

The Finitude of Public Space. Remarks on Two Exhibitions in Reunified Berlin

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—— The essay examines how two exhibitions held in Berlin in 1990 – the year after the Fall of the Berlin Wall – addressed and reflected on the then current political situation in Germany (and beyond), while also enquiring into the politics of the exhibitions themselves. The group show *Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit* [*The Finitude of Freedom*] was initiated by Heiner Müller and Rebecca Horn who together invited several international artists (including Hans Haacke, Christian Boltanski, Krzysztof Wodiczko and Barbara Bloom) to develop artworks with complementary sections on both sides of the formerly divided city. The second exhibition is the project *Demokratische Erhebung* [*Democracy Poll*] by the American collective Group Material; in it, inhabitants from all over the city of Berlin were consulted on questions related to the social and political changes following Germany's reunification. Both exhibitions used the public space of the city, and yet they brought to the fore quite different ideas of political representation and critique, of participation and the public domain.

Keywords: public space, participation, notion of art, Berlin 1990, reunification, Group Material, Hans Haacke, Christian Boltanski.

In the summer of 1990, two exhibitions entered the public space in Berlin, both of them concerned with questions of German reunification. One is the project *Demokratische Erhebung* of the American artist collective Group Material, and the other is a group exhibition entitled *Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit*.¹ In Germany and beyond, the summer of 1990 was dominated by the political debate over the reunification of both German states. Euphoria over the Fall of the Wall in the autumn of 1989 gave way to the multifaceted realities of a process of reunification that was – formally – completed on 3 October 1990 with the entry of the German Democratic Republic into the Federal Republic of Germany. While Germany was seen from the outside as having become a strong political force in Europe, the internal social, economic and psychological transformations in the confluence of the two political systems of the GDR and FRG have been marked by the great challenges and different ideas of a united country. The velocities of change on both sides of the Berlin Wall, writes the East Berlin dramatist Heiner Müller in the catalogue to the exhibition *Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit*, “are now, after the opening of the East and the leap into German unity, gathering to form an explosive mixture. After parting from the equilibrium of terror, we enter a zone of uncertainty”.² The artists invited to the exhibition, Müller continues, reflect this step. Equipped with a generous budget and organized by the Berlin DAAD *Artists-in-Residence* Programme,³ eleven international artists commented on the upheaval in *Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit*, conceiving site-specific installations on both sides of the former Wall and along the barren Wall strip.

The project *Demokratische Erhebung* of the American artist collective Group Material also reflected the current process of reunification.

1 The project *Demokratische Erhebung. Ein Kunstprojekt im Stadtraum* [Democracy Poll. An Art Project in Urban Space] took place from June 26 to July 5, 1990. The exhibition *Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit. Berlin 1990. Ein Ausstellungsprojekt in Ost und West* [The Finitude of Freedom. Berlin 1990. An Exhibition in Berlin East and West 1990] was on view from 1 September – 7 October 1990 in different locations in the former East and West parts of the city.

2 Heiner Müller, “Berlin Twohearted City”, in: Wulf Herzogenrath, Joachim Sartorius, and Christoph Tannert (Eds.), in: Wulf Herzogenrath, Joachim Sartorius, and Christoph Tannert (Eds.), *Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit. Berlin 1990. Ein Ausstellungsprojekt in Ost und West*, exhibition catalogue, Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1990, p. 9, [my translation].

3 The DAAD *Artist-in-Residence Programme* (Berliner Künstlerprogramm des DAAD) was originally initiated by the Ford Foundation (New York) in 1962, the year after the construction of the Berlin Wall, as a residential program for international artists in Berlin West. Since 1966, it has been handled by the German Academic Exchange Service DAAD and is financed by the Senate of Berlin, inviting around 20 artists from the visual arts, literature, music and film.

The collective, which had been invited by the Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst (NGBK) to “work on the issues of foreigners, immigrants, reunification, the concept of freedom, and neoconservatism”,⁴ opted for an action in public space. *Demokratische Erhebung* conducted a poll pluralistically by obtaining diverse opinions on these issues in public space and publishing them there as well.

The NGBK, a non-profit, member-based art association dedicated to the presentation and promotion of contemporary art, was founded in 1969 in West Berlin, with a grass-roots structure. This structure, meant to enable the members to directly influence and work on the programme of the institution, corresponds to an understanding of art “as a form of action that has an impact on social processes” and that engages with relevant socio-political topics.⁵ The founding of the NGBK with an alternative organizational structure and the promotion of socially-oriented art can be understood in the context of a critical discussion in the 1960s about the function of art and of public space. The concept of public space was thereby connected with the idea of “critical participation in the formation of social life”.⁶ It follows the “model of social emancipation for *all* and of *all* as a place of social communication and creation”.⁷

In the following comparison of the two exhibitions, two distinct understandings of public space emerge, based on different notions of art and understandings of the role that art should play in society. Interestingly, in his contribution to the catalogue of *Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit*, one of the curators mentioned Group Material’s Berlin project as an exemplary model of “social effectiveness”, recognizing the “artist as a social worker in the media world to make the private opinions of others visible.” In the same spirit, according to Wulf Herzogenrath, *Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit* also understood itself as “an answer to the question of the possibilities of contemporary art and the public”.⁸ In my opinion, the two exhibitions answer

4 Exhibition leaflet *Demokratische Erhebung*, Berlin: Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, 1990, n.p. [my translation].

5 Cf. Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, [online] [cited 27/03/2019] <https://ngbk.de/en/institution>. [my translation].

6 Judith Laister, “Öffentlicher Raum“, in: Brigitte Franzen, Kasper König, Carina Plath (Eds.), *Skulptur Projekte Münster 07*, exhibition catalogue, Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2007, p. 410f., [my translation].

7 *Ibid.*, p. 410.

8 Wulf Herzogenrath, “Künstler verändern die Ausstellungsformen“, in: Wulf Herzogenrath, Joachim Sartorius, and Christoph Tannert (Eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 35, [my translation].

this question quite differently, because the “possibilities of effectiveness” attributed to art are interpreted differently. In pursuing this question, I first discuss the exhibition project *Demokratische Erhebung*, before selecting examples from the group exhibition *Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit*, to work out the differences in approach.

Demokratische Erhebung

Demokratische Erhebung was not the first project in which Group Material dealt with questions of democracy; rather, a democratic and participatory understanding of art conditioned the practice of this collective. The collective of artists and non-art professionals was first founded in 1979, in opposition to an individualized and career-oriented art practice. Group Material understood art as a motor for social communication and political change. A manifesto for the collective’s first exhibition stated: “Group Material was founded as a constructive response to the unsatisfactory ways in which art has been conceived, produced, distributed and taught in New York City, in American Society.” Tired of traditional forms of production – the manifesto refers to traditions of formalism and pseudo-avant-garde art – the collective was committed to “directing our energies to the demands of social conditions as opposed to the demands of the art market”.⁹ Art should “take a role in a broader cultural activism”.¹⁰ The central idea of the collective has been “to fuse political interests and art in practice, and to articulate collaboration as a socially engaged practice”.¹¹

What set the *Demokratische Erhebung* project by Group Material apart was that its fundamental aim was to produce and restore the public sphere. It used public space to address the conditions of the public sphere itself.¹² This Berlin project tied in with the methodologies of other projects in which the collective dealt with the possibilities of participation, the conditions of democracy and the public sphere. Such projects include *The People’s*

⁹ Group Material, handout to visitors distributed during *Inaugural Exhibition*, 4–27 October 1980; reprinted in: Julie Ault (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 21 f.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Cf. Julie Ault, “The Double Edge of History”, in: Julie Ault, Martin Beck, *Critical Condition. Ausgewählte Texte im Dialog*, Essen: Kokerei Zollverein. Zeitgenössische Kunst und Kritik, 2003, p. 242.

¹² Cf. Oliver Marchart, “Art, Space and the Public Sphere(s). Some basic observations on the difficult relation of public art, urbanism and political theory”, in: eipep, [cited 30/12/2018], <http://eipep.net/transversal/0102/marchart/en>.

Choice from 1981 and the discursive and participatory exhibition project *Democracy* at the DIA ART Foundation in New York in 1989. The early exhibition *The People's Choice* is a successful attempt to not just to invite the neighbourhood to visit the collectively-owned gallery space, but to actively involve it in the production of an exhibition by showing “things that might not usually find their way into an art gallery [...],” as the invitational letter to the neighbours stated.¹³ Inviting the community to contribute their favourite artworks to a common exhibition was a direct approach to participation and one that worked out very well for the show's production, as people brought the things they liked or considered important. While showing a cultural kaleidoscope of the community – from personal memorabilia and photographs to souvenirs and gifts –, the exhibition challenged the established concept of art.

What was already laid out in the participatory projects, was then being implemented programmatically in the later exhibition project *Democracy*: “The subject of democracy not only became our content, but influenced our method of working.[...] In conceptualizing the project, therefore, we proposed a structure that differed from the conventional art exhibitions, lectures, and panels that Dia had previously sponsored”.¹⁴ By collectively organizing round table discussions and citizen meetings on the core topics of education and democracy, politics and elections, cultural participation and AIDS, *Democracy* responded to the crisis of democracy of the late 1980s in the United States. Four exhibitions, presented in Dia Art Foundation from September 1988 to January 1989, “reiterated the interrelatedness of our subjects and the necessity of our collaborative process”.¹⁵ What distinguishes the artistic practice of Group Material is that it questions the conditions of cultural production and its relationship to political reality: “What politics inform accepted understandings of art and culture? [...] How is culture made, and for whom is it made?”¹⁶

At the invitation of the NGBK, Group Material carried out *Demokratische Erhebung* in the summer of 1990. The project was envisioned as an artistic contribution to stimulate a discussion about the intoler-

¹³ Julie Ault (Ed.), *Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material*, London: Four Corners Books, 2010, p. 35.

¹⁴ Group Material, “On Democracy”, in: Brian Wallis (Ed.): *Democracy. A Project by Group Material*, DIA Art Foundation: Discussions in Contemporary Culture, no. 5, Seattle 1990, p. 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

ance, xenophobia, chauvinism and anti-democratic tendencies that emerged in German society shortly after the euphoria of autumn 1989. In April 1990, just a few months after the Berlin Wall fell, spontaneous interviews with 120 people were conducted for *Demokratische Erhebung* in Berlin and New York. Passers-by were randomly approached on the street and asked about their opinions on reunification, the concept of freedom, hostility toward strangers, nationalism and neo-conservatism, with questions like: “What are the hopes for the future of Germany? What do you think about the current policies on immigration, guest workers, and refugees? How does the opening of the Wall affect these matters? What is your definition of freedom? [...] What does nationalism mean to you? [...]”¹⁷ Group Material regarded this opinion poll as a survey of German and American opinions on the current political situation.¹⁸ From these spontaneously conducted interviews, Group Material selected 65 answers to be published together with the profession and location (Berlin East/West, New York) of the interviewees. To distribute the statements, the collective used advertising channels: for the period of the exhibition, from late June till early July 1990, about 60 statements were shown alternately on an electronic screen – very prominently placed in the heart of capitalist West Berlin, at the corner of Kurfürstendamm/Joachimsthaler Straße.

Passers-by could read statements such as that of a housewife from Berlin-West: “I can’t understand it at all. So anyone who has ever seen pictures from World War II can’t even think in the right-wing direction. That is my opinion.” Or that of an attorney-at-law from New York: “Basically, I think we Americans love this country and would fight and die for it any time, even for the freedom of other people, as we did in Korea and Vietnam” [ill. 1, 2]. During the exhibition period, fourteen large posters were also displayed at four central subway stations in the city (all of them in former West Berlin). These included a poster in the underground station at Kottbusser Tor, which cites a welfare recipient from West Berlin talking about Germany’s aggressive power, aggressive global economic policy, and the increasing

¹⁷ Julie Ault (Ed.), *Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material*, London: Four Corners Books, 2010, p. 173.

¹⁸ For details on the project, cf. Frank Wagner, “Democracy Poll/Demokratische Erhebung”, in: Marius Babias (Ed.), *Im Zentrum der Peripherie. Kunstvermittlung und Vermittlungskunst*, Dresden/Basel: Verlag der Kunst, 1995, pp. 307–313.



1. Group Material, *Demokratische Erhebung*, 1990.
Interview statement on an electronic screen at
Kurfürstenstraße/Joachimsthaler Straße. NGBK, Berlin
„Group Material“, *Demokratijos apklausa*, 1990



2.
Group Material, *Demokratische Erhebung*, 1990.
Interview statement on an electronic screen at
Kurfürstenstraße/Joachimsthaler Straße. Matthias
Reichelt, Berlin

„Group Material“, *Demokratijos apklausa*, 1990



3.
Group Material, *Demokratische Erhebung*, 1990.
Interview statement installed at a U-Bahn station.
Photo: Regina von Poek. Courtesy the artists and
Four Corners Books

„Group Material“, *Demokratijos apklausa*, 1990

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conservatism and ignorance of socialist systems in Germany [ill. 3]. And, finally, an eight-page newspaper supplement brought together a selection of seventeen statements, produced for the *Berliner Tagesspiegel* with a print run of 50,000 copies. It was sent out with the newspaper on the opening day of the project [ill. 4]. The supplement was accompanied by a request for further statements on the topics addressed or comments on the project. In addition to the publicized invitation to participate, the curator of the project himself can be found here briefly explaining the intent of the art project *Demokratische Erhebung* to “stimulate discussion about the artist’s current position in our society, his possibilities of intervention in the social process and his possibilities of political and aesthetic forms of expression in a world dominated by the media”.¹⁹ It can be stated generally that the possibilities for infiltrating social space with the use of electronic screens and posters are particularly potent, since these media do not directly reveal their status as art and thus dissolve the conventional border between art and public space. In contrast to conventional advertising messages, *Demokratische Erhebung* generates attention and ideally provokes a response – be it in the form of an immediate reaction to the statements themselves or to the fact that these appear unexpectedly in a place usually reserved for advertisements. But what is the *democratic* aspect of this survey, where a selection of individual statements from only 120 interviews can hardly be considered representative and where their statements sometimes oppose democratic values?

“Ideally,” to quote Group Material, “democracy is a system in which political power rests with the people: all citizens actively participate in the process of self-representation and self-governing, an ongoing discussion in which a multitude of diverse voices converge”.²⁰ The survey can thus be understood as democratic, insofar as the principles of democracy are applied and addressed. Firstly, the survey allows the voices of men and women of various ages and professions to be heard: voices that hardly correspond

¹⁹ Frank Wagner, newspaper supplement, Berlin: Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, 1990, n.p. [my translation].

²⁰ Group Material, „On Democracy”, in: Brian Wallis (Ed.): *Democracy. A Project by Group Material*, DIA Art Foundation: Discussions in Contemporary Culture, no. 5, Seattle 1990, p. 1. However, this is precisely the situation that they believe no longer exists in 1987, after two legislative periods under Ronald Reagan no more given: “Access to political power was obstructed in complex ways, participation in politics had degenerated into passive and symbolic involvement, and the current of *official* politics precluded a diversity of viewpoints.” (ibid.)

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Berlin
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DEMOCRACY POLL GROUP MATERIAL

DEMOKRATISCHE ERHEBUNG

Ein Kunstprojekt im Stadtraum
26. Juni bis 5. Juli 1990

Eine Zeitungsbeilage
sowie
AVNET Bildwand, Joachimstaler Straße / Kurfürstendamm
Pikettwände auf den U-Bahnhöfen
Kerbau: Neukölln - Kottbuser Tor (U1 + U8) - Mehringdamm - Wittenerplatz
Ein Projekt der RealismusStudios der
Neuen Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst

NGBK *Berlin*

Im Moment sind wir noch nicht frei als DDR-Bürger, solange wir irgendwie als Untertanen betitelt werden; daß wir 'nen Kurs von eins zu eins haben, die Arbeitsmoral steigt ja dadurch nicht, dadurch ist ja alles nieder. Für uns ist die Freiheit sozusagen der Freikauf und der Ankauf vom Westen.

Bauschlösser, Berlin-Ost

Persönliche Freiheit bedeutet für mich, daß ich über meine Person, über meine Freizeit, über meinen Arbeitsplatz frei verfügen kann und diese Freiheit nicht nur in dem Bezug sondern auch allgemein also gefährdet sehe. Weil ich das Gefühl habe, daß die Stadt im Augenblick überquillt und dieser ganze Ruf nach Freiheit und Wiedervereinigung mir also im Augenblick auch zuviel wird, also, daß ich mich auch so dermaßen bedrängt fühle durch dieses, was zur Zeit von den Politikern propagiert wird, daß ich eher die Tendenz hab', wegzuziehen.

Damenschneiderin, Berlin-Ost

KUNSTBIBLIOTHEK
Sozialistischer Arbeiter
zu Berlin

4.
Group Material, *Demokratische Erhebung*, 1990. Newspaper supplement with interview statements. BE

„Group Material“, *Demokratijos apklausa*, 1990

to the official opinions on reunification and rarely reach the media public. Expectations and wishes are expressed, as are fears and rejections. It is important to remember the political and economic transformation processes of this time and, in particular, the changed living conditions of many East Germans: Freedom of travel had been introduced into the GDR six months earlier; the first free parliamentary elections were held there in March 1990 and the currency reform had just been completed. Reunification was unstoppable.²¹ In this period of rapid political and social change, *Demokratische Erhebung* not only opened up a space for discussion accessible to different population groups, but also created a space for a public articulation of individual opinions, all the more so as a common ground for discussion between East and West had hardly been established.

The selected statements showed the democratic condition through a plurality of opinions which, fragmentary and politically diverse, produced a differentiated public opinion. They represented a corrective to the political transformations of German reunification taking place in the abstract political sphere.²² *Demokratische Erhebung* not only invited direct participation, but also, above all, created access to participation through the individual statements of the people. The sociologist Oliver Marchart has pointed out that art projects in public spaces often assume that public space per se already exists. According to Marchart, however, this has to be “produced first and always anew”.²³ *Demokratische Erhebung* can be understood as such a formation of the public sphere through negotiation processes, – all the more as differences and contradictions of opinions are openly exposed. As Marchart notes, drawing on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s reflections on radical democracy, conflict and dissent are the moments in which publics actually emerge. “Conflicts and divisions [in the public sphere; BE]”, according to the political scientists Mouffe and Laclau, “are neither disturbances that unfortunately cannot be eliminated nor empirical impediments that render impossible the full realization of a harmony that we cannot attain

21 Cf. Frank Wagner, “Democracy Poll/Demokratische Erhebung”, in: Marius Babias (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 308, [my translation].

22 Cf. Marius Babias, “Subject Production and Political Art Practice”, in: *Afterall*, No. 9, p. 105.

23 Oliver Marchart, “‘There is a crack in everything...’ Public Art als politische Praxis”, in: Christoph Schenker (Ed.): *Kunst und Öffentlichkeit. Kritische Praxis der Kunst im Stadtraum Zürich*, Zürich: JPR Ringier 20007, pp. 239, [my translation].

because we will never be able to leave our particularities completely aside in order to act in accordance with our rational self – a harmony which should nonetheless constitute the ideal towards which we strive. Indeed, we maintain that without conflict and division, a pluralist democratic politics would be impossible”.²⁴ In their work, “the notion of antagonism [...] forecloses any possibility of a final reconciliation, of any kind of rational consensus, of a fully inclusive ‘we’”.²⁵

In making public a wide range of opinions on issues relating to German reunification, *Demokratische Erhebung* was able, first and foremost, to produce a public sphere. For this, the project used an artistic method developed by the artists’ collective in the early 1980s. During that period, they exchanged the gallery space for public space and worked with so-called *Democracy Walls* or *DA ZI BAOS*, as the Chinese debate medium is called – public-space areas where controversial opinions could be expressed.²⁶ A member of Group Material, Tim Rollins, learned about *DA ZI BAOS* (*big character posters*) when he visited China in the late 1970s. At that time, the *Democracy Wall* Movement in China used handwritten posters for providing information about or protesting political and social issues. Spread across public walls, these initiated a public discourse, as more and more posters and opinions would follow in response to previous ones.

Group Material’s decision to enter public space was based on the insight that even the most politically progressive content and the most ambitious form only make sense when the means of distribution or modes of communication make political sense.²⁷ For their first *Democracy Wall* in 1982, Group Material collected among passers-by on New York’s Union Square opinions and statements on political issues, such as women’s re-

²⁴ Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London/New York: Verso 2001 [1985], pp. xvi.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Cf. Group Material, “DA ZI BAOS”, in: Julie Ault (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 62f.

²⁷ Group Material, “Caution! Alternative Space!”, flyer distributed during *Downtown Uptown*, an exhibition by seventeen lower Manhattan-based alternative spaces at the City Gallery in New York, October 1981; reprinted in: Julie Ault (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 56: “Art can have the most political content and right-on form, but the stuff just hangs there silent unless its means of distribution make political sense as well.” This might call to mind Walter Benjamin, who acknowledges the effectiveness of a politically-engaged art only if it also incorporates production conditions relating to time and other production conditions into its thinking. Cf. Gerald Raunig, “Changing the Production Apparatus. Anti-Universalist Concepts of Intelligentsia in the early Soviet Union”, in: *eipep*, [cited 30/12/2018], <http://eipep.net/transversal/0910/raunig/en>.

productive rights, the death penalty, the significance of labour unions, and displayed these together with statements by relevant organizations on the same topics. Whilst New York's *Democracy Wall* was set up as a guerrilla action, Berlin's *Demokratische Erhebung* entered urban space legally, in the context of an exhibition. The geopolitical shift to Germany brought along a change in the significance of intervention in public space. Against the background of the two "democratic" states undergoing reunification, it was essential both to communicate about the conditions of the democratic and its conflicting forces, and to enable the participation of all.

Demokratische Erhebung incorporated another fundamental aspect of the artistic practice of Group Material: rather than creating permanent works of art, they created temporary situations in public spaces that had not been compatible with the art market and used a language accessible to all rather than an aesthetically coded or elitist language of art. In terms of institutional criticism, this method meant that the forces taking effect within the art system – hierarchies, value structures, economies, and commodification – are exposed and understood as transferable to the criticism of a dominant culture.²⁸

Group Material endeavoured over the course of reunification not only to address and let people address burning political issues, but also to ask what democracy actually is, on what kind of politics it is based and how it works. Democratic participation is also enacted where it finds itself challenged to deal with different, sometimes contradictory or even undemocratic statements. It also addressed the question of the democratic understanding of a united Germany, whose reunification was to take place in the autumn of the same year.

The project can be understood as one that, in the sense of a "call for critical participation in social design processes [...]," addressed issues related to the structure and function of public space, against the backdrop of reunification, and reclaimed the "city as a forum for social exchange, cultural localization and collective memory work".²⁹ Interestingly enough, a call for critical participation in the shaping of societal processes or for their themat-

28 Cf. Jan Avgikos, "Group Material Timeline: Activism as a Work of Art", in: Nina Felshin (Ed.), *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*, Seattle: Bay Press 1995, p. 103.

29 Judith Laister, "Öffentlicher Raum", in: Birgit Franzen, Kasper König, Carina Plath (Eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 410f.

tization can hardly be found in *Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit*, even though the artistic contributions are placed in public space, including the “no-man’s-land” of the Wall Strip, which had long awakened desires among economic investors, and show an awareness of the finiteness of the newly won freedom.

Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit

The history of the exhibition *Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit* begins several years before reunification, dating back to an idea of the East Berlin playwright Heiner Müller quoted at the beginning. Before examining the exhibition in detail, I would like to refer to yet another understanding of art that underlies the conception of this exhibition. It finds expression in the quotation prefixed to the catalogue. There it says: “What is lively about art is its difference from politics – the work of art points to the terror of its realization as well as to the unreal”.³⁰ It is precisely the difference between art and political practice that constitutes the liveliness of art. What distinguishes art from politics and generates its potential is its reference to the horrors of reality and to the fictitious. In other words, art should be free from politics and political action, its potential unfolds in reflection.

Heiner Müller had developed the idea for an exhibition of this kind as early as 1986, together with the artist Rebecca Horn, who lived in West Berlin, and with the Arte Povera artist Jannis Kounellis. The idea was to show “differences and/or similarities in the art of east and west” and to bring both parts of divided Berlin – *Berlin Twohearted City*, as Müller’s text is titled – into a dialogue.³¹ Artistic interventions or installations at different locations on both sides of the Wall would reflect the respective historical and topographical coordinates, thus communicating with each other.

When first conceived, it appeared to be a utopian project. But it became possible through the political transformations of autumn 1989. At the same time, however, the exhibition, realized as early as the summer of 1990, lost its subversive potential.³² If, before 1989, it pursued the idea of creating a dialogical public space – however limited by the ideologies of both German systems – that did not yet exist, the exhibition as ultimately imple-

³⁰ Wulf Herzogenrath, Joachim Sartorius, and Christoph Tannert (Eds.), *op. cit.*, n.p.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³² Cf. André Meier, “Kulturbetrieb im Niemandsland. ‘Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit’ in Ost- und West-Berlin”, in: *Bildende Kunst*, no. 10, 1990, p. 20.

mented showed itself to be art in public space, an art that did not address the issue of the public or the public sphere as such. The melancholy of the exhibition's title, which was also provided by Heiner Müller, spoke for itself. It was a verbal Trojan horse, as can be seen from Mark Thomson's explanation of the ambivalence of the phrase *Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit*: "*Freedom finally has come, but within endlichkeit is the possibility of Freedom finished / will end*".³³ The ambivalence of the title referred to the awareness that the regained freedom has its price that has to be considered. "The artworks show fractures of the unification and allow a glimpse in the abyss of freedom," as Müller put it.³⁴ And so *Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit* also appeared with a political concern. This, however, was not connected with the claim of concrete interventions in social contexts, but with the reflection of historical conditions and the present situation.³⁵ It is no surprise that this show – different in contrast to *Demokratische Erhebung* – did not offer any participatory artworks or requests for direct participation.

However, West Berlin politicians quickly recognized the representative significance of the exhibition project, which had an impact beyond Berlin and can be seen as a first step toward establishing the future capital Berlin as an international cultural metropolis. The West Berlin Senator of Culture Anke Martiny saw the potential to present the specific situation of Berlin in 1990 to an international public with works of art. Subsequently, the financing for the project – 1.5 million DM in total – was quickly secured.³⁶ Joachim Sartorius, director of the *DAAD Artist-in-Residence-Programme*, Wulf Herzogenrath, designated director of the National Gallery, and East Berlin art scholar Christoph Tannert, took over its organisation.

The Berlin Senate also set conditions for the exhibition: artists from the Western Allies and from Eastern Europe had to be involved as well as one artist from East and West Berlin, respectively. This stipulation

³³ Mark Thomson, "Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit: Berlin 1990. Art in the two-hearted City", in: *Art Monthly*, no. 142, Dec–Jan 1990/1991, p. 3.

³⁴ Heiner Müller, "Berlin Twohearted City", in: Wulf Herzogenrath, Joachim Sartorius, and Christoph Tannert (Eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 9.

³⁵ In this sense, September 1 (the opening day of the exhibition) can be associated with the beginning of the Second World War in 1939 and October 7 (the last day of the exhibition) with the founding of the GDR in 1949.

³⁶ Cf. Hans Dickel, "Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit 1990 in Berlin", in: Verena Krieger, Elisabeth Fritz (Eds.), "*when exhibitions become politics*". *Geschichte und Strategie der politischen Kunstausstellung seit den 1960er Jahren*, Cologne/Weimar/Vienna: Böhlau, 2017, p. 32.

makes the exhibition's great cultural and political significance – or rather, its high political appeal – plainly evident. In addition to Barbara Bloom (USA), Ilya Kabakov (USSR) and Christian Boltanski (France), an international selection of eleven artists came together, including Giovanni Anselmo, Hans Haacke, Rebecca Horn, Mario Merz, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Jannis Kounellis, Raffael Rheinsberg and Via Lewandowsky.

Of the eleven two-part projects planned for the East and West, 17 were finally realised in urban space on both sides of the former border strip. Their distribution within the urban space challenged the visitors' movement through the districts and invited them to explore different places. The exhibition unfolded a mental network that connects these places with many analogies to time and history.³⁷ The mostly site-specific installations were to be seen as individual answers to the new political situation and the historical moment of upheaval. They presented themselves as a commentary on current political and social transformations and as a reconsideration of specific historical contexts.

The comprehensive reception of the exhibition in the media can be regarded as a triumph for external cultural policy goals. For example, an installation view of Via Lewandowsky's contribution can be found on the title page of the *Artforum* in November 1990, which discussed the individual artists' positions in a comprehensive article.³⁸ Some critics went so far as to claim that the exhibition was created essentially for media representation. For example, the projections by Krzysztof Wodiczko, which were discussed in almost all the articles, could be viewed but for a few nights owing to cost reasons. Ironically enough, Wodiczko's projections criticized the new dominance of money and consumption: on Leninplatz, for example, he dressed the monumental Lenin sculpture by Nikolai W. Tomski in new clothes and added a trolley carrying consumer electronics [ill. 5].

Looking through the extensive media coverage it becomes apparent that especially the local media made critical comments on the concept of the exhibition. Critical voices mentioned, first of all, the selection of international artists, "which have been invited for a site visit with distance," thus

37 Cf. Peter Hans Göpfert, "Lenin mit der Tüte oder Bismarck geht nach Europa: zwei Ausstellungsprojekte in Berlin: Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit und Bismarck", in: *Weltkunst*, No. 60, 1990, p. 3374.

38 Giorgio Verzotti, "Doppel Jeopardy", in: *Artforum*, November 1990, pp. 125–129.



5.
 Krzysztof Wodiczko, *The Leninplatz
 Projection*, 1990. Exhibition catalogue.
Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit, Berlin 1990,
 Photo: Werner Zellien

Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Lenino aikštės
 projekcija*, 1990

deeming the lacking representation of artists from East Berlin as symptomatic of the ongoing dismantling of GDR culture.³⁹ The East Berlin municipal councillor of culture Irana Rusta underlined this fact, contending that the financial support for *Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit* stands in no relation to the funds made available for *all* East Berlin projects in the same year. With the headline “Those affected don’t get a chance to speak,” the Berlin based and leftist daily newspaper *Die Tageszeitung* published her speech on the occasion of the press conference for *Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit*. It is not the individual works of the exhibition to which she objected, but the decision for such an exhibition and the participation of only one Berlin artist. “For who, if not them, have the right to be involved in such an action?”

But beyond that, Rusta continues, the Berlin Wall, “the bleak, grim and stupidly functional wall,” which is more expressive and effective than any current attempt at artistic creation, is a contemporary document and a more expressive work of art. An aestheticization through works of art tends to trivialize. It is rather necessary to preserve “a section of the Wall as a memorial to posterity”.⁴⁰ As early as October 1990, the East Berlin magistrate placed a section of the Berlin Wall under preservation order, which today forms the core of the Berlin Wall Memorial.

Rather than pitting the different approaches against each other, it is interesting to see the different political needs and public interests as well as the diverse publics they responded to. In the remainder of the text, I therefore briefly introduce two of the very prominent and highly appreciated contributions, by Hans Haacke and Christian Boltanski, respectively, to give an alternative and positive impression of this exhibition project as well. Different in their choice of subjects, the site-specific works of both artists made significant use of the historical and situational location in the urban space, with regard to its implications.

For the project *Die Freiheit wird jetzt einfach gesponsort – aus der Portokasse* [*Freedom is now simply sponsored – from petty cash*] conceptual artist Hans Haacke used a former GDR border watchtower within

³⁹ Barbara Rüh, “Operation gescheitert, Idee lebt”, in: *Bildende Kunst*, no. 10, 1990, p. 27, [my translation]. Via Lewandowsky, the only ‘representative’ artist from the GDR, had left the country shortly before the fall of the Wall.

⁴⁰ Irana Rusta, “‘Die Betroffenen kommen nicht zu Wort’. Rede von Kulturstadträtin Irana Rusta anlässlich eines Pressegesprächs zum Ausstellungsprojekt ‚Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit‘ (Berlin, den 31.8.1990)”, in: *Die Tageszeitung*, 1. September 1990, [my translation].



6 A/B.

Hans Haacke, *Freedom is now simply sponsored – from petty cash*. Inscriptions: “Readiness is everything” (6a) – “Art remains Art” (6b). Exhibition catalogue. *Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit*, Berlin 1990

Hans Haacke, *Laisvę finansuoti dabar lengva – iš smulkių pinigų*, 1990

the former Berlin Wall zone in Kreuzberg. Haacke replaced the searchlight on the roof of the watchtower with a rotating Mercedes star made of neon and replaced the windows with tinted mirror glass, blocking the view of the control centre. Two inscriptions were attached to the concrete walls of the tower – “Readiness is everything” from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, and the Goethe quotation “Art remains Art” [ill. 6 a/b]. Whilst both quotes alluded to a Mercedes advertising campaign in which the car manufacturer asserted its affinity to high culture and surrounded its products with precisely this sublime quality, the Shakespeare quote recalled the motto “Be ready – always ready,” a motto of the young pioneers, a youth organization in the GDR. As an installation without a counterpart on the other side of the for-

mer Wall, the Mercedes star corresponded – at least for visitors from West Berlin – directly to the one atop the Europacenter on Kurfürstendamm, in the centre of West Berlin. Haacke had previously addressed the entanglements of art, politics and economics in critical analyses of institutions and economics; with *Die Freiheit wird jetzt einfach gesponsort – aus der Portokasse* he created a site-specific installation that made use of multi-layered allusions, to comment on the political and economic processes of reunification; for instance, the symbols of old and new rulers are linked.⁴¹ One of the specific background reasons for Haacke's installation was the disputed property deal between the Berlin Senate and Mercedes in the summer 1990, in which the company purchased a huge area at the central Potsdamer Platz for very little money.

Whilst Haacke's installation can be read as a critical analysis of the then current situation and future developments, in which economy becomes the new ruler, Christian Boltanski's contribution addresses German history in terms of the country's National Socialist past. In line with the original concept of the exhibition, he developed two corresponding installations for the eastern and western parts of the city. For *The Missing House*, he recalled the names of the former residents of a house on Große Hamburger Straße. This house had fallen victim to a night of bombing in February 1945. More than 100 names of former residents were traced; a selection of the names of former tenants were displayed on the remaining bare firewalls of the house, like oversized door signs. The duration of the rental contracts was also stated [ill. 7, 8]. It may not be immediately recognizable, but the differing duration of the leases can be traced back to the deportation of Jewish tenants in 1942/1943. The corresponding installation *The Museum* helped to make the tangible gap of the *missing* house legible – the associated fates of individual Jewish residents under German National Socialism. Near today's Museum Hamburger Bahnhof, ten showcases contained documents and archive materials from which the lives and fates of the former residents could be reconstructed; sources were cited ranging from private memories to lists of the inventoried possessions of those Jewish tenants [ill. 9].

⁴¹ In the catalogue, his contribution is also contextualised through documentary and journalistic research – for example, on the emergence of GDR border troops, the history of the chosen site and the construction and functionality of the watchtowers. There is also an artist's commentary on the auction of Wall fragments, which were auctioned by an auction house as a limited edition in June 1990.



9.

Christian Boltanski, *The Museum*, 1990. Exhibition catalogue. *Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit*, Berlin 1990, Photo: Werner Zellien

Christian Boltanski, *Muziejus*, 1990

Birgit Eusterschulte ———

The Finitude of Public Space. Remarks on two exhibitions in reunified Berlin

Much more could be said about both projects, whose many dimensions and allusions call for political, economic and historical reflections. As different as the installations by Hans Haacke and Christian Boltanski are in their historical references and artistic strategies, they both follow a site-specific concept. They make historically significant places, translated into an artistic form, the starting point of their research. They choose a place within public space, but they do so in and through more or less autonomous forms – that is, without thinking about the dimension of the public or the function of art in the process of social transformation. It is in the late 1980s and early 1990s that terms like *Art in Public Interest* (Arlene Raven) and *New Genre Public Art* (Suzanne Lacy) are used to describe a public art, which is understood as a means to enable cultural participation and which engages the audience directly. The question remains whether in the moment of historical transformation of 1990 it would not have been admissible or even necessary to consider the role of art within society and to question the institution of art. This is precisely the starting point for *Demokratische Erhebung*, which tries to democratize the art system and to bring into the social field alternatives to current hierarchies and economies. In conclusion, it is therefore worth repeating the fundamental questions of the collective, which have not lost any of their topicality to date: “What politics inform accepted understandings of art and culture? Whose interests are served by such cultural conventions? How is culture made, and for whom is it made?”⁴²

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⁴² Group Material, “On Democracy”, in: Brian Wallis (Ed.): *op. cit.*, p. 1.

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Santrauka

Viešosios erdvės ribotumas: keletas pasta- bų apie dvi parodas suvienytame Berlyne

Birgit Eusterschulte

Reikšminiai žodžiai: viešoji erdvė, dalyvavimas, meno sąvoka, Berlynas 1990 m., suvienijimas, „Group Material“, Hans Haacke, Christian Boltanski.

1990 m. vasarą, praėjus metams po Berlyno sienos griūties, Berlyno viešojoje erdvėje buvo surengtos dvi parodos, susijusios su Vokietijos suvienijimo klausimais. Šiame esė analizuojama, kaip abi parodos tyrinėjo ir apmąstė tuometinę politinę situaciją Vokietijoje (ir už jos ribų), ir tuo pačiu gilinamasi į pačių parodų rengimo politiką. Grupinę parodą *Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit (Laisvės ribotumas)* inicijavo Rytų Berlyno dramaturgas Heineris Mülleris, Vakarų Berlyno menininkė Rebecca Horn ir graikų bei italų menininkas Jannis Kounellis. Jie pakvietė kelis menininkus iš užsienio (tarp jų Hansą Haackę, Christianą Boltanskį, Krzysztofą Wodiczką ir Barbarą Bloom) sukurti kūrinis, kuriuos sudarytų viena kitą papildančios dalys abiejose anksčiau buvusio padalyto miesto pusėse. Antroji paroda – tai amerikiečių kolektyvo „Group Material“ projektas *Demokratische Erhebung (Demokratijos apklausa)*, kurio metu viso Berlyno ir Niujorko gyventojams buvo užduodami klausimai apie socialinius ir politinius pokyčius, įvykusius po Vokietijos suvienijimo. Nors abi parodos įvyko viešojoje miesto erdvėje, jose išryškėjo gana skirtingos politinio atstovavimo ir kritikos, dalyvavimo bei viešosios sferos idėjos. Lyginant šias parodas, nagrinėjamos kiekvienoje iš jų iškylančios skirtingos viešosios erdvės sampratos, kurios taip pat reikalauja skirtingų požiūrių į meną ir suvokimo, kokį vaidmenį menas turėtų vaidinti visuomenėje. Labai skiriasi ir abiejų parodų meninės strategijos, priskiriant menui socialinio veikimo galimybes. Šis skirtumas ypač išryškėja *Demokratische Erhebung* grupės žiūrovus įtraukiančioje prieigoje ir tame, kaip ji remiasi demokratijos principais. Šis projektas yra apžvelgiamas platesniame „Group Material“ praktikos kontekste nuo XX a. 9 deš. pradžios.