadt, Ursula. "56 Jahre. Zum 80. Geburtstag von Bernhard Heisig." Marginalien 178 (2005): 3-19.
- Mattheuer, Wolfgang. Künstler über Künstler: Bernhard Heisig. Leipzig: Museum bildende Künste Leipzig, 1973.
- Meißner, Günter. "Architekturbezogen und originell." Bildende Kunst 10 (1965) 527-533.
- . "Ein Bild der Commune." Leipziger Volkszeitung 30 Oct 1965, supplement: 6.
- . "Malerei und Grafik auf der 7. Bezirkskunstausstellung." Leipziger Volkszeitung 9 October 1965, beilage: 6.

- . "Suche nach neuen Wegen. 7. Bezirkskunstausstellung Leipzig eröffnet." Neues Deutschland 5 October 1965.
- . "Um die Vertiefung der realistischer Aussage." Bildende Kunst 2 (1966): 73-78.
- . "Schönheit und Überfülle, Diskussionsbeitrag zum Thema 'Bilder auf der Etage.'" Leipziger Volkszeitung 17 Jul 1965, beilage: 6.
- Merkert, Jörn, and Peter Pachnicke, eds. Bernhard Heisig, Retrospektive. Munich: Prestel, 1989.
- Ministerium für Kultur der DDR. Bernhard Heisig: Gemälde, Zeichnungen, Lithographien. Dresden: Gemäldegalerie Neue Meister, 1973.
- Mittenzwei, Werner. Die Intellektuellen: Literatur und Politik in Ostdeutschland 1945 bis 2000. Berlin: Aufbau, 2003.
- Nerlinger, Oskar. "Politics and Art." Bildende Kunst 10 (1948).
- Nisbet, Peter. "Crash Course, Remarks on a Beuys Story." Joseph Beuys, Mapping the Legacy. Ed. Gene Ray. Sarasota, FL: John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 2001.
- Nitschka, Irma. "Wir suchen unser geistiges Antlitz, Leser schreiben zu Bezirksausstellung 'Architektur und bildende Kunst.'" Neues Deutschland 24 July 1969.
- Niven, Bill, ed. German as Victims. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Nugent, Jeanne. "Family Album and Shadow Archive: Gerhard Richter's East, West and al German Painting, 1949-1966." Diss. U of Pennsylvania, 2005.
- Nungesser, Michael. "BH Neue Bilder, Zeichnungen." Die Kunst 6 (1984).
- O'Doherty, Paul. The Portrayal of Jews in GDR Prose Fiction. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997.
- Olbrich, Harald. "Ästhetische Subjektivität oder Subjektivismus." Bildende Kunst 5 (1966): 272-273.
- Orlow, N. "Wege und Irrwege der modernen Kunst." 1951. Feist and Gillen 19.
- Peters, Hermann. "Voll kritischer Unrast schöpferisch aktiv – Bernhard Heisig." Bildende Kunst 7 (1974): 315-19.
- Plenzdorf, Ulrich. Die neuen Leiden des jungen W. Rostock: Hinstorff, 1973.
- Raum, Hermann. Bildende Kunst in der DDR. Berlin: Edition Ost AG, 2000.

- Richard, Jackie. "Der grosse Bernhard Heisig fleht: Erspart uns bitte den St.-Pauli-Schock." BILD 7 Oct 2005. 21 Feb 2007 <[www.detektei-wischer.de/erkl\\_licht.htm](http://www.detektei-wischer.de/erkl_licht.htm)>.
- Ross, Corey. The East German Dictatorship. New York: Oxford UP, 2002.
- . "'Protecting the Accomplishments of Socialism'? The (Re) Militarisation of Life in the German Democratic Republic." The Workers' and Peasants' State, Communism and Society in East Germany under Ulbricht 1945-71. Eds. Patrick Major and Jonathan Osmond. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002. 78-93.
- Roters, Eberhard. "Der Maler und sein Thema." Bernhard Heisig: Zeiten zu Leben, Malerei. Ed. Theodor Helmert-Corvey. Bielefeld: Kerber, 1994. 17-24.
- Rühle, Günther. "Deutschland, Deutschland. Betrachtungen zur deutschen Kunst und Geschichte." Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 14 Apr 1979.
- Ruthe, Ingeborg. "Malen am offenen Nerven." Berliner Zeitung 22 Oct. 2005.
- Sager, Peter. "Ein Künstler mit Profil." Die Zeit 26 Mar 1982.
- Sander, Dietulf. "Bernhard Heisig – Das druckgraphische Werk, Kommentiertes Verzeichnis der Lithographien, Radierungen und Monotypien, 1950-1990." Diss. U Leipzig, 1993
- , ed. Bernhard Heisig. Der faschistische Alptraum. Leipzig: Reclam, 1989.
- Sarasohn, Judy. "Reagan honors war dead in visits to Bergen-Belsen, Bitburg cemetery." Stars and Stripes 7 May 1985. 14 Mar 2007 <<http://stripes.com/article.asp?section=104&article=17397&archive=true>>.
- Schirmer, Gisela. DDR und documenta. Kunst im deutsch-deutschen Widerspruch. Berlin: Reimer, 2005.
- . Willi Sitte: Farben und Folgen. Eine Autobiographie mit Skizzen und Zeichnungen des Künstlers. Leipzig: Faber & Faber, 2003.
- Schmidt, Jürgen. "Babylonische Bauten." Nürnberger Nachrichten 16 Dec 1981.
- Schmidt, Jutta. "Über die Gestaltung des sozialistischen Menschenbildes. Vor der VI. DKA." Einheit 11 (1966).
- Schneider, Peter. The Wall Jumper, A Berlin Story. Trans. Leigh Hafrey. New York: Pantheon Books, 1983.
- Scholz, Günter, ed. Otto Dix, Bernhard Heisig. Der Schrecken des Krieges. Böblinger: Böblinger Museum, 1993.

- Schröder, Gerhard. Speech for the opening of the *Wut der Bilder* exhibition. Museum bildende Künste Leipzig, Leipzig. 20 Mar 2005. 21 Feb 2007.
- Schumann, Henry. Ateliengespräche. Leipzig: Seeman, 1976.
- Sonntag, Susan. "Fascinating Fascism." New York Times Review of Books 6 Feb 1975.
- Sullivan, Michael. "Hitler's Teenaged Zealots: Fanatics, Combat Motivation, and the 12<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Division Hitlerjugend," MA Thesis. New Brunswick U, 1999.
- Sumpf, Gertraude. "Das Mensch-Technik-Problem in neuen Arbeiten von Willi Neubert." Bildende Kunst 1 (1968).
- Tannert, Christoph. "Offener Brief." 9 Feb 1998.
- Thomas, Karin. "Deutsch-deutsche Kunstdialog." Die Weltkunst 1 Jan 1982.
- . Kunst in Deutschland Seit 1945. Köln: DuMont, 2002.
- Thum, Gregor. Die Fremde Stadt, Breslau 1945. Berlin: Siedler, 2003.
- T., M. "Eine Topographie in Farben. Werke von BH bei 'Kunst der Zeit' ausgestellt." Die Union 30 Mar 1968.
- Topfstedt, Thomas, and Pit Lehmann, eds. Der Leipziger Augustusplatz, Funktionen und Gestaltwandel eines Großstadtplatzes. Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 1994.
- Tschirner, Marga. "Schwedt wird international." Leipziger Volkszeitung. 25 Jul 1965.
- Uhlitzsch, Joachim. "Sixth Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig." Junge Kunst 2 (1962).
- Verband Bildende Künstler. Vierter Kongress des Verbandes Bildender Künstler Deutschlands. Leipzig: VBKD, 1959.
- "Vielfalt des künstlerischen Ausdrucks. Gespräch mit Mitgliedern der Jury zur 7. Bezirkskunstausstellung." Leipziger Volkszeitung 1 Aug 1965.
- Walter, Schiller, ed. 200 Jahre Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst Leipzig. Leipzig: n.p., 1964.
- Weber, Hermann. Kleine Geschichte der DDR. Köln: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1980.
- Westermann, Waltraut, and Jutta Schmidt. "Das Bild des arbeitenden Menschen." Bildende Kunst 1 (1968): 2-8.

Winkler, Gerhard. "Kostbarkeiten aus Bildgalerien: Bernhard Heisig, 'Der Brigadier.'" FF Dabei 4 Dec 1970, 41.

---. "Kunstwerk des Monats aus dem Museum bildende Künste Leipzig. Bernhard Heisig's *Der Brigadier*, Ölgemälde." Leipziger Volkszeitung 10 Apr 1971.

---. Leipzig Hotel Deutschland. Leipzig: Seemann, 1967.