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ART MADE USE OF

FORMSCHÖN by Tilo Schulz follows on from a presentation of around 50 works, chiefly of abstract art, that were given to the GfZK by the Cultural Committee of German Business within the BDI. Proclaimed in the GDR to be hostile to the "imperialist struggle,"¹ these works came to the then newly founded Leipzig Museum for Contemporary Art (GfZK) on permanent loan soon after the collapse of communism,² and entered its collection as a gift in November 2006. They are a part of the institution's unusual founding history and are integrated into our current areas of enquiry, which illuminate from various perspectives such subjects as the relationship between art and economics.

The gallery thus provides an ideal framework for entering into debate with the thematic complex of formalism and realism from the perspective of contemporary art. Tilo Schulz does so from the standpoint of someone born in the GDR in 1972 and observes, from a mixture of personal experience and knowledge of post-socialist discourses, the discussions that were simplistically conducted in both German states. This stereotyping forms the starting point of FORMSCHÖN and is translated into a visual causeway in which opposites such as abstraction and figuration, formalism and realism, form and content, autonomous and applied art, masculine and feminine intensify into a complex interweaving.

In East and West Germany, the harnessing of art to ideology was an issue for both. If on the one side there was the accusation of the political spoon-feeding of art by party and state, the other side called into question the support and manipulation of art by businesspeople, the church and the Western occupying powers. Limited under fascism, the debate about the freedom of thought and action became aggravated in the late 1940s over the question of the use of art and artists for society. In a discussion in 1948 in the journal "bildende kunst" between Karl Hofer, director the College of Visual Art in Berlin-Charlottenburg, and Oskar Nerlinger, a professor at the same institution, Nerlinger criticised the remoteness of the artist, while Hofer rejected all non-artistic demands on visual art.³ Here a conflict is manifested that emerged in the late 18th century with the growing autonomy of art, and almost inevitably raised the question of art's social role: how much autonomy does art need, or how much can it tolerate? What can artists do for society, and what do they want to do for it? Where do they need to they defend themselves so as not to be appropriated? In his book "Der Verlust der Mitte" (The Loss of the Centre), also published in 1948, Hans Sedlmayr, a

¹ *Der Kampf gegen den Formalismus in Kunst und Literatur, für eine fortschrittliche deutsche Kultur* (The Struggle against Formalism in Art and Literature for a Progressive German Culture), resolution of the Central Committee of the SED at its plenum on 15 -17.3.1951, p. 154.

² At an official ceremony in 1992 three of the works were handed over to the Friends of the GfZK. More followed in 1996.

³ Carl Hofer, "Kunst und Politik" p. 20-22, Oskar Nerlinger, "Politik und Kunst" p. 23-25, in *bildende kunst*, year 2, no. 10, 1948.

critic of autonomous art, observed what he considered to be a dangerous dissolution of traditions, a confusing juxtaposition of new challenges and styles, a separation of genres, even a basic tendency towards isolation and autonomy. According to Sedlmayr, the singling out of independent spheres leads to purism but also to isolation, the driving apart of opposites to polarisation, the preference for the inorganic to a contempt for life, the detachment from the basics to a sense of homelessness.⁴ Paradoxically, Sedlmayer's argumentation was taken up equally in East and West in order to criticise formalist approaches, the status of which was not agreed on at first in the West of the late 1940s.⁵

The heated debate about formalism in the GDR following the 5th plenum of the Central Committee of the SED in 1951 took place against the above-described background, although it equated the destruction of artistic form with the destruction of art and society.⁶ In this context it lamented the break with the "classical cultural heritage," the "uprooting of national culture" and "destruction of the national consciousness."⁷ Following a speech by Hans Lauter on the "Struggle against Formalism in Art and Literature for a Progressive German Culture", and a debate in which prominent writers and artists participated, new guidelines were decided upon. The outcome was that "all directions and viewpoints in art, which separate it from life itself and lead to abstraction were to be avoided."⁸ The alternative was seen in the development of a realistic art through which "true to life, historically concrete artistic depiction [should] be linked to the task of educating people in the spirit of the struggle for a unified, democratic, peace-loving and independent Germany, for the fulfilment of the Five-Year Plan and for peace."⁹ The instrumental character of this statement can still be felt today. Art, in subordination to state doctrine, was intended to serve - in the set phrase - the "command of socialist progress."¹⁰

In his sculptures "home made (ideology unit_01)", "home made (ideology unit_02)" and the mural "class room", Tilo Schulz makes use of quotes from the plenum brochure of 1951, e.g. "Formalism means the destruction and subversion of art itself." These quotes are combined with manga figures that make stylistic reference to Kiriko Nananan, whose work mainly portrays the everyday life of young girls in Japan. The

⁴ Sedlmayr, Hans, *Verlust der Mitte. Die bildende Kunst des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts als Symptom und Symbol der Zeit*, Frankfurt a.M. 1955.

⁵ See the debates on the competition "Eisen und Stahl", 1952, in *Das Kunstwerk*, no. 1, 1952, p. 60.

⁶ Formalism here still relates to the destruction of (figurative) form and not to a constructive-concrete approach. This came later with the verdict of the Central Committee of the SED.

⁷ *Der Kampf gegen den Formalismus in Kunst und Literatur, für eine fortschrittliche deutsche Kultur* (The Struggle against Formalism in Art and Literature for a Progressive German Culture), resolution of the Central Committee of the SED at its plenum on 15 -17.3.1951, p. 13 f.

⁸ Ibid. p. 153.

⁹ Ibid. p. 159.

¹⁰ Ulbricht, Walter, "Prinzipienfestigkeit ist nicht Dogmatismus", from his speech to the 2nd Bitterfeld Conference, in *bildende Kunst* 1964, p. 339.

artificial emotionality of the melancholy faces with their pairs of tears contrasts with the seemingly aggressive message of the text passages. Schulz's mangas are characterised by a high degree of formal stylisation, but do not disguise their origins in popular culture. Here the artist brings three different areas into position with one another: self-reflective art, popular culture and the doctrine of socialist realism. If in an allusion to Lenin the SED Central Committee's 5th plenum demanded that art should belong to the people,¹¹ this is paradoxically fulfilled in a completely different way by the mangas that in present-day Japan - i.e. in a capitalist system - are available for almost every target group and have become a considerable economic factor. Their "cosmopolitan" element (over the past 15 years mangas have gained many fans outside Japan) recalls the spectre of imperialism once propagated in the GDR, and translates it into a discourse on global culture and its commercialisation. Schulz's mangas - because of the indoctrinating text passages and the figures' high degree of abstraction - evade all formal servility, i.e. popularism and simple consumption. Moreover the text - comparable to a picture puzzle - itself becomes a kind of formalism.

In the Federal Republic of Germany from the 1950s to the 1980s a non-functionalist (autonomous) concept of art successfully asserted itself in dissociation from the GDR's functionalist (instrumental) concept of art. This opposition was maintained on a political level into the 1980s, even though over the years a convergence of ideas became apparent at semi- or non-state level,¹² and the boundaries between instrumentalisation and non-instrumentalisation were not as clear as was claimed. But abstract art in the West, no matter how free and self-determined it saw itself, was in the end de facto a plaything of cold-war politics. Abstract art soon became linked with a whole spectrum of values promising "tolerance, freedom of thought, independent creativity, modern humanity, modern science, modern art, social values, democracy, Goethe, Schiller, etc., Kant, Hölderlin etc., Mozart, Beethoven, Stravinsky etc., Cézanne, Picasso, Klee," as Willi Baumeister trenchantly put it at the "Darmstädter

¹¹ *Der Kampf gegen den Formalismus in Kunst und Literatur, für eine fortschrittliche deutsche Kultur* (The Struggle against Formalism in Art and Literature for a Progressive German Culture), resolution of the Central Committee of the SED at its plenum on 15 -17.3.1951, p. 19.

¹² See the exhibition "11 Positionen. Malerei aus der Bundesrepublik Deutschland" (11 Positions. Painting from the Federal Republic of Germany), presented in Berlin and Dresden, with works by Ernst Wilhelm Nay, Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter, Emil Schumacher and Günther Uecker. Away from the state level, a series of important artistic contacts between East and West came about during the 1980s at semi- or non-state level, e.g. in the Galerie Arcade, run by Klaus Werner, or at Raum rot-grün, in Sredzkistrasse 64, an artistic community around Erhard Monden, both in Berlin. Conversely, the Hanover-based gallerist Dieter Brusberg organised a touring exhibition of painting and graphics from the GDR through seven West German cities without consulting the cultural representatives of the SED. See Banz, Claudia, *Baustelle der Identitäten, Klopfzeichen. Kunst und Kultur der 80er Jahre in Deutschland*, exhibition catalogue, Museum der Bildenden Künste/Zeitgeschichtliches Forum Leipzig, Ruhrland Museum, Essen 2002/2003, p. 45-56. Lindner, Bernd, "Mauerspringer - Mauersprenger", in *Kunst in der DDR. Eine Retrospektive der Nationalgalerie*, exhibition catalogue, Neue Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 2003, p. 21.

Gespräche" (Darmstadt Discussions) in 1950.¹³ The hope was already being articulated of leaving, or extending, "German nationhood" - experienced as limiting - and to create a link between art, science, technical progress and social values. In 1961 this seemed to have come about in the West, and the journal *Magnum* ran a triumphant leader, "Modernism is Western!"¹⁴ Abstract art allowed a simultaneous dissociation from the fascist past¹⁵ and the totalitarian "Eastern bloc". It could be identified with to a high degree and encouraged a feeling of freedom and renewal. Art was very soon put into the service of a progressive world view and adapted to the prevailing ideology of freedom. As the expression of modernity per se it was successively able to open itself up to other - applied - areas. Individual artistic stances with their existential questions, doubts and contradictions fell from view, and the critics and cautioners were now at times the involuntary invokers of a largely unreflective social renewal. Abstract (formalist) art became, in the above context, either a political weapon or served to furnish a pragmatically designed future.

One is certainly reminded of these debates by Tilo Schulz's use of a modernist stainless-steel sculpture as the pedestal for Ursula Fesca's craft objects, or his incorporation of the words "Cold" and "War" into a bead curtain. These installations recall exhibitions such as "Modern Art in Your Life", MoMA 1949, or "Mensch und Form unserer Zeit" (Man and Form of Our Time), Ruhr-Festspiele Recklinghausen 1952. Both shows made the programmatic attempt of putting works of art into social service, or of reconciling artistic and technical development within the idea of progress. In Recklinghausen Henry Moore's "Reclining Figure" was brought into a formal correlation with an Olympia calculator and a Bizerba fully automatic retail weighing device, a composition by Willi Baumeister with the Brown Boveri isolator DIN 42535 and a Bauknecht kitchen appliance. This was possible through the invocation of a newly constituted social-societal whole ("the FORM of our time")¹⁶ that could find its expression in both autonomous and applied art.

Tilo Schulz brings both areas into collision. From a modernist perspective the (autonomous) stainless-steel sculpture is "devalued" and the objects by Ursula Fesca

¹³ Cit. from Katja von der Bey, *Nationale Codierungen abstrakter Malerei: Kunstdiskurs im westlichen Nachkriegsdeutschland, 1945-1952*, Oldenburg 1997, p. 156.

¹⁴ "'Modernism' is a speciality of the West. Its birthplace was Paris. Later it also emerged in Moscow and Leningrad, but its unconventional spontaneity did not agree for long with the rules of historical materialism. Modern art is apolitical and its leaps of thought cannot be controlled. This naturally does not suit the Central Committee. Thus modernism had to retreat to the free world of the West." *Magnum*, Dec. 1961, cit. from Laszlo Glozer, *Westkunst, Zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939*, Cologne 1981, p. 218.

¹⁵ Willi Baumeister's award in 1951 seems to confirm this thesis of new international importance - through art too. He received it at the Sao Paulo Biennale (for his painting "Kosmische Geste"), where Hans Uhlmann also won a prize.

¹⁶ The inside cover of the catalogue bears the following subtitle: "An attempt to make the FORM of our time visible through selected works of visual and applied art and literature, through technical appliances, furniture and household items." Translated from the exhibition catalogue *Mensch und Form unserer Zeit*, Ruhr-Festspiele Recklinghausen, Städtische Kunsthalle in Recklinghausen 1952.

"enhanced" in value. The aesthetic quality of Ursula Fesca's tea sets and vases emancipate themselves from their mere utility value, yet cannot completely disown it. Conversely the sculpture loses its autonomy and enters the realm of everyday life. In other words, Schulz abstracts the utility value of art and converts abstraction into a utility value. Through the discovery of the words "Cold" and "War" the bead curtain, with all its homely associations, breaks out of the private sphere and is brought into a political context. Conversely Schulz places the political conflict in the sphere of furnishings, bringing applied art itself into the focus of ideological dispute. The negative emotionalising associated with these opposing concepts contrasts with the homely design, or it is perhaps even the design which enables the former political context to be concealed completely: the "Cold War" curtain becomes a fashionable item of interior furnishing. The lifestyle aspect enables Schulz to put the work into a contemporary context and to bring the formalist debate into the present day. Autonomous and applied art, political and economic instrumentalisation, hold each other in mutually commenting balance.

Aside from the above-mentioned conflict zones, the exhibition brings gender relations into the foreground and shows them to be no less ideologically configured. By placing Ursula Fesca's tea set and vases on a stainless-steel sculpture, Tilo Schulz identifies and displaces the gender images handed down by modernism, along with their associated boundaries, prejudices and value judgements. The idea of autonomously conceived abstract art as the expression of (superior) mental processes, and of applied art as its (inferior) counterpart,¹⁷ is both put on display and called into question by this interlocking of fine and applied art. The gender issue runs through Schulz's entire exhibition and is brought into a parallel with the conflict between the two Germanys¹⁸ in such a way that the classic, ideologically defined roles, within both East-West and gender relationships, cannot be maintained. Tilo Schulz weaves into his works a network of complex relationships and dependencies that keep each other in balance and move either into the foreground or the background, depending on how they are touched on by the viewer. It is both an investigation into the ideological content of form and a formalisation of ideologies. The relationship between form and content and the reaction in society to the artistic method itself are called into question. These multi-connotative works generate contradictions and conflicts that cannot be resolved, but give rise to diverging areas of debate. The spatial conception of the exhibition is important in this context. The complexity of the individual works is further deepened by traversing the gallery. Schulz uses its fluid transitions and open vistas to create visual connections and interpretive relationships between the works. His particular approach to display, to spatial placement, both suggests and interrupts various ways of reading the exhibition, and enables him to draw our attention to the premises by which we perceive and interpret art. The question of the function of

¹⁷ Following this logic, areas such as fashion that are defined solely as female and linked to femininity and things as they appear on the surface can be (mis)interpreted as an expression of intrinsic qualities.

¹⁸ See also Tilo Schulz's manga works.

artworks, or that of their functionalisation, is also posed in relation to institutional space – in this case the GfZK. The curtain in the display window, for example, can be understood as a reference to the central paradigms of modernism, but it is also a link to the architectural concept of the gallery's builders As-If. The politics of visibility propounded by this group of architects is taken up by Tilo Schulz in his visible transplanting of a curtain – a symbol of private homeliness – into an art institution. This act marks a boundary between public and private that has now become invisible and fluid. The curtain, protecting us from the gaze of outsiders, becomes both décor and utopia.

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