

Künstlerische Strategien in der DDR 1970-1990

1. Leipziger HERBSTSALON

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much indeed for the invitation and this opportunity to speak in the context of "Subversive Practices" about an event that can probably be described as one of the most important and far-reaching art projects in the former GDR during the 1980s – the "First Leipzig Autumn Salon".

After a short introduction I will be showing you a selection of silent, black and white archive material as part of my talk; please excuse any lack of synchrony between the images and my text, but the text was not originally conceived as a film commentary.

The First Leipzig Autumn Salon: in 1984, 6 painters, sculptors and filmmakers from Leipzig employed courageous, partisan tactics to occupy a trade-fair building at the heart of Leipzig's inner city, where they produced and curated their own group exhibition in an area of more than 1000 qm; the exhibition was uncensored and so avoided state control and supervision. This temporary re-conquest of public space by artistic means represented a tremendous questioning - previously unseen in such dimensions - of the power monopoly of the SED - party and the state executive in the GDR at that time.

The exhibition was also a trigger, particularly for young artists in the contemporary art centres of the GDR like Dresden, Berlin or Karl-Marx-

Stadt, and it led - among other things - to the foundation of the producers' gallery "EIGEN+ ART" in Leipzig or the Dresden Spring Salon, from which the group of "Auto-Perforation Artists" emerged later on.

Preparations for the "First Leipzig Autumn Salon" began in summer 1984. *(pict. 01, 02)* It was more than just an affinity of style or the restrictions of the little GDR that brought the six painters, sculptors and filmmakers together: they wanted to send an audible signal that made not only an artistic, but also a political impact.

Eight years earlier, taking at face value the "breadth and diversity of socialist art" proclaimed by the SED, they had made an attempt to investigate the interfaces between fine art, film, dance and music with the intermedia exhibition concept "Tangents 1". But the project was immediately prohibited. *(pict. 03)* This and many other acts of repression had robbed the painters of their illusions as far as a future in the "operating system art" (Betriebssystem Kunst) of the GDR was concerned. "To bury yourself (in the GDR) or to go away (to the West)" was the issue discussed by those painters almost daily in the period that followed. On the eighth anniversary of the failed Tangents project, they decided to brave another attempt: to show the flag, and to publicise their own pretensions to art without censorship.

They decided to lease one of the big trade-fair buildings on the market place in Leipzig and to create an exhibition there. Leipzig – the city of trade fairs! The title of the exhibition was both programmatic and ironic:

“First Leipzig Autumn Salon”, referring to Herwarth Walden’s exhibition in 1913.

Initially, the painters’ plans seemed utopian. Every text, every picture, every piece of film and indeed any form of artistic utterance had to be granted permission before it could be published in the GDR.

A tight network of filters, regulations and controls regulated what could be performed or shown in public. The monopoly to grant such permission lay with the party and the state alone.

The painters used a cunning ploy to subvert this close-knit network of controls. At the Leipzig fairs office, the owner and landlord of the trade-fair building on the market place, they presented themselves as members of the state association of artists who wanted to lease one floor for an exhibition, and concluded a lease contract with the fairs office.

The fairs office believed that it had actually made a contract with the state association of artists (Verband Bildender Künstler der DDR), to which the painters belonged.

No one at the fairs office could imagine that private individuals would lease a fair building in order to show what they consider right and proper. There was no precedent for this within the system; it was a grey area into which no one had stepped before.

The painters’ extensive preparations began, but at the same time their discomfort and fear were growing.

The criminal law of the GDR specified considerable prison sentences for the production of invitations, exhibition catalogues and posters without official state permission to print, and the same was true of the unofficial exhibition in itself.

The scale of the confrontation that they could expect was gradually becoming clear to them: the painters were posing the "question of power", - means, they: "stellen die Machtfrage" - publicly, in the heart of the city.

Using a truck belonging to a scrap merchant and art enthusiast - a friend of one of the painters -, the works are taken from the painters' studios to the market place in several loads.

One of the painters knows a cameraman, Thomas Plenert. The same evening, he arrives on a train from Berlin with a 16mm camera and several rolls of black and white reversal film in his rucksack, illegal "borrowed" from the DEFA, the only company for producing films in the GDR. This makes it possible to document the transport of the paintings and parts of the exhibition set-up. *(pict. 05)*

One of the aims that the painters were pursuing with this exhibition was to make known their long-completed breach - in artistic terms - with the painting of the "Leipzig School" then dominant in Leipzig. The painters wanted to show that parallel to the great masters of "socialist-realist painting" and their pupils - given the well-meaning label "Dürer's red

heirs" by the West German media - a different art had developed in Leipzig in recent years. That art was interdisciplinary and multimedia, attempting to distance itself from alimention and acquisition by the state. The painters not only wanted to think privately in their studios about "*how to be artists working inside a dictatorship i.e. one confirm or seek confrontation with the system*", but also to discuss intellectual concepts for their art in public - and with the public.

This also included a search for lines of tradition for their own artistic language: they replaced the "Leipzig Mix" of Menzel, Klinger, Corinth, a little bit of Beckmann, old German drawing and the subjects suggested by the party with a looked-for affinity to John Heartfield's montages, to the films of Ruttmann, Fischinger, Richter and Eggeling and to the ideas of the Bauhaus and the Surrealists - or to the the films of Godard and Antonioni, Kieslowski, Marta Meszaros, Ferenc Kosa, Gabor Body or Andrej Tarkowski, to cite just a few.

While the transport of works was still going on, the first invitations began to arrive in letter boxes and alarmed the authorities. No one has heard anything about a "First Leipzig Autumn Salon", to which the invitations have been distributed; neither in the district council, the committee of the artists' association, nor the area headquarters of the SED.

Leading members of the artists' association are sent to find out what is going on in the fair building on the market place. *(pict. 04)*

On the instructions of the SED area headquarters, the director of the Leipzig fairs office appears and presents the painters with a cancellation of the lease agreement and a notice of eviction, both effective immediately.

While the painters continue, undaunted, to set up the exhibition, they also contact a lawyer. He formulates an application to cancel the termination of the lease agreement and takes it to court. That amuses the painters: they are going to court and presenting a case against the fairs office, i.e. against the state. And to their amazement, they discover that the laws of the GDR allow them to do so.

The painters ring their friends and ask them to come to the trade-fair building on the market place. At the same time, they inform the artists' association that if they are evicted, they will occupy Leipzig market place with their paintings and objects.

Their call is followed by a large number of artist colleagues and supporters, who soon arrive at the fair building: the friends of the Clara Mosch Group from Karl-Marx-Stadt, painters from the circle around AR Penck from Dresden, the Concept and Mail-Art artists Robert Rehfeld and Erhard Monden from Berlin and art historians like Gabriele Muschter, Christoph Tannert and Eugen Blume, and many, many others.

The mood is tense. Now it is about more than just defending art. *(pict. 07)*

The painter Bernhard Heisig also comes to the trade-fair building, but he has arrived in his double function as one of the heads of the artists' association and as a high ranking SED party official, and he has brought us a message. "The party" request that we take no further unlegal steps and do nothing that is otherwise provocative. He says that he has been personally commissioned by the Leipzig SED-headquarters to present the case to the central committee of the SED in Berlin and so get the situation clarified. *(pict. 06)*

In the meantime, the first phone calls have begun to come in from journalists in East and West Berlin who have heard about the trouble in Leipzig. The exhibition opening has also been strategically timed shortly before the start of the International Documentary and Short Film Week in Leipzig, so there are already a number of filmmakers and journalists in the city. That puts the authorities under more pressure.

Time is on the painters' side now.

The painters begin to sign the serigraphed exhibition catalogue, for which art historian Klaus Werner wrote a text. (Klaus Werner is the former director of the East Berlin gallery "Arkade", who was dismissed without notice for planning a German-German edition of graphic art works.)

Shortly before the planned exhibition opening, Bernhard Heisig returns from Berlin, bringing an offer from the SED: the exhibition can take place, but it must be declared a "workshop", only a limited number of visitors

may be let in each day, and contacts to the West and the press are prohibited. The painters accept these conditions.

When the exhibition opened as planned on the tenth of November 1984, it was possible to see one of the storyboards for my "Hercules Concept" in the entrance area (*pict. 08*):

"Hercules Concept", let's call it a GESAMTKUNSTWERK, for which I – as the "assembler" – collect themes, photographs, newspaper cuttings and archive material of various kinds, process them, and assemble them into an "archaeology of memory".

When I began work on the Hercules Project in 1982, two texts were decisively important to me: one was a fairy-tale by the Brothers Grimm called "The Wilful Child" and the other was the text "Hercules 2 or the Hydra" by the GDR dramatist Heiner Müller. In the Grimm's fairy-tale, wilfulness appears as an anarchic individual strength, a necessary ability as a defence against society's attempts to bend the individual, although here the child is punished for it by death. In Müller's text, the demigod and classic strong hero Hercules is both the victor and the one defeated. Hercules Project first began with material from recent German history, but expanded rapidly, and soon I was investigating the way that these materials interlock with bigger and more comprehensive contexts of contemporary and intellectual history.

In the exhibition itself – here are the works of painter Hans Hendrick Grimmling – it is soon impossible to regulate the influx of visitors as demanded, as the Christmas market is beginning on the market place in front of the trade-fair building.

On the floor below the Autumn Salon there is a model railway exhibition and in the “Capitol” Cinema, not far away from the exhibition, the international documentary and short film week is also beginning.

This means that the exhibition not only attracts people with an interest in art, but also chance visitors from the Christmas market and the model railway exhibition, who wander into the autumn salon by accident.

Here you can see works by Günter Huniat...then artist's books and book objects by Olaf Wegewitz....followed by Günter Firit's painting ...and then, among other things, an ensemble of large, painted felt cloths and mobiles by Frieder Heinze.

The painters are always there in person to discuss their work and talk to visitors. Some of the exhibitors have set up studio or workshop corners, and at the back of this floor of the building someone is cooking. Now and then, events presented by actors, writers and musicians in the artists' circle of friends take place. *(pict. 09, 10)*

And so a kind of hodgepodge emerges, in which art and other spheres mix in a relaxed way - a temporary cell of normality. In just under four weeks, almost ten thousand people visit the exhibition.

The example of the autumn salon spread like wildfire, not only in Leipzig, but in the art scene of the whole GDR. In Dresden, students of the class of stage design at the College of Fine Arts initiated a "Spring Salon" based on the model of the autumn salon, from which the group "Auto-Perforation Artists" would develop later on.

In Leipzig, too, some young artists attempted to organise self-curated public exhibitions quite officially. But this was rejected at first by the artists' association and the party.

But little later, there was an auction of works by the artists of the Autumn Salon in a small pub in the southern outskirts of Leipzig.

Using the proceeds of this auction, the rooms of a small shut-down factory that had produced lithographic ink were renovated, the intention being to set up a gallery run by a group of young Leipzig artists. *(pict. 11)*

Most works in the first exhibition in this producers' gallery "Eigen + Art" came from the "donors", the artists of the Autumn Salon. (Later, the producers' gallery was to culminate in today's gallery "Eigen + Art", after what was at the time a controversial "take over" by Judy Lybke; following political change in 1989, it was integrated into the international art business as a junior partner - under the direction of bankers, West German gallery owners and the BDI, and it is considered a successful example of the "boom in the East (AUFSCHWUNG OST).

But back to spring 1985, as the sector-head responsible for culture in the central committee of the SED, Ursula Ragwitz - flanked by the professors

Bernhard Heisig (Leipzig), Willi Sitte (Halle) and Gerhard Kettner (Dresden) -announced the party's future cultural policy to a gathering of artists in Leipzig.

In this context, the "First Leipzig Autumn Salon" was described as a counter revolutionary development, which the authorities would not allow to happen a second time. The party would not let the rules of action be taken out of its hands again. Three of the six painters of the Autumn Salon left the GDR in the months that followed, having applied for permission to leave the country.

Now, all that was 25 years ago. At the time, what we - as the protagonists of the Autumn Salon - wanted was quite simple:

"We opposed the existing conditions with a specific artistic, creative and political intention. We knew that we would be sailing against the wind. It was 'good sport' for us, as the English would say."

But: that was a quote from theatre director Peter Stein referring to his problems at the theatre in Zurich, which dismissed him in 1976 - and it is absolutely relevant to the issues that concerned us. Which means it is a classic, constantly repeating situation for artists - nothing out of the ordinary. But stop, is this true? Are the artists today not very comfortable with the situation "how it is"? And are they still interested in "change now"?

And so, after this little trip into history, I would like to turn our attention

back to the present and the future, to the possibilities and the limitations of art in a world that seems to be getting more and more incomprehensible and complicated, a world in which art has become the appendage of an initially exploding and now imploding capital and money market, where concepts like “subversive practices” are also conceivable as a logo on luxury and designer fashion.

Guy Debord, Fluxus and an art that lays claim to a basic right to the “freedom of meaning” have long become compatible with the market, and their once subversive potential has long been put to rest in the context of museums. In the West, therefore, the phrase “Subversive Practices” recalls something that seems far away and far in the past; things like political attitude, being able to say NO, and opposition. The only question is: Who do they oppose? And what should we fight for?

Good old, not yet fully globalised capitalism was a relatively easy opponent. And that was true in a similar way for the GDR and the other countries in the Eastern Bloc: the artists there saw themselves faced by a repressive state apparatus. The enemy was visible.

“Drawing a clear dividing line between us and the enemy!” was the original motto of the RAF. But its protagonists did not succeed, either in life or in death, because the motto included an impossible demand. Or at least it did when the putative enemy was within.

Under such conditions, i.e. under today’s conditions, what is “subversive” and what “consolidates the system”? And what if “subversive practices”

function are employed as “system-consolidators” and “system-improvers”, as can be said in retrospect - from today’s perspective - of some post-war, western Modernism?

Another interesting question could be: What is the relation between “subversive” and “artistic quality”? Is “subversive” whatever questions the art market or completely avoids it? Or is artistic quality, whether subversive or not, defined and confirmed exclusively by success on the art market, as the museum specialist Werner Schmalenbach once said about the art of the West?

These are some of the questions that went through my mind when I was searching the archive for material to put together this talk.

Perhaps we can discuss them now.

But first, thank you very much indeed for listening

Lutz Dammbeck

Stuttgart May 31th 2009

Credits 1. Leipziger HERBSTSALON

artists: Lutz Dammbeck, Günter Firit, Hans-Hendrick Grimmling, Frieder Heinze, Günter Huniat und Olaf Wegewitz / Paintings-Graphic-Sculpture-Concept / 10.11. – 7.12.1984 at Leipziger trade fair building at the Leipzig market place, first floor / a MOGOLLON-production

Catalogue: edition of 100 exempl, of all artists hand signed, 14 pages original serigraphy,

Poster: edition of 150 exempl., handsigned

Documentation film

1. Leipziger HERBSTSALON - Deutschland 1984-2006 – Dokumentation – Regie und Schnitt: Lutz Dambeck - Kamera: Thomas Plenert - Länge: 220 m (20:00) - Format: 16 mm Umkehrfilm - s/w – stumm – Produktion: Lutz Dambeck Filmproduktion, Hamburg - Premiere: 2006 - Archiv: Lutz Dambeck

Photographs

01 Leipzig Plagwitz, 1984. Old historical industry quarter in Leipzig in which many artists had their studios (Foto: Karin Plessing)

02 Preparation of the Herbstsalon 1984, meetings and strategy discussions (Foto: Karin Plessing)

03 Preparations for the exhibition „Tangenten 1“, 1977 (Foto: Karin Plessing)

04 Leipzig market place, buildup of the Herbstsalon, in the background the Alte Rathaus Leipzig (Foto: Karin Plessing)

05 cameraman Thomas Plenert is filming in the exhibition (Foto: Karin Wieckhorst)

06 the artists Grimmling, Dambeck, Firit in discussion with the painter-official Bernhard Heisig (Foto: Ernst Goldberg)

07 in the exhibition: the artists Lutz Dambeck, the art historian Christoph Tannert, the artist Hans-Hendrick Grimmling (Foto: Karin Wieckhorst)

08 storyboard of the Hercules Concept by Lutz Dambeck (Foto: Karin Plessing)

09 Party in the exhibition, Günter Firit (Foto: Karin Plessing)

10 Party in the exhibition (Foto: Karin Plessing)

11 opening in the just grounded producers-gallery EIGEN + ART, 1985 (Foto: Ernst Goldberg)

12 exhibition poster, edition of 150 expl. handsigned, designed by Lutz Dambeck

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